

Sports and Games
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Bernard's Suits' engaging book The Grasshopper offers a convincing account of games. But does it tell us anything about sports? Suits suggests that sports are nothing more than that subclass of games distinguished by the involvement of physical activity. But this seems to me entirely to mistake the nature of sport, and consequently to misunderstand why many people find it so important.

Suits argues that in Utopia, when all needs and desires can be satisfied on demand, the only worthwhile activities left to us will be playing games.¹ But at first pass it seems quite implausible that playing games in Suits' sense would ever be worthwhile per se. Why is it a good thing to pursue some end by arbitrarily by restricted means? (Tom Hurka has suggested that it is valuable in itself to overcome difficulties. But I'd say that, if something is not worth doing, it is not worth doing even when it's made difficult.)

As Suits sees it, when all ends are automatically granted, there can be value only in activities where "what is instrumental is inseparably combined with what is intrinsically valuable, and where the activity is not itself an instrument for some further end" The Grasshopper p 172. But why is he still thinking in terms of instrumentality at this point? An obvious alternative is to recognize that many people find pleasure and value in the exercise of physical skills, not as instruments to anything, but simply in themselves, and would continue to do so even in Utopia. I know nothing of Suits' personal life, but the book left me with an impression of an author who never knew the joy of hitting a six back over the bowler's head, or of body-surfing a wave 100 yards up onto the beach, or of hitting a backhand topspin crosscourt winner . . . Such actions are valuable in themselves, quite independently of any results that may flow from them, whether "lusory" or not.

I propose that sport is any activity whose immediate purpose is the exercise of physical skills. The first advantage of this alternative suggestion is that it has no difficulty with the wide range of sports that aren't games, and are thus anomalous for Suits. These include running, jumping, indeed all track and field sports, rowing, archery, gymnastics, swimming, and so on and on, not to mention such non-competitive activities as rock-climbing, fishing, wind-surfing, hang-gliding . . .

To focus on the intrinsic value of physical skills is not to deny that some sporting skills constitutively involve ends. The skill in archery is to hit the target, and in shot-putting it is to send to shot as far as possible. But even here the value lies in the physical skill required to achieve these results, and the results are aimed at only to allow the exercise of the skill (an example of Suits' "reverse English").

Nor need my position deny that some sporting skills constitutively depend on games. There would be no such thing as cross-court backhands if tennis did not exist, nor curve balls outside the game of baseball. But here too I would say that the value of these games as sports is derivative from the fact that they provide the framework for the intrinsically valuable exercise of the physical skills they demand.

¹ "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]. I also offer the following simpler and, so to speak, more portable version of the above: playing a game is the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles" The Grasshopper p 41.

Not all valuable games derive their value from so enabling the exercise of physical skills. But I do think that all worthwhile games enable the exercise of skills of some kind. The other obvious category of games is those that allow the exercise of intellectual skill. Most widely-played card games satisfy this requirement, along with chess, crossword puzzles and so on.²

Perhaps there is value in some games that do not call for any skill. People can absorb themselves in completely mechanical versions of patience (solitaire), and children can be excited by snakes and ladders. But I do not need to force the point. My concern here is not to show that all worthwhile games call for skills, but only that those that count as sports are worthwhile because of the physical skills they involve.

This alternative account of sports helps with something else that poses a problem for Suits. This is the question of whether you can win a sporting contest by cheating. Since Suits thinks of sports as games, he is forced to the implausible conclusion that you can't.

I agree that, if you are really playing a game for its own sake, then cheating is self-defeating. Someone who cheats at patience is removing the constraints that constitute the activity. But if the point of your activity is to exercise physical skills, and only incidentally to play a game, then cheating need by no means amount to opting out. By my lights, a soccer player who tugs at an opponent's jersey, or a baseball player who pretends to have caught a ball he only trapped, is certainly still playing soccer or baseball, notwithstanding the rule violations.

Suits realizes that his position here is unsatisfactory, and tries to plug the gap by arguing that some games include meta-rules specifying that certain infractions will incur fixed penalties, and that strategically taking such a penalty is just a further move in the overall game whose practice demands conformity to these constitutive meta-rules. But this does not serve. The soccer shirt-puller and baseball ball-trapper aren't compliantly accepting penalties required by certain meta-rules. They would like to escape penalties altogether. But they are still playing soccer and baseball all right, precisely because the point of doing so isn't to play a game per se.

To digress for a moment, most sports recognize a set of conventions—the "spirit of the game"—that the players expect each other to conform to. These can bear more or less resemblance to the official rules of the game. In golf, for example, everybody is expected to stick precisely to the rules and indeed to call fouls on themselves. In soccer or baseball, by contrast, all kinds of attempts to subvert the official rules are condoned.³

By and large, I would say that it is not only metaphysically cogent, but perfectly morally acceptable to violate the rules of game, provided that you respect the conventions that constitute the spirit of the game. The conventions are like a kind of contract agreeing how we are going to engage with each other. To violate the conventions is to free-ride or renege, and on that account morally reprehensible. But breaking the formal rules themselves is neither here nor there. (Which is not to

² Poker is an interesting case. Unlike other games of skill that can be played for money, but which are worthwhile even when not, such as bridge and klabberjass, or indeed golf and cricket, it is of the essence of poker that proper money is at stake. Poker played for insignificant sums is a trivial and tiresome pursuit. Does this mean that in poker it isn't the skill that matters, but the money? No. The explanation is that poker involves a very particular skill, namely, duping your opponents into false moves precisely by hazarding significant amounts of money.

³ Fred D'Agostino has distinguished the 'ethos' of a game from the formal rules. But he is thinking of the flexible way the formal rules are often interpreted by the officials. I have in mind a far wider set of conventions which can dissociate some distance from the rules in both directions.

say that any set of conventions will constitute a morally acceptable way of playing. “When in Rome do as the Romans do” is not a bad rule of thumb, but not when it requires you to condone slavery.)

To return to the main issue, the nature of sports, note how my account fits with the fact that pretty much any physical skill in which people take pride and pleasure can become a sport. Bronco riding, snow-boarding, medieval jousting, catfish noodling, trailer truck reversing, competitive barbecuing . . . (I admit this last case is marginal). My favourite example is competitive casting. When I was a youngster in Natal the local surf fisherman vied to see who could cast out furthest beyond the Indian Ocean breakers. Soon some of them decided to skip the fishing and concentrate on the casting—and so ended up holding casting competitions on sports fields with special equipment.

What is the connection between sport and competition? As I see it, there is a natural connection, but it’s by no means essential. To want to exercise a skill is to want to do something well, indeed as well as is feasible. And a natural way to test whether you are doing as well as you can is to measure yourself against other people. It is scarcely surprising that people who take pride in how far they can cast a fishing line will want to see if they can cast farther than others.

Still, even if sport lends itself naturally to competition, it does not require it. A rock-climbing team that sets out to conquer some challenging ascent needn’t be competing with other teams; when I became keen on golf, I was desperate to break 100, and then 90, and then 80, and played many solitary rounds in pursuing these challenges. And even in those cases of sports that are essentially competitive, as with many sporting games, it is normally the playing well that matters most, not the winning; after all, if people got nothing out of contests they lost, it is hard to see why most matches would take place (cf Suits ch 7).

Perhaps competition is crucial to spectator sports, and indeed a large part of the reason why people watch them. But that is a different issue. I have been concerned here with the nature and value of playing sports, not watching them. There may well be a number of further features needed to make a sport worth watching, beyond those that make it worth playing. (Most obviously, it will need to be visually engaging. Many very popular participant sports fall at this first hurdle. Squash and field hockey spring to mind.)

One final issue. It could be objected to my account that it fails to explain the sense in which sport is essentially lusory, play, leisure, unserious, the opposite of work. Suits’ account of sports as games makes this feature basic to sports. But my account arguably casts no light on this essential difference between sport and real life.

My response is to deny the premise. I do not agree that sport has a different kind of value from other things.⁴ As far as the ultimate value of things goes, I would place the performance of outstanding physical skills pretty high. But in any case that is more than I need to argue here. Maybe physical skills are less important than purity of character or artistic creativity. The more basic point is that they are valuable in just the same serious way as other things. Someone who devotes their life to high-jumping or baseball is no less serious a person than someone who devotes it to the ballet,

⁴ I can’t help quoting from a wonderful Sri Lankan book about cricket—Chinaman by Shena Karunatilaka: "I have been told by members of my own family that there is no use or value in sports. I only agree with the first part. I may be drunk but I am not stupid. Of course there is little point to sports. But, at the risk of depressing you, let me add two more cents. THERE IS LITTLE POINT TO ANYTHING. In a thousand years, grass will have grown over all our cities. Nothing of anything will matter."

say, or the environment. There is nothing intrinsically dilettante about sports compared with other walks of life. (Sure, gymnastics and baseball don't appeal to everyone. But neither does the ballet.)

If there is something peculiar about sporting achievements, it is perhaps that they don't ramify, in the sense that they don't connect up with other aspects of life. For most practitioners, sport is disconnected from financial welfare, and is often independent of social life. Sporting achievements are ephemeral and lead to no lasting concrete products, unlike a garden, say, or even a stamp collection. They aren't normally designed to entertain an audience, still less to explore and transform our perceptions of the world.

Maybe sport is special in this sense. It forms a self-enclosed realm, isolated from the rest of life. (Perhaps this is one of the reasons why people can find sport absorbing and relaxing.) But I see no reason to accord sport less importance on this account. The exercise of physical skills may not win you friends or influence the rest of the world. But that doesn't mean it is not important and valuable in its own right.