

also for making the harsh upstate New York winter one of the most exciting and pleasurable times of year. I would like to thank my former players on the Hamilton men's golf team, during the years I was their coach as well as more recent team members, for some wonderful experiences with intercollegiate athletics; to say nothing of not teasing me too much when they outdrive me by 75 yards!

Robert L. Simon
Clinton, New York

INTRODUCTION

The Ethics of Sport

I would like to think that this book began on an unfortunately not atypical cold and rainy late October day in upstate New York. I had been discussing some of my generally unsuccessful efforts in local golf tournaments with colleagues in the philosophy department and let drop what I thought was an innocuous remark to the effect that although winning isn't everything, it sure beats losing. Much to my surprise, my colleagues objected vehemently, asserting that winning means nothing. In their view, the recreational aspects of sport, such as having fun and trying to improve—not defeating an opponent—are all that should matter. I soon found myself backed into a corner by this usually unthreatening but now fully aroused assortment of philosophers. Fortunately for me, another colleague entered the office just at the right moment. Struck by the vehemence of the argument, although he had no idea what it was about, he looked at my opponents and remarked, "You folks sure are trying to *win* this argument."

This incident illustrates two important aspects of a philosophical examination of sports. First, issues arise in sports that are not simply empirical questions of psychology, sociology, or some other discipline. Empirical surveys can tell us whether people think winning is important, but they cannot tell us whether that is what people ought to think or whether winning really ought to be regarded as a primary goal of athletics. Second, the incident illustrated that logic could be applied to issues in the philosophy of sport. Thus, at least on the surface, it appeared that my colleagues were in the logically embarrassing position of trying hard to win an argument to the effect that winning is unimportant. (Of course, they might reply that their goal was not winning but the pursuit of truth, but athletes might similarly argue that winning is important because it is a sign of achieving their true goal, excellence.)

We will return to the issue of whether winning is important in Chapter 2. For now, let us consider further what philosophical inquiry might contribute to our understanding of sports.

ETHICAL ISSUES IN SPORT

Sports play a major, if sometimes unappreciated, role in the lives of Americans. Most of us are exposed to them as children. As a result of our childhood experiences, many of us become participants or fans for life. Others are appalled by their early exposure to sports and avoid them like the plague later in life. They may have been embarrassed by failures in front of peers and parents or humiliated by an insensitive physical education instructor. They may just find sports less interesting than other activities, such as participation in the arts, reading, and writing, and less valuable than social service. Girls may have received less encouragement to participate than boys. Others may just find sports boring.

Many of us, however, retain some affiliation with sports for life, even if only as spectators.¹ Athletes and fans devote so much time and effort to sports at all levels that their involvement is surely one of their most personally significant activities. The situation is not unique to the United States. Intense interest in sports is virtually a global phenomenon. Whether it is ice hockey in Russia or soccer in Europe, South America, and Africa, sports play a major role worldwide. Sports were valued by the ancient Greeks, by the Romans, and by Native Americans. Indeed, participation in sports, and the related activity of play, is characteristic of most, if not all, human societies.

Although there is a tendency to regard sports as trivial, it is not clear that such a view is justified. Those critical of sports or bored by athletic competition must admit that sports play a significant role in our lives, even if they believe that dominance is misguided or even harmful. At the very least, it is surely worth discovering what it is about sports that calls forth a favorable response among so many people from so many different cultures.

Reflection upon sports raises issues that not only have intrinsic interest but also go beyond the bounds of sport itself. For example, reflection on the value of competition in athletics and the emphasis on winning in much of organized sports may shed light on the ethics of competition in other areas, such as the marketplace. Inquiry into the nature of fair play in sports can also help our understanding of fairness in a wider social setting. Indeed, because many of our basic values, such as playing fairly, are often absorbed through involvement in athletic competition, inquiry into values in sports is likely not only to prove interesting in its own right but also to have implications of more general concern.

Sports raise many kinds of philosophical issues. For example, what is a sport? Football, baseball, and soccer clearly are sports. But some have doubts about golf. What about chess and auto racing? How are sports related to games? Is participation in sport always a form of play? Questions such as these raise issues that go well beyond looking up words in a dictionary. To settle them, we will need to rely on a theory of what makes something a game, a sport, or an instance of play. Dic-

tionary definitions often presuppose such theories. But the theories presupposed by the definition may be unclear; they may leave open how borderline cases are to be thought of; or they may just be wrong. For example, one dictionary account of games classifies them as competitive activities. But must all games be competitive? “Playing house” arguably is a game, but is it competitive? What about playing catch?

Some of the most important kinds of philosophical issues that arise in sport are ethical or moral ones; these are the kinds of issues about which this book will be primarily concerned. Some moral issues in sport concern specific actions, often by athletes. For example, in the championship game of the 1999 World Cup, the American women’s soccer team completed regulation and overtime play against China with the score tied. The championship, viewed throughout the world by millions of fans, many of them young American girls captivated by the success of the American women, was to be settled by penalty kicks in a game-ending shootout.² The American goalkeeper, Briana Scurry, decided that one of the Chinese shooters, Liu Ying, lacked confidence. When Liu made her move, Scurry took two quick steps forward, in violation of a rule of soccer, to cut off Liu’s shooting angle. The tactic worked. Scurry deflected Liu’s shot, and the Americans won. But did Scurry cheat by violating a rule? Was Scurry simply doing what any goalkeeper would do in such a situation: namely, conforming to a convention of the game tacitly accepted by all players? Or was the American victory tainted by unethical behavior in a deliberate violation of the rules?³

Other kinds of ethical issues in sport involve the assessment of rules or policies—for example, the prohibition by many sports organizations of the use of performance-enhancing drugs by competitive athletes. What justifies this prohibition? Is it because performance-enhancing drugs such as steroids often have harmful side effects? But why shouldn’t athletes, especially competent adult athletes, be free to take risks with their bodies? After all, many of us would reject the kind of paternalism that constantly interferes with the pursuit of our goals whenever risky behavior is involved. Think of the dangers inherent in a typical American diet, which contains a high proportion of unhealthy fat and sugar.

Or should performance-enhancing drugs be prohibited because they provide unfair advantages to some of the competitors? Are the advantages any different from those conferred by the legal use of technologically advanced equipment? Moreover, would the advantages still be unfair if all competitors had access to the drug? Defenders of baseball slugger Barry Bonds, who is alleged to have achieved his home run records in part with the assistance of performance-enhancing drugs, claim that some opposing pitchers undoubtedly also used performance enhancers, thus equalizing the competition.

Questions of marketing, sports administration, and the formulation of rules also involve moral issues, although the moral character of the questions raised may

not always be obvious. For example, consider whether a rule change ought to be instituted that might make a sport more attractive to fans at the professional or college levels yet diminish the skill or strategy needed to play the game. Some would argue that the designated-hitter rule in American League baseball, which allows teams to replace their usually weak-hitting pitcher with a designated hitter in the batting order, is such a case. The rule may make the game more exciting to the casual fan, who values an explosive offense. However, it may also remove various subtleties from the game, such as the decision about when to remove the pitcher from the game for a pinch hitter, or the value of the sacrifice bunt, which weak-hitting pitchers might be capable of executing. Although this is not as obvious a moral issue as some of the other examples cited, it does have a moral, or at least evaluative, component. It raises questions about the purposes or goals of sports, what social functions they ought to serve, and whether sports have an integrity that ought to be preserved. Similar issues may arise when we consider when technological innovations ought to be permitted in sport, and when they ought to be prohibited for making a sport too easy.

At a more abstract level, other ethical issues concern the values central to competitive sport itself. Is competition in sport ethically permissible, or even desirable, or does it create a kind of selfishness, perhaps an analog of a narrow form of nationalism that says “My team, right or wrong?” Does the single-minded pursuit of winning, which is apparently central to competition in sport, help promote violent behavior in fans? Does it teach competitors to regard opponents as mere obstacles to be overcome and not as fellow human beings? Is it related to the anger shown by many parents of participants in youth sports, which culminated in 2001 in the killing of a hockey coach by an enraged parent? What kind of competition in sport can be defended morally, and how great an emphasis on winning is too much?

Questions such as these raise basic issues about the kinds of moral values involved in sports. They are not only about what people think about sports or about what values they hold; rather, they are about what people *ought* to think. They require the identification of defensible ethical standards and their application to sport. Critical inquiry into the philosophy of sport consists in formulating and rationally evaluating such standards as well as testing them by seeing how they apply to concrete issues in sports and athletics.

SPORT, PHILOSOPHY, AND MORAL VALUES

Just what does philosophy have to contribute to reflection about sports and moral values? It is evident even to a casual observer of our society that sports in the United States are undergoing intense moral scrutiny. How can philosophy contribute to this endeavor?

Philosophy of Sport

Misconceptions about the nature of philosophy are widespread. According to one story, a philosopher on a domestic flight was asked by his seatmate what he did for a living. He replied, perhaps foolishly, “I’m a philosopher,” a statement that is one of the greatest conversation-stoppers known to the human race. The seatmate, apparently stupefied by the reply, was silent for several minutes. Finally, he turned to the philosopher and remarked, “Oh, and what are some of your sayings?”⁴

The image of the philosopher as the author of wise sayings can perhaps be forgiven, for the word “philosophy” has its roots in the Greek expression meaning “love of wisdom.” But wisdom is not necessarily encapsulated in brief sayings that we might memorize before breakfast. The ancient Greek philosopher Socrates provides a different model of philosophic inquiry.

Socrates, who lived in the fifth century B.C., did not leave a body of written works behind him; however, we know a great deal about his life and thought, primarily through the works of his most influential pupil, Plato. As a young man, Socrates, seeking a mentor from whom to learn, set out to find the wisest man in Greece. According to the story, he decided to ask a religious figure, the oracle at Delphi, the identity of the man he was seeking. Much to Socrates’ surprise, the oracle informed him that he, Socrates, was the wisest man in Greece. “How can that be?” Socrates must have wondered; after all, he was searching for a wise teacher precisely because he was ignorant.

However, looking at the oracle’s answer in light of Plato’s presentation of Socrates, we can discern what the oracle meant. In the early Platonic dialogues, such as the *Euthyphro*, Socrates questioned important figures of the day about the nature of piety or the essence of knowledge. Those questioned purported to be experts in the subject under investigation, but their claim to expertise was discredited by Socrates’ logical analysis. These experts not only failed in what they claimed to know but also seemed to have accepted views that they had never exposed to critical examination.

Perhaps in calling Socrates the wisest man in Greece the oracle was suggesting that Socrates alone was willing to expose beliefs and principles to critical examination. He did not claim to know what he did not know, but he was willing to learn. He was also not willing to take popular opinion for granted but was prepared to question it.

This Socratic model suggests that the role of philosophy is to examine our beliefs, clarify the principles on which they rest, and subject them to critical examination. For example, in science, the role of philosophy is not to compete in formulating and testing empirical hypotheses in biology, chemistry, and physics. Rather, philosophers might try to understand in what sense science provides objective knowledge and then examine claims that all knowledge must be scientific. If we

Plato

adopt such a view of philosophy, the task of the philosophy of sport would be to clarify, systematize, and evaluate the principles that we believe should govern the world of sports. This task might involve a conceptual analysis of such terms as “sport” and “game,” an inquiry into the nature of excellence in sports, an ethical evaluation of such principles as “winning should be the only concern of the serious athlete,” and an application of ethical analysis to concrete issues, such as disagreement over whether athletes should be permitted to take performance-enhancing drugs.

This book is concerned primarily with the ethical evaluation of principles that many people apply to sports and the application of the analysis to specific issues. Its major focus is the nature of principles and values that should apply to sports. Thus, its concern is predominantly normative rather than descriptive—assessing what ought to be rather than describing what is. Perhaps only a few people think of sports as activities that raise serious moral issues. They see sports either as mere instruments for gaining fame and fortune or as play, something relatively trivial that we do for fun and recreation. However, as the headlines of our daily newspapers show all too frequently, serious moral issues do arise in sports.

But can moral issues be critically examined? Is rational argument even possible in ethics? Aren't moral views just matters of opinion? Can moral principles be rationally evaluated and defended, or are they mere expressions of personal feelings that are not even the sorts of things that can be rationally evaluated or examined?

Ethics and Moral Reasoning

If reasoned ethical discourse is impossible, rational inquiry into ethical issues in sports is impossible. Although we cannot consider all possible reasons for skepticism about whether rationally justifiable moral positions can be developed, one widely cited reason for doubting the objectivity of ethics is relativism. Because relativism is so widely suggested as a basis for skepticism about the role of reason in ethics, a brief discussion of it will prove helpful. The remainder of this book attempts to consider moral issues in sports rationally. Clearly, if this attempt succeeds, it counts as an example of reasoned inquiry in ethics.

Relativism

Perhaps the most widely cited position that rejects the rationality and objectivity of ethical discourse is relativism. In his best-selling book, *The Closing of the American Mind*, Allen Bloom blames relativism for much of what he sees as the moral and educational decay infecting American universities. According to Bloom, “There is one thing a professor can be absolutely certain of: Almost every student entering the university believes, or says he believes, that truth is relative.”⁵ Relativism is so widely

supported, according to Bloom, because its opposite is (incorrectly, as we will see) identified with a kind of intolerant and dogmatic absolutism. The price we pay for this misidentification is our inability to formulate, articulate, and defend standards we think are correct. But just what is relativism in ethics?

Actually, no one position has a unique claim to the title of relativism.⁶ Rather, relativism is more like a family of related positions that share such features as the rejection of a universal outlook or perspective and the suspicion of principles that claim to be true or justifiable for all. According to *descriptive* relativism, the moral judgments people make and the values they hold arise from or are relative to their culture, socioeconomic state, or ethnic and religious background. For example, secular culture in the West tends to be permissive of sexual contact between consenting adults, but such contacts have been much more strictly regulated at other times and in other places. In the world of sports, some cultures may place more value than others on winning and less on, say, the aesthetic appeal of play. Different sports communities may recognize different conceptions of fair play. In golf, for example, players are expected to call penalties on themselves and are open to criticism if they do not, whereas in basketball, players defer to the calls of officials. This form of relativism is descriptive in that it is making a factual claim about the origin or empirical basis of our values. It claims to tell us where *in fact* our values originate, or describes the practices to which they are thought to apply rather than what we *ought* to think about them.

What does descriptive relativism have to do with whether our moral beliefs and judgments are or can be rationally justified? It is sometimes argued that if descriptive relativism is true, there cannot be objectivity or rationality in ethics. No one's ethical judgments would be any more justifiable or correct than anyone else's. Rather, people's ethical judgments would be mere subjective claims based on their distinct and different backgrounds. In this view, our moral values are the prejudices we absorbed as children. Perhaps they were presented to us as self-evident truths. In reality, they are only the blinders of our particular culture or group.

Accordingly, it is sometimes claimed that skepticism about the rationality and objectivity of ethics follows from descriptive relativism. Skepticism denies that we can know whether ethical beliefs or claims are justified or whether some are more reasonable and more defensible than others. This kind of philosophical skepticism needs to be distinguished from an ordinary and perhaps healthy kind of skepticism in ordinary life that cautions us not to accept the opinions of others at face value but to examine whether they are well supported. Philosophical skepticism of the kind at issue here denies that our ethical or moral views ever can be well supported, or that we can know which moral views are rationally warranted and which are not. Ordinary skepticism cautions us to look for evidence for our views, but philosophical skepticism questions whether it is even possible, even in principle, to provide evidence or rational support for our ethical views.

Others have suggested that descriptive relativism implies not skepticism but ethical (value) relativism. Ethical relativism is the view that each culture's moral code is right for that culture. For example, according to ethical relativism, repressive sexual practices are morally right for cultures that have such practices embedded in their moral codes but not for more liberal cultures or groups. Applied to sports, such ethical relativism might assert that we ought to follow the values of our own sports communities: If we are golfers we should call the penalties on ourselves, but if we are basketball players, we should leave it to the referees (even if they make a terrible call in our favor that enables us to win a game). Ethical relativism differs from skepticism in that skepticism denies that any ethical perspective is more justifiable or reasonable than any other (or denies that we can know which perspectives are more justifiable than others), whereas ethical relativism endorses an ethical view—namely, what is right for you to do is what your culture or community says is right.

What is the significance of these views for the ethical analysis of sports? If skepticism is correct, it follows that we cannot justify any position on questions of ethics that arise in sports, since skepticism denies that any ethical perspective is more justified than any other. For example, we could not justify either the claim that the use of anabolic steroids to enhance performance is warranted or the claim that it is unwarranted. However, if ethical relativism is correct, what is morally justifiable depends on the group to which one belongs. Perhaps the use of performance-enhancing drugs is permissible for cultures that find it permissible but not for those that find it impermissible.

Does descriptive relativism really have the skeptical implications examined above? Is relativism acceptable in the forms discussed above?

A Critique of Relativism

First, consider the argument that because the thesis of descriptive relativism—that moral codes of different cultures and groups conflict—is true, therefore moral skepticism is true. To evaluate this argument, we need to consider what general conditions an argument must meet to be acceptable. If the premises of an argument are to justify a conclusion, two fundamental requirements must be satisfied. (1) The premises must be true. False statements cannot be acceptable evidence for the truth of a conclusion. (2) The premises must be logically relevant to the conclusion; otherwise, the conclusion could not follow from the premises because they would be irrelevant to it. For example, we would not accept the conclusion that “The major goal of competitive sports is winning” on the basis of the claim that “Washington, D.C., is the capital of the United States.” Even though the latter claim is true, it has nothing to do with the former claim and so cannot support it.

Consider again the argument that because the moral codes of different cultures and groups conflict, no set of moral judgments or principles can be correct, reasonable, or justified. First, the argument assumes that descriptive relativism is true, but is it? If descriptive relativism claims no more than that the moral codes, principles, and judgments accepted in different societies sometimes conflict, it may well be true. But it leaves open the possibility that, behind the apparent disagreement, there is deeper agreement on some morally fundamental values. The area of agreement might constitute the basis of cross-cultural universal values that some investigators have claimed to detect. For example, people from a wide variety of cultural, ethnic, socioeconomic, and religious backgrounds condemn incest, torture, and the random killing of members of one's community. Protests against Communist regimes in China and the old Soviet Union and, more recently, against rigid forms of Islamic fundamentalism that deny women fundamental rights, or against the murder and rape of non-Arabs, amounting to genocide in the view of many observers, in Darfur, are evidence for the broad appeal of values such as liberty and human rights.

This point can be taken further. Apparent surface disagreement can disguise deeper agreement in values. For instance, consider a dispute between a basketball coach and her assistant before a big game. The head coach wants to use a pressure defense to take advantage of her team's agility and the opponent's lack of speed. The assistant argues against this strategy because it may cause overanxious and inexperienced defensive players to commit too many fouls. In this example, there is disagreement over which tactics to follow. But behind the disagreement is a common value or principle shared by both coaches. Each is trying to select the strategy that will lead to victory.

A parallel situation is possible in ethics. Suppose culture A believes that old people should be separated from the group and left to die when they can no longer contribute to the general welfare, but culture B disagrees. Clearly, there is a disagreement here, but both cultures might share deeper fundamental values as well. For one thing, the circumstances of each culture might differ. Culture A may barely be surviving at the subsistence level; culture B may be affluent and therefore able to care for its older members. Perhaps culture A consists of nomadic bands that must move fast to keep up with game. Arguably, each culture may accept the same basic principle of promoting the greater good for the greater number, but the principle might apply differently in the different circumstances in which each group finds itself. Accordingly, although the descriptive relativist is undoubtedly correct in pointing to moral disagreement among groups, it remains controversial whether there is fundamental disagreement about all values or whether underneath the surface disagreement most societies have a deeper acceptance of fundamental core values.