

SPORT AS A THICK CLUSTER CONCEPT

(3/19/15)

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INTRODUCTION

What are sports? Although philosophers of sport have not all agreed upon a single account, we can distill a standard or dominant view. The rudiments of the dominant account are these. First, sports are a proper subclass of games.¹ Second, sports are games that involve both competition² and some type of ineliminable physical component—physical exertion, or physical prowess, or the deployment of gross motor skills, or the like. Third, games are, at least in broad strokes, as Bernard Suits analyzed them in his masterwork, *The Grasshopper*.

Now, I find it less clear than others do precisely what Suits's definition of games *is*: the definiendum of his oft-quoted definitions is not *games*, but *game-playing*, and it strikes me that philosophers of sport have assumed that converting a definition of the latter into one of the former is a more straightforward matter than may be the case.³ Be that as it may, the core insight behind the

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¹See, e.g., Hurka 2006: 217. Strikingly, Suits himself abandoned the claim that sports constitute a proper subclass of games, arguing that sports that are “judged” by aesthetic standards, as opposed to being “refereed” by reference to relatively objective rules, are not games. Suits 1988, 1989. That position has been roundly rejected by scholars who otherwise accept Suits's views about games and sports. See, e.g., Meier 1988, 1989; Kretchmar 1989. So the dominant view remains that all sports are games.

² E.g., Feezell 1986: especially 7 (citing other authorities); 8 (“No one would deny that the pursuit of victory is essential in sport.”)

³ Here is Suits's definition:

To play a game is to attempt to achieve a specific state of affairs [prelusory goal], using only means permitted by rules [lusory means], where the rules prohibit use of more efficient in favour of less efficient means [constitutive rules], and where the rules are accepted just because they make possible such activity [lusory attitude].

Suits 2005: 54-55 (bracketed material in original). No doubt this definition of what it is to “play” a game (or to participate in a game) is, at a minimum, highly suggestive of a definition of what is a game. But a precise

Suitsian account, and the feature emphasized by many philosophers who present themselves as following his approach, is that games are activities that involve contrivance or the overcoming of artificial challenges.⁴ For ease of exposition, and while allowing for some imprecision, we can capture these central theses within the philosophy of sport as follows:

S1: Sports are competitive activities of physical prowess that involve the overcoming of artificial challenges.

In this paper, I argue that S1 is false. More fundamentally, I propose that SPORT is not definable by any set of individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions.⁵ Instead, I propose that SPORT is a cluster concept,⁶ and I offer a first pass at the conditions that count in the cluster. The factors or attributes that I propose as making out the cluster concept of SPORT are: gameness, physicality, competitiveness, autotelicity, and warranted seriousness. Additionally, I argue that the factor that I am calling warranted seriousness is one of two necessary conditions in the cluster, and also that it is a partly evaluative condition, whereas the others are descriptive. If so, SPORT is not only a cluster concept, but also a thick concept. I conclude, then, that SPORT is a thick cluster concept.

A caution at the outset, though. The precise nature of, and criteria for, both “cluster concepts” and “thick concepts” are matters of live philosophical investigation and disagreement. I am invoking these notions as helpful labels for the substantive claims that I am putting forth. The substantive claims are that our concept of SPORT—insofar as we have one—involves a significant and ineliminable evaluative component, and that the descriptive features that also bear constitutively on something

formulation of the latter will depend on choices about the modality that attaches to the lusory attitude, especially insofar as we are interested in a definition of games at the type rather than token level.

⁴ See, e.g., Kretchmar 2008.

⁵ Following a common convention, I use small caps to denote a concept.

⁶ Forty years ago, Frank McBride argued that sports is not definable and urged philosophers of sport to abandon the search for a definition. McBride 1975, 1979. Other views that also deny, or express skepticism, that sports is definable include Thomas 1979, Wertz 1995, McFee 2004. Notice also that, after Suits reversed himself and maintained that judged sports are not games, he was left without any definition of sports. My account differs from all of the foregoing, but specification of the differences must await the next draft.

being a SPORT do not comprise a set of individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions. If these claims are true, I am not committed to the further proposition (although I am assuming it to be the case) that, in virtue of their being true, SPORT is a thick cluster concept.

I. CLUSTER CONCEPTS AND THICK CONCEPTS: THE BRIEFEST OF INTRODUCTIONS

The “standard” or “true” or “classical” definition of a concept specifies a set of individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions that demarcate membership within the concept. These conditions are often presented in the form of a genus and differentia. For example, a CHAIR is a piece of furniture [the genus] designed to be sat upon by one person at a time [the differentia]. S1 is a classical definition of SPORT.

In his *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein famously argued that not all concepts can be defined in this way. Rather, some are definable—or constituted—by a set of features that appear in different combinations in all members of the concept, no subset of which is either necessary or sufficient to confer membership.⁷ Such concepts, he said, are marked by “family resemblances” and thus constitute a family. The example Wittgenstein provided to illustrate family resemblance concepts was GAME.⁸

Closely related to Wittgenstein’s notion of family resemblance concepts is the idea of “cluster concepts” put forth by John Searle (1967) and Hilary Putnam (1975). There is some debate regarding

⁷ On one common view, a definition necessarily involves the specification of a set of individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions. On this view, to claim that sports are not definable by any set of individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions is to say that they are not definable, full stop. I am agnostic about whether this is the best way to understand definitions. Nothing I say in this paper is intended to stake a position on whether the cluster concept account of sports that I offer counts as a “definition” of the concept and not only as an “account” or “analysis” of the concept.

⁸ *Philosophical Investigations* 65-67.

the exact nature of a cluster concept and its relationship both to family resemblances and “prototype” theories of concepts.⁹ For purposes of this discussion, I believe that exquisite precision is unnecessary. The basic idea, again, is that application of the concept is determined by multiple criteria that “count towards” proper application in a given case,¹⁰ without any set of the relevant criteria constituting necessary and sufficient conditions. Furthermore, as with the family resemblance idea, I will take it that at least some of the criteria are scalar and that the magnitude to which a given criterion is present can bear on whether the presence of that criterion compensates for the absence of others.

If philosophers continue to raise questions about cluster concepts, the nature and even the existence of thick concepts are subjects of even greater current philosophical debate.¹¹ To a first and very rough pass, thick concepts have both evaluative and descriptive content whereas thin concepts have only (or mostly) one or the other. Because the literature on thick concepts generally concerns thick *ethical* concepts, the contrasting thin ethical concepts are evaluative, but not (or minimally) descriptive. For example, in the ethical domain, COURAGEOUS and CRUEL are thick concepts whereas GOOD, VIRTUOUS, BAD and EVIL are thin concepts. The former are world-guided in addition to action-guiding, as Bernard Williams (1985) put it, whereas the latter are only action-guiding; they don’t answer to descriptive features or facts of the world. Insofar as the thick/thin distinction applies outside of the ethical realm, thick concepts remain both evaluative and descriptive, whereas their thin counterparts are solely descriptive. Compare WEED and PLANT.

Philosophers of thick concepts debate, among other things, what Väyrynen (2011: 2) calls “the location of evaluation”: whether the evaluative component of a thick concept is part of the semantics of the concept or part of the pragmatics of the standard usage of the related term. And insofar as both

⁹ See, e.g., the entries on “Concepts” and “The Definition of Art,” in SEP.

¹⁰ See Gaut 2005: 273-74.

¹¹ Recent useful work includes the essays collected in Kirchin 2013; Väyrynen 2013; Elstein & Hurka 2009.

evaluative and descriptive elements are baked into the concept, theorists also disagree over whether these elements can be “separated” or “disentangled.” I will sidestep these and other deep uncertainties and disputes regarding thick concepts in this very preliminary draft. For now, the rudimentary and unsophisticated understanding of thick concepts will suffice: thick concepts include both descriptive and evaluative elements—or, insofar as thickness and thinness refer to relative positions on a continuum, thick concepts include both types of elements in significant measure. S1 represents SPORT as a thin concept.

II. CHALLENGING THE STANDARD DEFINITION

S1 can be represented by a Venn Diagram in which all sports and only sports fall within the intersection of the sets denominated Games,” Competitive, and Physical, where “games” mean, roughly, activities that involve the overcoming of artificial challenges, “competitive” denotes activities structured to recognize “winning” and “winners,” and “physical” stands in for whatever somatic quality—physical prowess, physical exertion, etc.—might plausibly be advanced as helping to differentiate sports from non-sport games. Figure 1 presents such a diagram, and populates it with a large number of activities that either are, or are not, generally considered to be sports.

Activities that are considered to be sports and that fall within the intersection of the three sets support S1. So too do activities that fall outside the intersection of the three sets and that are not considered to be sports. Activities that are considered to be sports but that do not fall within the intersection of the three classes, and activities that do fall within the intersection but are not considered sports, both threaten or undermine S1—on grounds of underinclusion and overinclusion, respectively. Activities that I take to support S1 appear in black font; activities that I take to challenge or undermine S1 appear in *red italics*. Of course, my judgments about which sets an activity falls within, and about

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whether an activity is generally considered a sport or not by knowledgeable observers, are contestable.

But judgments of both types will at least provide a starting point for discussion.

GAMES

RPGs (e.g., Dungeons & Dragons)

board games (e.g.,
Monopoly, Risk, Scrabble)

noncompetitive parlor games
(e.g., chain novel, telephone)

*“mind sports” (e.g.,
chess, bridge)*

card games (e.g.,
gin rummy)

croquet

poker

golf

make-believe (e.g.,
house, cops & robbers)

games of chance (e.g.,
chutes & ladders, bingo)

“electronic sports” /
“competitive gaming”

fantasy sports
(e.g., football)

billiards

team sports (e.g.,
baseball, soccer)

parkour

darts

racquet sports

quarters

“Hi, Bob”

marbles

*party games / “fair games”
(e.g., twister, 3-legged race)*

jump rope,
hula hoop

jacks

jenga

bowling

cup stacking

*“outdoor sports”
(e.g., fly fishing,
hunting, skiing)*

gymnastics

combat sports

motor sports

farming,
subsistence hunting

spelling bee

track events (e.g., 100m)

competitive yodeling

entrance exams

*field events (e.g.,
javelin, high jump)*

competitive eating

*“adventure sports”
(e.g., hang gliding,
caving, climbing)*

weightlifting

thumb wrestling

ballet

warfare

arm wrestling

dueling

bullfighting

crossfit

PHYSICAL

pushups

sex

COMPETITIVE

Figure 1 suggests the following five different challenges or worries for S1.

1. Many activities, the sportness of which seems obvious and uncontested to many people, including many philosophers of sport, fall within the intersection of Competitive and Physical, but fall outside of Games. These include many of the activities in track and field, along with weightlifting and combat sports. To see this, consider the short foot races we call “sprints.”¹²

Sprints are games, says Suits, because they employ inefficient means to a prelusory goal. The prelusory goal, he proposes, is (in a contest) to be the first to pass one’s body through a designated vertical plane in space or (in a test) to pass through that plane in the shortest time. The inefficiencies imposed by the constitutive rules include the following: competitors must start some specified distance from the plane that constitutes the “finish line”; they may not use jet packs or a range of other devices that could speed their movement; they may not cut across the infield; they may not start before an official signal, available to all competitors, announces the start of competition; they may not obstruct the other competitors; etc. (For comments along these lines see, e.g., Suits 1995: ch.3.)

The reason to worry about this account is straightforward. It seems strained and artificial to describe the prelusory goal as Suits has done. Surely it is far more faithful to the phenomenology of the participants to describe the prelusory goal in something like the following terms: “running some specified short distance faster than one’s fellow competitors” (in a contest) or “running some specified short distance as fast as one can” (in a test). Of course, these are not canonical descriptions of the prelusory goal. The goal could be described in different ways, including by making reference (in a contest) to being the first to cross the finish line. The key point is only that, as far as the phenomenology of the participants is concerned, all of the following ingredients appear to be

¹² The following discussion is excerpted from Berman 2013. It extends observations in Tasioulas 2006: 239.

components of the prelusory goal for a sprinting contest: that the goal is to run, that the goal is to run a relatively short distance, and that the goal is to run that distance faster than competitors who are running that same short distance. Suppose that a friend or bystander, wishing to be helpful, were to point out to a sprinter that she could achieve her supposed prelusory goal of crossing a particular plane in space faster by hopping on a motorcycle or, while still running, by starting five meters from the finishing plane rather than 100 meters from it. The sprinter would not respond that *the rules* exclude these particular means of achieving the goal. She would say that her interlocutor misunderstands *her goal*. Her goal, she might say, is to run, and to run the agreed-upon distance. To reinforce the point by reference to the lusory attitude, it is not the case, *pace* Suits, that “cutting across the infield is shunned solely because there is a rule against it.” (Suits 1995: 53) The prelusory goal itself, and not the implementing rules, are sufficient to induce sprinters to eschew this tactic.

If the proper characterization of the sprinter’s prelusory goal includes the activity of running, as well as the other features that I have identified, then something of importance follows: the rules governing the sprint do not preclude more efficient means of realizing the goal. If *A* cuts across the infield while *B* goes the long way round, *A* simply hasn’t run the distance that it was *A*’s and *B*’s joint or shared goal to run. If *A* starts before *B*, then the fact that *A* reaches the designated finish line before *B* does not establish that he ran the specified distance *faster* than did *B*—which, I have suggested, is part of the prelusory goal—but only that he reached the line *sooner*. If *A* uses a jet pack then *A* is not *running*. And so on. Constitutive rules, says Suits, are the rules that specifically rule out more efficient means to a prelusory goal. If the prelusory goal of sprints is as I have described it, then the rules of sprint that, e.g., preclude cutting through the infield or tripping one’s competitors are not constitutive.

To summarize, it would seem that the phenomenologically faithful characterization of the prelusory goal of a foot sprint is not, *pace* Suits and many of his followers, “to cross a plane in space,”

but, instead, “to run a specified (short) distance as fast as possible, or faster than one’s competitors” (or something of the sort). And if we attribute the latter prelusory goal to participants and not the former, then what Suits *claims* to be inefficiencies are not *in fact* inefficiencies, in which case sprints have not been shown to be games, on Suits’s definition, and therefore also cannot be sports, if the sport thesis is true.

If I am right that the rules of sprint competitions do not impose obstacles or inefficiencies toward the realization of sprint’s prelusory goals, it remains to ask what the function of the rules of sprint competitions is. The first step toward an answer, I suggest, is to imagine what sprint competitions would look like absent any formal rules. Questions regarding the conduct of the competition would naturally arise, whether at the outset or over time. Precisely what distance should we run? Should we run at the same time or seriatim? How many tries do we get? For example, is this contest the best of three attempts or the best single attempt? How do we know when to start? What if one of us starts too soon? Is that disqualifying or does he get additional chances? If competitors are more or less tied at the race’s conclusion, is the winner the one who first touches the line or who first completely crosses it? Rules are needed to provide answers to these and similar questions, not to make realization of the prelusory goals harder, but *in order to facilitate their realization*. To coin a term, the rules of sprints are facilitative, not constitutive.¹³ They are not constitutive in Suits’s sense, to repeat, because constitutive rules, for Suits, specifically rule out more efficient means to a prelusory goal. They are not constitutive rules in John Searle’s sense either, for they do not bring into being a new activity whose existence is dependent upon the rules: sprints are an activity that exists without what I am terming the “facilitative rules.”

¹³ What I am terming facilitative rules are loosely analogous to what the natural law tradition, following Aquinas, calls *determinatio*—the process by which the norms of natural law become specified or concretized into positive law. For a succinct introduction to *determinatio*, see Waldron 2010: 1-3.

All that I have argued so far with respect to sprints is true, *mutatis mutandis*, of many other athletic competitions. To start, while I have focused on sprinting races in running, the same is true of sprints involving other means of locomotion, like swimming and biking. It is true as well of many throwing, jumping, and lifting competitions. In all these cases, the prelusory goal is not simply a state of affairs, but also an activity that produces the state of affairs,¹⁴ and, as a consequence, the rules (or many of them) are not constitutive but facilitative. The prelusory goal of the high jump, for example, is not simply to be on the other side of a bar, but to *jump* over it. The prelusory goal of the snatch is not simply that the state of affairs obtain in which a weighted bar is above one's head, but that one *lifts* it over one's head.¹⁵

At the same time, I do not maintain that what I have argued about sprints holds true for all activities that, pretheoretically, are both sports and games. That is, I am not claiming either that the proper specification of the prelusory goal for all putative sports includes the athletic means for producing states of affairs or that the supposedly constitutive rules for all putative sports are really only facilitative.¹⁶ Were I advancing either of those claims, I could be taken to be challenging Suits's definition of *GAME* (or the definition attributed to him). But I am accepting that the Suitsian account of *GAME* is, at a minimum, a good start, and am arguing that (putative) sports are not, in that event, games.

¹⁴ Some may object that an activity that produces a state of affairs should not be opposed to a state of affairs because a more capacious description of a state of affairs could include the activity. That's a quibble. The distinction in text could be made regardless of how we conceptualize states of affairs.

¹⁵ Suits recognizes that people will be disposed to characterize many goals in this way (e.g., Suits 1995: 45), but seems not to appreciate the potential significance. The closest he comes to addressing the worry I present in this section is in a discussion of mountain climbing. In that discussion, he suggests that mountain climbing is distinctive (albeit not unique) because it is non-competitive. (Suits 1995: 85) I do not believe that is a relevant distinction for purposes of the concern that I am presently developing.

¹⁶ Fifteen years ago, Angela Schneider and Robert Butcher challenged Suits's conception of prelusory goals by observing that the goals of games "sometimes cannot even be stipulated without a discussion of [the] means." (Schneider & Butcher 1997: 44). I believe they were precisely right. They advanced this claim, however, in support of a more far-reaching contention that "the notion of a 'pre-lusory goal' is incoherent as defined." (Id.: 39). My discussion of baseball and Monopoly is intended to demonstrate that I do not endorse that more ambitious challenge.

Consider baseball. Plausibly, the participants' prelusory goal is to score the most runs.¹⁷ By rule, the means for realizing this goal include that one must reach home from home, after traveling to and touching all the bases in order; that one may start on one's journey from home only by putting a pitched ball legally in play or by drawing a walk or by being hit by a pitch (or in a small number of specified other ways) and not, e.g., by attempting to steal first base; that each team has a limited number of attempts to complete the circuit, defined by the rules governing outs and innings; and so on. I do not claim that all of these means are properly built into the correct statement of the goal, and I therefore accept that the rules do (among other things) exclude more efficient in favor of less efficient means for realizing the prelusory goal.

Much the same can be said of paradigmatic non-sport games. Suppose you invite a foreign friend to play Monopoly. When she asks what the game is and how it is played, you might find it natural enough to identify the goal (to get the most money) and then to specify the means (you move around the board in turn by moving a number of spaces that correspond to the total of two thrown dice; exercise discretion whether to purchase properties on which you land; build houses and hotels on your properties to draw rents from other players, but only after you possess a monopoly, and subject to the constraint that you may never have two more houses, or equivalent, on one property in a monopoly than on the others; etc.). It seems in this case perfectly natural to describe the goal in a fashion that could indeed be realized by means that it is precisely the point of the game's constitutive rules to rule out.

In short, baseball and Monopoly contain constitutive rules and satisfy Suits's definition of a game. Sprints, so the objection goes, do not.

¹⁷ I accept, at least for present purposes, Suits's argument that the prelusory goal of game-playing or game-participating can depend upon concepts created by the game institution. See Suits 1995: ch. 4.

2. If the distinction between constitutive and facilitative rules is sound, then a great many activities commonly called “outdoor sports” and “adventure sports”—hunting, fishing, rock climbing, skiing, surfing, caving, hang gliding, etc.—are also not games and therefore cannot be sports if S1 is accurate. Indeed, these activities pose an additional challenge to S1. Many “outdoor sports” and “adventure sports” are principally engaged in non-competitively. That is, even where competitive variants of these activities exist, the non-competitive variants are often more common and more salient. If S1 is correct, then calling these activities “sports” is doubly mistaken.

3. It is not obvious that physicality is a necessary condition for something being a SPORT. Several competitive games that involve significant mental ability—chess, bridge, backgammon, and go are the clearest examples—have been deemed “mind sports” by the IOC. If “mind sports” are a form of “non-physical sport,” and if physicality is a necessary condition for something being a sport, then “mind sport” is oxymoronic. To be sure, many people would resist bestowing the appellation “sport” on such games as chess and bridge. But S1 does not provide any explanation for why it would seem even plausibly apt to call *these* games “sports” if it’s not equally apt to call *all* competitive games “sports.” Many people feel that chess, bridge, backgammon and go (to give a non-exhaustive list) have a greater claim to sportness than, say, checkers, monopoly, and battleship. But S1 provides no resources to make sense of this sociological fact (if it is a fact).

4. The first three worries or challenges suggest that S1 may be underinclusive in several respects. The activities that most forcefully suggest that S1 is also overinclusive are “party games” such as the sack race, the three-legged race, the egg-and-spoon race, twister, and the like. It seems hard to deny that these are within the intersection of Games, Competitive, and Physical. But they are not called “sports” and I think it very unlikely that many people would agree that these are sports, on reflection.

5. Lastly, many people treat games such as darts, billiards, croquet and bowling as borderline cases of sport. I do not take the existence of borderline cases, by itself, to present a problem for S1. It is surely plausible both that the best articulation of the condition that I am presently loosely calling “physical” describes a continuum and that darts, billiards and similar games present the physical requirement to a small degree. The problem for S1 is created by the existence of other competitive games that seem to involve roughly similar degrees of physicality and yet strike many as notably less sportish—games such as jacks, pickup sticks, and jenga. Possibly, S1 can withstand this challenge if the physical component requires the exercise of gross motor skills, not fine motor skills. But this proposal, although occasionally floated, seems ad hoc. Moreover, pitching pennies seems to involve the same type of gross motor skills as does darts, but will strike people as a much less plausible example of sport. Similarly, competitive marbles is often called a sport but does not seem to involve appreciably greater gross motor skills than jacks does.

III. A THICK CLUSTER ACCOUNT OF SPORT

Here is a first provisional stab at a thick cluster account of SPORT:

S2: Sports are autotelic activities that are engaged in by persons with warranted seriousness, and exhibit such features as gameness, physicality, and competitiveness.¹⁸

S2 contains five conditions, one of which is itself a compound. The suggestion is that the first two are necessary, and the latter three bear constitutively on whether an activity is a sport, but are not necessary. The non-necessity of the latter three conditions make S2 a cluster account. The significantly evaluative character of the second condition renders the account thick. The defense of this account is

¹⁸ Compare Thomas 1979: 46: “The paradigm case of sport might be formed by some catalogue of properties including skill, competition, physical effort, rules, and moral quality derived from the goals, means, and motives culturally permitted.”

coherentist. I hope that it supports judgments about activity types (X is a sport; Y isn't) that we endorse on reflection, and also explains why what we take to be marginal or disputed cases are marginal or disputed. In this part I offer a handful of observations about this proposed account.

1. The condition I am calling "warranted seriousness" is the heart of the account and what I take to be the principal contribution of this paper. This single condition has two components. First, there exists a recognizable community of participants whose members participate in the activity seriously, in the sense (roughly) of committing significant time and effort both in engaging in the activity and in training for it, as by seeking to improve their skills at it. That is, the activity is taken seriously by enough persons to constitute a community of serious participants. Second, this seriousness of engagement is warranted, not wholly misplaced. The activity warrants being taken seriously because (a) it develops and displays skills or qualities that qualify as human excellences and (b) the development and display of such excellences is not negated or overridden by other morally objectionable features. Both (a) and (b) are irreducibly matters of evaluation.

2. The descriptive requirement of seriousness explains why "party games" and "fair games" such as the sack race, the three-legged race, the egg-and-spoon race, and pin the tail on the donkey are not sports even though they seem plainly to satisfy all other criteria in S2: competition, physicality, gameness, and autotelicity (all of which are briefly glossed below). The crucial empirical fact (if true) is that people do not take them seriously in the sense of devoting time and energy to honing their game-relevant skills. People don't train for these games or take them seriously when participating in them. Of course, things could change. People could start taking these activities seriously. And if and when they do, these activities would become sports, says S2, so long as they satisfy the evaluative condition that seriousness of engagement be warranted. In fact, many activities have transitioned, or are in the process of transitioning, from frivolity to seriousness of engagement—such as competitive eating,

competitive (video) gaming, and cup stacking.¹⁹ As they become more serious, they stake a greater claim to being a sport, although the judgment by others that the increasing seriousness is warranted often lags the fact of increasing seriousness.

The seriousness condition also makes sense of a distinct condition that several scholars have offered as part of a true definition of SPORT: that the activity be “institutionalized.” I do not think that an activity must be institutionalized for it to qualify as a sport. But institutionalization will correlate highly with whether the activity reflects seriousness of engagement, and it is seriousness, not institutionalization, that is critical. Or so I claim.

3. Seriousness might seem to be inconsistent with a standard definition of sport as whimsical or frivolous, or in any event something close to the opposite of serious.²⁰ The sense of seriousness that I invoke is entirely compatible with recognition that sport is, in an important sense, not important. As Randolph Feezell observes (1986: 8), “the ‘nonseriousness’ at the heart of play”—and, I would here add, sport—“is based on the recognition that there are obviously more important values in life than the value of improving sporting skills and winning games.” But, he continues (1986: 9): “We might distinguish between internal and external seriousness.” The seriousness that I suggest is essential to an activity-type that qualifies as a type of SPORT is what Feezell labels “internal.” Sports, I am claiming, are engaged in (typically or often, not always) with an attitude of serious or determined or earnest engagement, not

¹⁹ If competitive eating has become a sport, or ever does, the transformative moment when an exhibition of gluttony by large men gave way to skilled performances by trained and conditioned competitors might well have occurred in the early days of this century thanks to the innovations of the Japanese eaters Kazutoyo “the Rabbit” Arai and his protégé, Takeru “the Prince” Kobayashi. According to many reports, the Rabbit originated the practice of dunking full dogs and buns in water prior to eating and introduced it in 2000 at the 85th annual Nathan’s Hot Dog Eating Contest en route to consuming 25 hot dogs with bun in 12 minutes, breaking the existing record of 20. The following year, the 23-year-old Kobayashi introduced the new technique of breaking the hot dogs in half, dunking both wiener and bun in water, and eating them separately. Thanks to this technical innovation, as well as his natural gifts and strict training regimen, Kobayashi doubled Arai’s record in a display of eating prowess that turned the world of competitive eating upside down. The gripping history is recounted in Jason Fagone, *Horsemen of the Esophagus: Competitive Eating and the Big Fat American Dream* (2006).

²⁰ This is a central thrust of Keating 1964.

with an attitude of flippancy or frivolity. But that attitude is entirely consistent with an understanding that the activity is optional and not critical, or even important, instrumentally.

Even to emphasize the “internal” seriousness of sport—that is, the earnestness of engagement that sport elicits and warrants—is to contradict a historical understanding of sport as frolic, as “something light, playful, or frivolous and lacking in serious intent or spirit.”²¹ But I am not denying that that remains one of the many definitions of the *word* “sport.” My interest, of course, is in the concept of SPORT. And I am claiming that our current concept encompasses only activities that are characterized by a spirit of (roughly speaking) committed engagement. I suspect that our concept has indeed undergone a change over time. If so, we might reasonably seek an explanation for the change, and that is not something I am competent to provide. But the core of the explanation, I suspect, is that increasing wealth and leisure time, along with other conditions of modernity, have altered collective attitudes toward activities not devoted to subsistence, and have (in ways on which I do not purport to shed light) given us new or strengthened reasons to differentiate among the activities to which we devote our “leisure-time” energies.²²

4. The warranted component of the “warranted seriousness” condition explains debates over many putative sports. Competitive eating is, again, a good example. Even if I am correct that competitive eating is being treated increasingly seriously by its practitioners—a seriousness of treatment that includes their exploring new speed-eating techniques and their adhering to (moderately)

²¹ Webster’s Third New International Dictionary 2206.

²² Suits (2007: 17-19) also associates sport with seriousness, but in a manner wholly different from what I suggest here. For Suits, sports are serious in exactly the same way as all games (and most leisure activities) are serious: as an autotelic activity, they constitute a domain of intrinsic value. What I mean by seriousness is an attitude of serious engagement that is *contrasted* with the play attitude. I am drawing attention to a distinction that Suits overlooks or denies that lies *within* the broad space of autotelicity. And I argue further that seriousness of attitude is not sufficient for sportness but, rather, that the seriousness must be warranted because of the human excellences that the activity hones and displays (and also because participation in the activity is not subject to overriding moral objection).

demanding training regimens—there is little doubt that many observers would refuse to label it a sport. This resistance, I think, stems from the thought that, even if competitive eaters take the competitions seriously, it is absurd or grotesque that they do so—that even if it's perfectly reasonable to participate in a pie-eating contest, it is fundamentally misguided to devote considerable energies toward the practice. Similar things might well be said about, for example, cup-stacking or thumb-wrestling. In my terms, the claim is that seriousness of engagement is not warranted because the practice does not adequately promote or reflect any skills that qualify as a human "excellence." And if this charge is correct (whatever correctness means for what I am insisting is an evaluative judgment), then the activity does not instantiate SPORT no matter how seriously participants engage in it.

The activities I have just mentioned plausibly fall outside of sportness, by reason of failing the condition of warranted seriousness, because, by hypothesis, they do not embody any skill that counts (or counts sufficiently) as a human excellence. But activities that do involve human excellences might not be warranted for another reason: because any pro tanto reasons to engage in them, and even to take them seriously, are overridden or otherwise defeated by reasons to eschew them entirely. Gladiatorial contests seem like this. It seems stipulative or dogmatic to deny that such contests involve skills—such as swordsmanship—that qualify as excellences. It is not warranted to engage in gladiatorial contests seriously (if it isn't) because it is not warranted to engage in them at all, because they are morally wrongful *despite* that they hone and make manifest skills that are of such quality, difficulty, or intricacy as to make seriousness of engagement entirely warranted if harnessed in another context (such as in fencing). In short, then, warranted seriousness rules out of SPORT, activities that have, in a sense, nothing to recommend serious engagement as well as activities whose engagement is proscribed by other moral or evaluative standards. The condition thus explains both why, e.g., tiddlywinks isn't a sport, and why many people maintain that combat sports, bull fighting, and dog fighting aren't either—

and why such people could be right (though I think they are not right in the case of most combat sports). Either way, I take warrantedness to be a dynamic property.

5. The last three elements do not require substantial elaboration. I am using here the same rough working definitions I mentioned earlier: “gameness” involves the overcoming of artificial challenges; “competitiveness” involves the pursuit of victory or of recognition as a “winner”; “physicality” stands in for one or another, or some combination of, somatic qualities such as physical prowess or physical exertion. I am certain that these elements can be refined to advantage. I am very open to the possibility that they should be added to. The critical point is that, in virtue of being a cluster account, *S2* does not require that all of these elements (however they may be most accurately glossed) be satisfied for an activity type to qualify as a sport. This explains why many track and field events that are not games (if my argument in Part II is correct) are nonetheless sports. Indeed, because they possess all the other criteria—warranted seriousness, competitiveness, and physicality—to very substantial degree, these activities are close to central cases of sport notwithstanding their non-gameness. Outdoor sports and adventure sports are plausibly sports despite that they too often lack gameness and are frequently engaged in non-competitively. Finally, that physicality is not a necessary condition of sportness would explain why many people feel some pull to accept chess and bridge as sports—even if under the designation “mind sports”: although non-physical, they are engaged in very seriously, involve the exercise of what we take to be significant excellences, and are highly gamey, or artificial.

We might, at this point, note a modest irony regarding Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein used games to introduce his notion of family resemblance concepts. Games, he said, are not definable. Famously, Suits challenged that claim. As the introductory remarks in this paper suggest, that challenge has been

widely influential.²³ I am accepting arguendo that Wittgenstein was wrong about GAME and that Suits was, in broad strokes, right. I am claiming, however, that Wittgenstein was right, and Suits wrong, about SPORT.

6. Consider finally a couple of cases that satisfy all of the conditions already discussed but that seem to fall clearly outside the parameters of SPORT: warfare and dueling. They are excluded from sportness by the criterion I have yet to discuss: autotelicity. By this, I do not mean that the activity-type must uniformly be engaged in only “for its own sake.” I mean only that it could be, and often is. I mean—and again, this is to a first pass—that an instrumental objective is not part of what makes the activity intelligible to us or that comes close to fully explaining its appeal. To refer back to Fezell’s distinction between “internal” and “external” seriousness, the autotelicity criterion is meant to require that the activity, although engaged in from a perspective of internal seriousness, remains nonserious from an external perspective: participants understand that the activity is not instrumentally important and that it is “freely chosen.” If this condition is correct, it explains not only why activities such as warfare and dueling that meet all other criteria in S2 are not sports, but also why hunting and fishing are sports (if they are) only when not engaged in for subsistence. Subsistence hunting, fishing and farming are all instrumentally important. They fail the autotelicity requirement.²⁴

IV. FROM METAPHYSICS TO ETHICS

I have discussed, briefly, both thick concepts (as opposed to thin ones) and cluster concepts (as opposed to “definable” ones). I have mentioned only in passing (p.4) the distinction between ethical

²³ But far from universally accepted. See, e.g., Geras 2009; Tasioulas 2006; McBride 1979.

²⁴ I am still unsure how to characterize recreational (i.e., not procreative) sex. It seems to satisfy the warranted seriousness and autotelicity requirements, and is plainly physical. It is not competitive or a game. I am unsure whether that is enough to move it out of sportness if S2 is correct. I solicit thoughts about this.

and non-ethical concepts. Just what distinguishes the two is far from settled, and I wish not to enter the debate here.²⁵ It is enough to observe that, while it seems highly plausible that getting our ethical concepts right “matters,” or has consequences, many people believe that careful analysis of our non-ethical concepts is an entirely sterile or arid affair, useful only to the extent it satisfies a personal taste (what some would deride as a “fetish”) for tidiness. In this final part, I’d like to assume, *arguendo*, that SPORT is not an ethical concept and to ask whether, on that assumption, anything of significance would follow if, as I have proposed, it is a thick cluster concept, describable more or less along the lines suggested by S2. Simply put: is S2, even if broadly correct, *normatively* significant or consequential?

My answer is affirmative,²⁶ though I am able, in this draft, only to offer a promissory note. Here are two ways in which S2 is likely have normative consequences. First, it plausibly informs what the virtue of sportsmanship is or consists of. If it is part of the nature of an activity *qua* sport that it involves warranted seriousness, then it may follow that part of the virtue of sportsmanship is to act in such a way as to allow the excellences that render seriousness of attention warranted to be displayed and to contribute appropriately to the contest’s outcome. Second, S2 plausibly informs how sport officials such as umpires and referees should interpret authoritative texts when deciding “what the law is” with respect to a particular matter in dispute, or when deciding how they should rule. J.S. Russell has argued (1999: 35) that “[r]ules should be interpreted in such a manner that the excellences embodied in achieving the lusory goal of the game are not undermined but maintained and fostered.” I do not think that excellences are embodied or encoded in games *qua* games. But they are embodied in sports *qua* sports, if S2 is on the right track. So an account of sport as a thick concept will likely lend support to

²⁵ For illustration, Michael Smith (2013: 99-101) proposes that “a concept is an ethical concept . . . if and only if, if someone believes that that concept is instantiated, then that person believes that there is a reason for him to desire that the world be a certain way.” I am disposed to think this definition too liberal, for it seems that whenever somebody believes a concept with any evaluative component is instantiated, that person should take the fact of its instantiation to give her some reason to desire that the world be a certain way. And that would build a redundancy into the notion of a “thick ethical concept”: *all* thick concepts would be “ethical” ones.

²⁶ See also, e.g., Kretchmar 1984.

interpretive obligations or recommendations along the lines that Russell and other sport philosophers are recommending and debating.²⁷

²⁷ See, e.g., Symposium on Officiating in Sport, JPS 2011.