

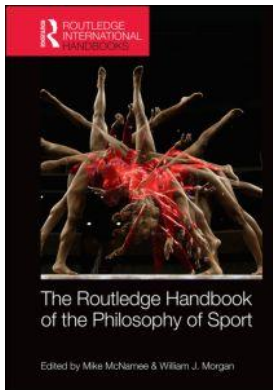
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11

FEMINISM IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF SPORT

Leslie A. Howe

A generous observer of the philosophy of sport might conclude that the effect of feminist theory on the field has been subtle rather than pervasive. In terms of published journal pages, the philosophy of sport lags significantly behind its sister fields of the sociology of sport and social philosophy in general. Nevertheless, the influence of feminist thought and political action here as elsewhere has been to press profound reconfigurings of the central values and conceptions of sport and of how these values may be best realised in a just society. I do not in this chapter offer an historical survey of either feminist theory or its appearance in the philosophy of sport; there are a number of these already extant.¹ Rather, I offer an outline of the major theoretical concepts and problems that have been pursued by feminist philosophers of sport, explore their philosophical underpinnings and attempt to make evident connections between issues. In particular, feminist philosophers of sport have been concerned with equality of access to sport and its personal and social goods, the relative values of difference and separation in addressing equality issues, autonomy and the definition of gender in and through sport and sexuality. These are by no means the only issues in sport that are open to feminist philosophical questioning but they are the ones that have taken up the most attention in the philosophical literature. Of these, by far the greatest share of attention, at least up to the mid 1990s, has been equality and so we begin at the beginning.

Equality of access to sport

Equality is a fundamental liberal value, more noted in its absence than its achievement. This has been and continues to be so in sport. Questions concerning women's equality with men in sport are complex, in part because the equality advocated can be applied in many different ways. Are two people equal if they can both compete for the same opportunities to compete further, even in a society where goods and the means to compete are unequally distributed? Or are they equal only if they each have the same real prospect of enjoying those goods? Women's sports have consistently been under resourced in comparison with men's and, despite various legislative measures, largely continue to be so. Much of the philosophy of sport literature has concerned such measures, particularly Title IX legislation in the USA. While Title IX concerns only a limited set of American jurisdictions, the debates around it have served to refine some questions of fair distribution of resources in a context where both equality of fundamental right and historical failure to honour that right in practice occur.

Jane English's article 'Sex Equality in Sports' (1978) is the plausible starting point for this debate in contemporary philosophy of sport. In it, she poses the question of what exactly constitutes 'equal opportunity' for women in sports. A common interpretation of equality is a blanket principle of non-discrimination. This is a formal principle that stipulates simply that all applicants for or recipients of some benefit must be assessed without reference to non-relevant characteristics; in this case, we must be sex-blind. As English argues, however, this is too weak a principle for the advancement of women's participation in sport. Insofar as women perceive sport as a male preserve they may lack incentive to pursue sport and, thus, some violation of purely formal equality may be necessary to bring about a more just distribution of benefits. Also, purely formal equality may not be sufficient to cope with a context in which the differences between men and women are permanent (physiological) rather than (entirely) socially based, albeit those differences are statistical rather than essential. That is, while any given woman may be stronger or faster than some number of men, *on average*, men are stronger or faster than women. Given this, reliance on a formal principle of equality such as non-discrimination on the basis of sex has a strong likelihood of reinforcing present inequalities and, unlike other social contexts where this principle may come into force, it is unclear how such inequalities may be overcome.

In sport, bodily differences matter; they directly affect how well one can carry out its constituent movements and thus whether one can succeed at them, all other things being equal. That is, muscle mass matters in strength sports, height in those in which the athlete must reach a specific span, and so on. These may not be decisive: fine motor control and learned technique may put one athlete ahead of another despite their respective inherited anatomical advantages or disadvantages, so that where sport-specific skill is equivalent, a talentless behemoth might do less well than a skilled sprite in a physical contest. Although size, or strength, or raw speed, or natural flexibility, and so on, may be decisive, this depends on the requirements of the sport in question. Given a social bias in favour of those sports that privilege predominantly male characteristics, however, women and women's sports are less likely to flourish.

The question of equal opportunity is thus inextricably linked with those concerning the masculine bias of much conventional sport. As Betsy Postow argues in 'Women and Masculine Sports' (1980), sports can be described as 'masculine' in a number of different ways, such as in: (a) requiring certain kinds of behaviours culturally identified as 'masculine'; or (b) attitudes likewise identified, as being (c) a vehicle of masculine gender identification, or (d) as defining athletic excellence in terms of developed capacities in which men have a statistical advantage over women owing to biological factors (1980: 52–3). Sports falling under (c) may be problematic in some ways but, while (a) and (b) are considered by Postow to be morally neutral; that is, there is no reason why women should not participate in these activities, 'masculine_d' sports ought, she argues, to be avoided (Postow 1980: 53–4). This is because participation in them perpetuates the image of 'general female inferiority which we have a moral reason to undermine' (ibid: 54). Instead, we should increase the availability of sports in which women have a statistical superiority or are, at least, not inferior, although those women who enjoy or are well suited to masculine_d sports should continue to pursue them, presumably because doing so mitigates the conviction of women's 'general inferiority'.

On the other hand, if able women can compete with men, the reverse ought also to be permitted and this may have undesirable consequences for women's sport participation.

In masculine_d sports, allowing men to compete against women would expose women to a drastically reduced probability of receiving the moderately scarce athletic

resources, such as access to facilities and coaching, that go with making a team. This too seems unfair.

(Postow 1980: 55)

As Postow points out, equality of opportunity *qua* freedom from socially imposed restrictions on one's ability to compete seems to work against equality of opportunity *qua* probability, given the same level of effort, of actually receiving the benefits of the sport.² In other words, if we all have equal opportunity in the sense that we can all *compete* for the same goods, then those who are already advantaged in the means of competition will exclude those who are not. Where the goods are assumed to be scarce, that means not merely that the disadvantaged will do less well but that they will not do at all.

Because of considerations like these, English argues in favour of an equality for sport that specifically stresses equality of access to the basic benefits that sport offers to participants:

Sports offer what I will call *basic benefits* to which it seems everyone has an equal right: health, the self-respect to be gained by doing one's best, the cooperation to be learned from working with teammates and the incentive gained from having opponents, the 'character' of learning to be a good loser and a good winner, the chance to improve one's skills and learn to accept criticism – and just plain fun. If Matilda is less adept at, say, wrestling than Walter is, this is no reason to deny Matilda an equal chance to wrestle for health, self-respect, and fun.

(English 1978: 270)

English goes on to declare that 'a society that discourages Matilda from wrestling is unjust because it lacks equal opportunity to attain these basic benefits'. While *prima facie* this seems a promising approach, it may not do as much work as English suggests, even if we accept its fundamental principle. That is, English's principle supposes that everyone ought to have access to the means of obtaining the basic benefits offered by sport, whether male or female, whether exceptionally competent or not. *If* basic benefits are of fundamental value then participation should not be dependent on whether one is sufficiently skilled to make the top-tier team but only on whether one is willing to participate and compete. Guaranteed access to *basic* benefits, however, does not guarantee access to the participant's *preferred* form of those benefits. That is, a society may accept English's principle but still restrict women's access to sports that some women may prefer to participate in, such as those that are considered the appropriate preserve of ('real') men and direct women into what it considers appropriately 'feminine' activities, ones that reinforce stereotypes about women's abilities and that restrict individual women's actual choices.

Difference and integration

Such an outcome might be the result of assuming that the ways to play constitute a naturally limited set, as, for example, if one were to suppose that any given sport, say hockey, could only be played in a particular way, and nothing else could count as hockey. This is even more restricting if it is assumed that these ways are all ways in which only one group (men) happen to play, not least because this then suggests that only men's sports could count as sport – because that is just what sport is. There are a number of possible responses to this. The most common in this period is to suggest a fragmentation of possible play situations. For example, skill classes are one way to deal with physical differences between competitors. As English points out, these

are more readily justifiable than sex segregation as they are determined by relevant characteristics and provide satisfying levels of competition. English (1978: 275–7) also calls for the development of new sports that are more suited to women's 'distinctive abilities'.

The just society ... would contain a greater variety of sports than we now have, providing advantages for a wider range of physical types. The primary emphasis would be on participation, with a wealth of local teams and activities available to all, based on groupings by ability.

(English 1978: 276)

The devising of sports specifically for women is advocated by a number of authors in this period and can be characterised as an expression of dismay at the exaggerated masculinity of modern sport, whether that is perceived as inherent to it or a contingent aberration. This masculinisation excludes women's participation in sport either by entrenching the social view that sport just is by definition masculine and thus women *ought not* participate, or by making any sport competition that features both sexes a mismatch that confirms the prejudice that women do not belong in sport. This is 'demonstrated' in an explicit way by the exhibition of lopsided scoring or by the deliberate or incidental infliction of physical harm on participating women. An historically popular and marginally more subtle technique that remains in force today is to demand that where women's sports exist at all, the participants exhibit male-determined ideals of femininity. Thus, for example, the exaggerated emphasising of female sexuality in sports such as volleyball, the social expectation that strong female athletes demonstrate gender-identified emotional traits (crying, devotion to family, etc.) and that female athletes, especially in masculine-identified sports such as hockey or football, signal strongly their real or feigned heterosexual identity. How then is the feminist project of reinventing sports for women not a tail wagged by a masculinist dog?

The crucial point is the modifier 'male-determined'. The conception of sport as fundamentally masculine presupposes a particular conception of 'masculinity' and concomitantly a particular conception of 'femininity'. These are exclusively dyadic (and hierarchical) conceptions. They are ideological conceptions, which is to say that they organise experience rather than follow it and are thus largely impervious to actual empirical evidence. The phenomenon of women playing and succeeding at sport does not shake the conception but merely confuses unless it can be placed back into the organising structure of 'masculine' = male = physically active and superior/'feminine' = woman = physically passive and inferior. On this structure, women doing sport makes very little sense, unless (perhaps) they also do it 'like girls' (that is, badly) and women doing 'male' sports makes no sense at all (so there must be something wrong with them).

The liberal feminist project of androgyny to which many of the authors of this period refer was an attempt to counter this dyadic conception of humanity. 'Androgynism' here refers to a number of theoretical responses to the recognition that sex (one's anatomical, hormonal, and/or chromosomal arrangement) and gender (one's set of psychological traits and/or social behaviours socially identified as belonging to one sex or the other, supposing a binary classification) are not necessarily or irrevocably linked. In particular, androgyny functions as an ideal of human development in which human individuals are enabled to develop so-called 'masculine' or 'feminine' gender traits independently of their sex and as an expression of a more fully developed humanness than is available under the "'this" or "that" and no other' of dominant heterosexist-dualist normativity. The central observation supporting the conviction that all humans should be treated *as humans* and as free to develop and express whatever (morally

acceptable) traits they choose is that there are no human traits that are possessed by all and only males or by all and only females. The androgynist ideal rests on this principle there is no essential masculinity or femininity. Rather, human traits are distributed through the population, with an, at most, statistical preponderance in one sex or the other. An ideal human society would be one in which any human individual could choose what traits to possess or realise in him or her self without regard to whether such traits were 'ideally' 'masculine' or 'feminine'. Indeed, in the best of all possible worlds, such designations as 'masculine' or 'feminine' would in time wither away, and we would recognise traits as simply and solely human.³

Thus, many of these authors, in advocating the development of women oriented or women-only sports, are *rejecting* the dyadic conception of 'femininity' and endorsing the view that women's participation in sport is a legitimate expression of their equal capacity for rational choice of embodied activity, but in a way that facilitates the de-legitimation of the dyadic conception.⁴

On an even broader level, and as hinted earlier, the feminist critique opens the question of sport itself. Many of the criticisms of conventional sport are not unique to feminism; for example, is sport best understood as barely restrained combat or, as Boxill describes it, as a co-questing after excellence (Boxill 1993–94: 25). Feminism brings to such questions a sharper perspective: not simply one involving a conflict of styles or tastes or a philosophically neutral dispute about definitions, but a matter of unwarranted discrimination rooted in false and unsupportable ideologies about the nature of masculinity, femininity and humanity in general. Our views about what sport is, and what characteristics are required for success in it, leans heavily on the degree to which sport figures in a set of ideological assumptions, including our conceptualisations of ideal femininity and ideal masculinity. Insofar as sport is implicated in a view of masculinity that is strongly opposed to femininity, and insofar as it is as such recruited in the attempt to preserve hegemonic strategies of masculine interpretation, women will encounter significant resistance to their participation in sport and even more so the recognition of their athletic endeavours as genuine *sport*. Thus, questioning the appropriate 'masculinity' of sport is not only critical to rethinking women's possibilities for participation but entails a reconsideration of the nature of sport itself. Although this has sometimes been put in dyadic terms (masculine agonism versus feminine relational support), to do so, it can be argued, merely reiterates this essentialist framework and moves too quickly past an opportunity for a more thoroughgoing reflection on sport as an intersubjective social practice.

This last observation brings us back to the question with which we began: sport is a social practice, so achieving equality in sport should be a matter of finding the right kind of social policy, one that finds the right balance between equality and justice. One of the problems with opting to treat everyone as the same: that is, interpreting the ideal of equality entirely in terms of an abstract policy of treating everyone (as) the same, rather than as a substantive social goal, is that it ignores the concrete inequalities with which participants come to the playing field. In the matter of sport, the inequalities are not (only) the anatomical and physiological differences between men and women, but the social contexts that prepare and shape the participants, that assess their performances, and that reward them differently for their efforts.⁵

Postow (1981) attempts to make something like this point in defending the segregationist point that women ought not to participate in the sort of male-preferential sports (football, baseball, basketball, tennis; that is, those that, in her characterisation, favour upper-body strength) at which they are statistically more likely to measure poorly against male participants because doing so will contribute to the view that women are naturally inferior. A number of commentators have responded to this by pointing out that such a conclusion is not a compelling reason for women to refrain from engaging in such sports; that is, that other people may form false

opinions about whether women are naturally inferior or not as a consequence of women participating in sport is no moral reason for women to cease to engage in it; the error is on the part of the observer, not the women (Vetterling-Braggin 1981; Grim 1981). As Vetterling-Braggin explains,

No matter what sort of case is invented, the image formed is either accurate or inaccurate. Because women have no moral reason to prevent the formation of anyone's truths and no moral reason to limit our own sports possibilities for the purpose of preventing the formation of someone else's falsehoods, we have no moral grounds for withdrawing from 'masculine' sports.

(Vetterling-Braggin 1981: 57)

Postow's point, however, is that such sports are not in and of themselves objectionable; what is, rather, is their 'virtual monopoly on social recognition' (Postow 1981: 62) and that social facts like this one are often mistaken for natural fact.

The criticism that women's social circumstances are treated as if natural fact is one with a long historical precedent. In 1792, Mary Wollstonecraft (1995) argued, in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, that keeping women from education in the use of their reason was what very conveniently allowed men to decry women as naturally frivolous and stupid and on that basis to bar them from what supposedly would only be a wasted education (Wollstonecraft 1995: 44). As John Stuart Mill (1970) also pointed out in 1869 in *The Subjection of Women*, it is a curious sort of natural fact that needs so many safeguards for its support (1970: 27). So here as well, if women fail (relatively) at 'male' activities such as sport because 'male' characteristics are required for success and women are prevented from acquiring them, as by training, what we have is a social artefact of women's 'inferiority', not proof of a natural fact that would hardly need social intervention to maintain if it really were a natural fact. Nevertheless, false though it be as fact, it is a bone to the dog of sexist prejudice.

Autonomy

Insofar as much of the discussion concerning women's participation in sport in the philosophical literature has been based in a liberal framework, it has approached these issues as fundamentally about equality and therefore also, although less explicitly, as a matter of personal autonomy. This especially stands out when the connection is made between women's equality and the right to be free of paternalist interference. Paternalism is an issue for women's sport when women are prevented from participating in certain sports or in integrated (mixed sex) sports on grounds of the possibility of harm to women. 'Harm' here may refer to a number of anticipated outcomes: physical harm, of which there may or may not be a reasonable expectation due to the particular activities involved; presumed likelihood of harm that is alleged to affect women in particular (for example, the belief that strenuous activity threatens a woman's capacity for maternity); social harms of various kinds (for example, muscles might make a woman mannish and thus unattractive to men); alleged moral/religious harms (for example, for women to expose themselves publicly in athletic clothing); or psychological harms (for example, sport makes women aggressive); and so on. These putative harms, then, may be exaggerated for women or unreasonably presumed to affect women more than men, or it may be thought that women ought to be especially protected from such harms. If, then, women are on the basis of one or another of these pretexts prevented from pursuing such activities, those who do so, it can be argued, are treating women as non-autonomous beings for whom decisions must be made by others.

At its basic level, liberal theory supposes that each individual is in principle rational and thus is able to rationally and, by dint of rationality,⁶ freely organise his own affairs for himself, to decide for himself which of his interests he will act upon and in what way. Liberal feminists point out that ‘his’ is also ‘her’, that women are just as capable as men of rational self-determination. For any such (ideally) autonomous agent, it is an affront to his or her human dignity and fundamental liberty to be ruled by another where autonomy itself does not warrant such constraint, and arguably not even then. In Wollstonecraft’s words,

I love man as my fellow; but his sceptre, real, or usurped, extends not to me, unless the reason of an individual demands my homage; and even then the submission is to reason, and not to man. In fact, the conduct of an accountable being must be regulated by the operations of its own reason; or on what foundation rests the throne of God?
(Wollstonecraft 1995: 53)

And later:

The being who discharges the duties of its station is independent; and, speaking of women at large, their first duty is to themselves as rational creatures, and the next in point of importance, as citizens, is that which includes so many, of a mother. The rank in life which dispenses with their fulfilling this duty necessarily degrades them by making them mere dolls.
(Wollstonecraft 1995: 67)

Thus, for women to be subject to much stricter controls over their activities than men on grounds of possible harm is differential paternalism, objectionable both because of the assumption of rational agential incapacity and the presumption that women are rationally defective in comparison with men.

This liberal-autonomy view is implicit in Angela Schneider’s (2010) discussion in ‘On the definition of “woman” in the sport context’. If men get to decide at the institutional level what sports women can do, how they are to be judged and to what extent they are to be funded, she concludes, ‘then women have a legitimate grievance of not being treated with due respect’ (Schneider 2010: 42). Moreover, women have the right, just as men do, to decide what risks of harm they will run. Subject to the normal limitations on every person’s freedom, it is immorally paternalistic to decide, on behalf of another competent adult, what personal risks he or she can choose to accept (Schneider 2010: 43).

The issue here is two-fold: paternalism as such and the usurpation by one class (men) of another’s (women’s) right to determine for themselves not only what risks may reasonably be incurred, but what by what standards and ideals they are to be judged. Thus, the broader issues here are not only paternalism but control over self-definition. More prosaically, this includes how women should play in sport, what counts as a good performance, by what rules sports-women are to be governed, and do women even get to play at all. If the ‘ideal (sports)woman’ is determined according to men’s rather than women’s own expectations and interests then women are not respected as fully capable agents. The strength of the argument is in its ruling out paternalism on the irrelevant basis of class membership (that is, prejudice), since all that matters for self-determination is humanity. In effect, paternalism can only proceed if the members of a class can be shown to be not fully human. The weakness of the argument is that the claim that it is (always) morally wrong to act paternalistically in relation to another human being rests on a highly abstract conception of the human; no one is such an ideal agent.

Separation, sovereignty, and bio-Amazon

So far, we have approached the question of equality primarily as that of women's inclusion in sport. Women are equally entitled to enjoy the basic benefits of participation and entitled to decide for themselves how, when and in what way to play. Many of the feminist authors writing in the philosophy of sport have argued against integration of men's and women's sport on the grounds that it is the best way of expanding women's participation while avoiding exclusionary effects of direct competition, although often at the same time accepting the value of at least some women competing with men. Michael Burke, in contrast, argues that segregation just protects the male gender from confronting the fact of overlap in performance between men and women, while women's acquiescence in the situation reflects a desire to remain within the strictures of heteronormativity (Burke 2010a: 130–1). Claudio Tamburrini and Torbjörn Tännsjö, more radically, argue that segregated sport is itself sexual discrimination and as such indefensible. There is, in fact, a divide between those who regard separate men's and women's sports as important for allowing women to participate freely, or at all, and those who argue that segregation simply bolsters masculine hegemony in sport, elevating and entrenching male dominance over governance and the cultural assumption of male epistemological authority (Burke 2010b: 20–1). Ironically, while the case for separation has often been made from a different feminist position, both sides of this debate have been argued from liberal humanist principles.

There are a number of reasons why women might prefer to participate in sport separate from men. Some of these are reactive in the sense that they are responses to defective social conditions. For example, one might prefer to perform motions that leave one vulnerable away from an objectifying gaze or the possibility that one might in some way be taken advantage of. In a society that mandates female appearance in terms of sexual attractiveness to males, appearing strong/weak, attractive/unattractive, carry meanings and thus possible responses that women may prefer not to negotiate for an hour or two. To some extent, women-only sport situations allow women to put the male-oriented world 'on hold'. Moreover, so long as one competes with only one's own sex, one need not be constantly measuring oneself against that other, although some measuring is inevitable (that is, someone will be faster than another, etc.). Success may be encouraged if one's genuine achievements are recognised as such rather than constantly downgraded as not as good as the very best.

Women may also prefer to avoid physical harm. While we have good reason to resist that disingenuous 'protection' of women from harm, particularly when it is not extended to men, it may also be the case that some proportion of women prefer to play sports that do not put them in harm's way. So, for that matter, do many men, but segregation may be a means of minimising certain kinds of avoidable harm due simply to size and to differing learned styles of play. There is also the particular kind of socially rooted conflict that can arise when women do better than the men with whom they compete. Tännsjö (2007: 347) rejects this as a good reason for segregation – men should just come to terms with it. Since, however, many men do not act with such aplomb, it can be a reason for a *preference* on the part of some women to avoid mixed sport, at least some of the time.⁷

Another, more positive, aspect of women-only sport is the freedom to develop one's own sport independently of whether men value the activity. Where the sport is indeed woman-developed, rather than delivered to women as a vehicle of masculinist demands on women's behaviour and appearance, its very separateness can be the means of women's autonomous self-expression and independent creativity. There is no reason to suppose that sports can only and must always be exactly as they have been established, which has largely been by and for men; other sports are possible and other ways of doing sport legitimate.

The prospect of a women-developed sport, however, challenges not only the possible definition of sport and of what it means to be a woman in sport; it also challenges political and economic models of sport and thereby raises questions about control of sport. Such questions are not strictly gender questions but they do inevitably arise in this context. In 'Gender Roles Roll', Pam R. Sailors (2013) describes the phenomenon of a player-created and regulated roller derby league which offers an example of the tensions that come into play in the simultaneous performance and parodic deconstruction of heteronormative femininity by the players. The league, however, as Sailors relates, faces the prospect of a kind of integration that is not necessarily advantageous to those already participating. As it has become more popular, pressure has increased on the league to allow men's participation and to 'go mainstream', that is, to tone down its parodic (and thus arguably gender-revolutionary) elements in favour of making it 'serious sport'; that is, more conformable to a dominant (and lucrative) conception of sport. In other words, the aim is to tame its radical nature and make it look like men's sports in order to enhance its commercial appeal to the same old market. As Sailors rightly points out, this is a question of control over sport; in this case, who owns the sport: those who created it or those who participate in it? But there is also the potential transition of an activity from being a practice with a specific set of meanings for the women participating (and spectating) because it is the product of their own creative self-expression to becoming a vehicle for the expression of others through women's bodies – in effect, back to where they were before devising this act of self-construction and determination. Thus, this serves as an example of the positive potential of the refusal of integration: in a social context where financial control and regulation of meaning is not in women's hands, it is sometimes preferable to be able to find some area of self-expression that is apart from that context, and sport is one possible avenue for that self-expression.

On the other side of the integration–segregation debate are Torbjörn Tännsjö and Claudio Tamburrini, who characterise sex segregation in sport competition as sexual discrimination and as therefore morally objectionable. In their view, sport should be completely integrated so as to ensure that the primary goal of sport is met, which is the identification of the best competitor. As Tännsjö (2007: 347) explains, '[i]n sports it is crucial that the best person wins. Then sexual differences are simply irrelevant'. It is important to recognise that, although many of Tamburrini and Tännsjö's remarks seem radical, they are simply at the extreme end of the same philosophical tradition as many (although not all) of the authors we have so far reviewed; their stance is libertarian rather than liberal, but begins in much the same place, with the ideally autonomous agent. We can see this in their advocacy of 'the inalienable right of the agent – the woman athlete – to decide for herself whether and when to undergo genetic modification' (Tamburrini and Tännsjö 2005: 191). This makes their characterisation of the views of authors such as Jane English as belonging to a completely different tradition from their own somewhat tenuous.⁸

Tännsjö states that sex discrimination (segregation) in sport is supposed to be justified 'on the ground that, *on average*, women perform less well than men in certain sports' (Tännsjö 2007: 349). He objects that it is hard to ascertain this 'fact' beyond a reasonable doubt, given its possible explanation as either a statistical accident or a consequence of socially constructed gender differences, which could eventually be abolished. He remarks that even if biological in origin, it is still only a *statistical* difference and thus is only indirectly relevant and thus not a valid basis for discrimination. In addition, sex segregation means that 'some women, who are not (statistically speaking) 'typical', perform better than many (most) men do. They do so because to a considerable degree they possess the characteristics that are crucial to winning, and possess more of these characteristics than do most men. Consequently, there are some rare women who

perform better than most men in the sport in question' (Tännsjö 2007: 349). It is discrimination, then, when a highly competent woman is prevented from defeating a man on the ground that most women do not have the ability to do so.

Tännsjö dismisses the statistical justification for separate sports but it is worth noting that this is not how it has been used by liberal feminists. Rather, the circumstance that there is a statistical variation between but not an absolute or essential difference in traits and abilities between men and women has historically been deployed in the opposite direction. As Joyce Trebilcot (1975)⁹ rightly points out, there is no trait that is shared by all and only men, or all and only women; sex and gender differences are merely statistical in this sense. The observation is then the basis for claims to the effect that women ought not to be excluded from professions or activities *just because* they are women as any given woman may be better equipped for those positions than a given man – which is the view that Tännsjö defends.

This does, nevertheless, help to clarify Tännsjö's philosophical intentions. Implicit in his argument is the claim that *individuals* are unjustly treated if they are treated as members of a group because group membership is irrelevant. The liberal individualist presumption is also present in Tamburrini and Tännsjö's (2005: 182) 'The Genetic Design of a New Amazon', which declares that the best way of dealing with sexual discrimination in sport is to 'offer women the possibility of becoming as strong as men' through genetic modification. The model of competition presupposed here is that of a completely open market. We cannot discuss the merits of Tamburrini and Tännsjö's conception of the market here, except to note its characteristically atomistic underpinning and the deep conviction that it ought not be interfered with. What is troubling about it, insofar as we restrict our attention to its application in sport, is their acceptance of market value as determinative of athletic value and the consequent flattening of questions of justice to what the market will offer. Thus, they argue that women ought not to receive an equal share of the scarce benefits of sport (payment, prize money, public recognition, media coverage) because their performances are not at the same level as men and have consequently less public appeal. To correct this 'society would have to interfere with market mechanisms by taking a share of male athlete's revenues and giving it to woman athletes' (ibid: 185). Such redistribution would be unjust and, they think, would reinforce women's bad self-image. Instead, women should be allowed genetic modification to produce physiques that would permit equal competition with men (in this unfettered athletic marketplace) as 'bio-Amazons' (ibid: 187).

The view of sport that comes out in Tamburrini and Tännsjö's contributions is one that is very much limited to a conception of sport as the production of results, and for professional sport, production of a commodity for which the market will pay, with lower price indicating lesser value. Consequently, they focus on English's discussion of scarce benefits but not at all on her discussion of the basic benefits or on the *activity* of sport itself. The claim that '[i]n sports it is crucial that the best person wins' is not argued for despite its centrality to the overall view. This is a point that some critics have fixed on as this is by no means a closed question, in philosophy or in practice, and, if true, would otherwise negate as sport any variety of it that is not intended to produce a decision as to who is the best – which is, arguably, the vast majority of actually practised sport. As Susan Sherwin and Meredith Schwartz (2005) point out in direct response to Tamburrini and Tännsjö, sports contests are always local and even where we are concerned with determining winners, a 100-metre race, for example, that does not include Usain Bolt is not thereby invalid. Moreover, sometimes the best do not win.¹⁰

Sherwin and Schwartz also raise two related concerns with Tamburrini and Tännsjö's (2005: 200) position: the conflation of equality with sameness and the assumption that 'existing male standards are an appropriate norm'. The problem here, as they explain, is the failure to question

the standards currently in place, and the requirement that those who are outside that norm must conform to it in order to compete. If one already fits the norm (because it is one's own 'natural' description, and thus perhaps invisible) one is advantaged in the competition over those who are different. But an explicit defence is needed to make the case that male traits or accomplishments should be the norm rather than female. As Sherwin and Schwartz explain:

Basing equality on the presumption of sameness is likely to disadvantage [those who are oppressed on the basis of some difference] by denying the reality and implications of their difference. Since some of these differences are important to the person's identity and self-conception, and others are beyond their power to change, the suggestion that they need to assimilate to the norm that arose in their absence based on standards appropriate to the dominant group may be both impossible and offensive.

(Sherwin and Schwartz 2005: 200)

In the case at hand, then, there appears to be no reason to assume that a woman must, to achieve athletic excellence equivalent to that of a man, become a bio-Amazon, *unless* we also assume both that the male norm is the right one (one is only the best if one defeats the best *man*) and that athletic excellence is a matter of *winning*. As Simona Giordana and John Harris (2005) also point out, these assumptions are not necessarily true and thus require an argument that Tamburrini and Tännsjö (2005: 211) do not provide.

All this adds to some of the problems we might have in accepting the market model of equality. Again, as Sherwin and Schwartz (2005) argue, market standards are developed in a skewed social context. Relying on the market to solve inequalities fails to appreciate that 'the problem of oppression for women is not that men are 'naturally' superior and women are struggling to 'catch up' to the male ideal. The problem is that the construction of what is 'best' reflects male talents, and those activities that are perceived as female are systematically undervalued' (Sherwin and Schwartz 2005: 201). We can see this last point in Tännsjö's (2007, 353) dismissal of the notion that women's sports offer any unique value; instead, he suggests that whatever is good about them should simply be absorbed into the dominant (male) system.

Bodies and practices

Since the late 1990s, there has been a slow growth in feminist sport philosophy scholarship that explores issues other than, though significant for, questions of equality between men and women. These include issues around embodiment, selfhood, and sexuality, many of which were largely missing from earlier discussions. There has also been some effort to redraw the way in which we think about issues like equality; that is, to think not just about social policy but about the epistemological and ontological frameworks that structure our apprehension of gender, sexuality, body, and embodied meaning in the sport context from a broadly feminist and queer perspective.

Lisa Edwards and Carwyn Jones (2007, 349) have argued that both humanist and gynocentric feminism have failed to 'sufficiently recognise and challenge the dominant masculine ideology of sport', having concentrated instead on either securing equality within it in the first case or rejecting mainstream sport altogether as irredeemably masculinist in the latter. Neither of these approaches, they claim, are necessary, and neither is satisfactory. Instead, they propose a middle course that 'unpacks gender ideology more carefully, but also leaves intact and celebrates the non-ideological features of sport' (ibid: 349). They aim to take on the radical project of exposing the roots of sexist exclusion in sport without discarding it as a potentially inclusive

and fulfilling social practice; in effect, they claim we do not have to give up on sport just because it has been so badly used, not least because the question of sport and that of ideology are distinct questions. But it is also important to see that sport *is* being badly used and *how*. The success that women have had is often presented in such a way as to persuade that women's battles for equality have been won, in sport as in business, politics, and education, but as Edwards and Jones (2007, 350) point out, sport remains one of 'the most significant showcases for the confirmation of gender and the gender hierarchy', presenting gender norms, especially masculinity, as natural and inevitable, and thus impervious to challenge or change.

Edwards and Jones argue that this problem and the previous approaches to it require a new approach that re-theorises subjectivity in non-dichotomous terms. Opposing the valorisation of masculinised ideals by simply substituting 'feminised' ones, they argue, only reinforces ideologically damaging conceptions of women.¹¹ Such conceptions are formulated in opposition to masculine ones and are, in any case, suspect but they also retrench the ideological expectation that women will be more interested in cooperation than competition, etc.¹² Consequently, they advocate a relational approach that recognises the mutually transformative operation of the allegedly distinct members of dichotomous pairs. Following Prokhovnik, Tuana, and Flanagan, Edwards and Jones (2007: 357–9) suggest that the classic dichotomies of much humanist and gynocentric feminist debate such as nature/nurture are much more dialectical (in the Socratic sense) than exclusively oppositional. The reason why we cannot settle such questions as what is 'natural' to men and women and what is 'social' is that there are no human traits that are either wholly natural or wholly social; they are all a bit of both, in varying degrees, and describing them one way or the other will make more sense in one context and less in another. But, even if this could be settled, 'nothing necessarily follows from this. It is not the existence and developmental or biological antecedents of traits themselves as psychological entities that is contentious; rather the ways in which traits are celebrated, cultivated, valued and rewarded in our society' (Edwards and Jones 2007: 358). Our task, then, would be to consider how we choose which traits to value, and which practices exclude or oppress; in other words, how do our practices and values presuppose other values and practices, but also what epistemological and ontological short cuts they entail.

In explicating their 'soft gynocentric' middle way, Edwards and Jones (2007) suggest a McIntyrean approach to sport in which the value of the practice is to be found in the internal goods available through the particular practice and which do not depend on sex or gender, only on the means employed to pursue them. Thus, the 'purported masculine excesses of violence, cheating, commercialisation and aggression are pathological, not because they are traditionally masculine but because they are contrary to the "good sports contest"' (Edwards and Jones 2007: 361). Therefore we could say that sport is bad not because sport is inherently masculine but because it has been masculinised; that is, the practice has been distorted in such a way that the goods available through the practice have been restricted in a way not justifiable within the practice as such.

The question, however, is whether we can make sense of the concept of a social practice without presupposing the social values, traditions, and preconceptions that inform that practice. Just as the social and the natural interact in the construction of human beings as human and as male/female, etc., sport is an artefact of human interaction; change the interaction and the sport practice is also changed. Seeing this is important for challenging the notion that sport just is the way it is (that is, natural) and that this is why only men can be (naturally) good at it. But how then can we make sense of an idea of sport that is outside of all social context? The answer is that we cannot and, moreover, we do not need to. If sport is a social practice, access to the internal goods of that practice requires an understanding of the set of social meanings that are

played out in it but, while these may not be infinitely reinterpretable, they are both highly malleable and remarkably resistant to singular fiat. In other words, no one gets to legislate the meaning of such social practices arbitrarily or in isolation, but neither practice nor meaning is fixed: it is subject to shifts both gradual and rapid, over time and locale. Thus, when a major sportswear company places prominent advertising at an Olympic Games that describes silver medal winners as ‘first loser’, it creates a dissonance with the silver medallist who considers herself to have *won* second place, but it also contributes to a reinterpretation of the meaning of that achievement as *failure*, a reinterpretation that also depends on other meanings embedded in sport practice. Whether we are persuaded by any given reinterpretation also depends on which meanings in the practice are salient for us, and this may depend on other groups of social meanings, as for example, ones having to do with gender and social roles. But the important point is that we are able, at least in principle, to interpret these meanings both despite and because of our commitments to other meanings. If not, we could not disagree about them except in ignorance. The silver medal winner understands perfectly well what the billboard says about her and her achievement and rejects it as not fitting the meaning that she places upon herself, her performance, and her sport; that is, she is able to translate between meaning-structures and practices, but this does not necessarily require that sport be in some fundamental way supra-social. By analogy, human languages differ considerably, and the meanings of individual words are determined within a language, and yet we are able, with some loss of meaning and gain of insight, to translate reasonably well between languages, and to talk about what is common to language(s). Sport, like language, is not a Platonic form, but there are some things we are able to say about sport, as about language, that are generally true of all or most sports. And that is all we really need.

Most of the authors we have surveyed so far present proposals that incorporate some degree of challenge to traditional gender roles and heteronormative expectations for women; that is, that women either must or inevitably will conform to traditional and quite rigidly dualistic norms of both gender and sexual expression, that women are and must be ‘feminine’ and men ‘masculine’ in traditionally and mutually exclusive respects. These challenges have been primarily about what are essentially public social roles: participation in ordinary public sport practices. Further challenges are presented by those exploring the boundaries of what constitutes bodily heteronormativity. The experience of embodiment in sport is an important area in the philosophy of sport, and there have been valuable feminist contributions in this area, most notably Iris Marion Young’s landmark essay ‘Throwing Like a Girl’ (1980), which pulled together sport, feminist theory and Merleau-Ponty, and inspired many further feminist writers, the present author among them. Our concern here, however, is with a notable recent shift in focus away from policy issues and toward an interest in the social significance of the individual body itself as a site for performance, disruption, and regulation, and with the concomitant shift in emphasis from gender to sexuality.

One arena of disruption of heteronormative expectations regarding physical presentation is body modification. In sport, this can be readily seen in body-building. Ken Saltman (1998) describes both male and female bodybuilding as pushing masculinity and femininity, respectively, to their limits and, in the process, both maintaining and undermining gender norms. Bodybuilders engage in a set of practices of bodily care that replicate for men the experience and daily practice of women; even as they realise their corporeal instantiation of masculinity, as they become ‘real men’, they also become women by making themselves into objects of the male gaze and desire. ‘The male bodybuilder’s body parodies its own hyperbolic butchness as it transmutes into the feminine’ (Saltman 1998: 50). Female bodybuilders, on the other hand, under pressure to distinguish their masculine-because-muscle bodies from those of men,

employ exaggerated signifiers of femininity (breast implants and elaborate hair and make-up) to demarcate their difference. Yet these serve only to highlight the artificiality of these signifiers of gender (ibid: 53). Nevertheless, Saltman argues that the transformation of the men into full-body objects of sexual desire and of the women to positions and postures of masculine power and authority is subversive of heteronormative gender. 'Humanisation and objectification both lend themselves as ideological constructs to be utilised to maintain or contest dominance by one group over another. Here I point to the potentially liberatory appropriation of objectification by women' (ibid: 55).¹³

There are flies in this ointment, of course. Melina Constantine Bell (2008) also argues for the emancipatory potential of women's bodybuilding, but finds this limited by the reliance on judging standards that reflect a masculinist aesthetic of female beauty. Insofar as judging standards are based on the competitor's sexual desirability, she explains, that judgement is only to the effect that the competitor's physique is subjectively pleasing to the judge and 'not a claim to the universal validity of the judgement that her physique is *beautiful*' (Bell 2008: 43). The problem here is two-fold: that judges use a different aesthetic standard for men and women in that sexual attractiveness (subjective to the observer) is imported into the aesthetic judging of women as it is not in men, and the inappropriateness of such a measure in any case. Bell's view is that the correct aesthetic attitude is humanistic and gender-neutral: 'the beautiful bodybuilder appears, because she is, strong, physically and emotionally healthy, confident, dignified, proud, sovereign; neither domineering nor subordinated' (ibid. 60).

Rebecca Ann Lock (2010) raises an important element for the critique of heteronormativity in sport, not in respect of bodybuilding as such but in connection with the attitude to female dopers and particularly muscular female athletes. Lock's thesis is that the effect of the ban on doping has not been to stop it but to reinforce the gender order, particularly in respect of aesthetic values that are inherently lesbophobic (ibid: 112–13). Certain female athletes and some female dopers disturb the coherence and stability of the man/woman distinction by virtue of their enhanced muscularity (ibid: 120). What is especially pertinent here is the connection made between increased muscularity and diminished heterosexual attractiveness; what is really offensive about female dopers, it seems, is that they have made themselves ugly to men (ibid: 121). This disturbs heterosexual norms of attractiveness and of behaviour, and of the presumed natural sexual availability of women to men, and it opens the possibility for men of finding sexually attractive a woman who looks more like them than the norm dictates that they should.

This, then, is where the most significant risk lies, as it has throughout our discussion in this chapter. We began with questions about equality of opportunity framed in terms of the separability of sex and gender. In the intervening years, much philosophical discussion has challenged the coherence of these two categories. Thus, we need to question not only whether women ought to be enabled to do things traditionally considered 'masculine' or restricted to men, but whether terms such as 'woman' or 'man' describe anything real.¹⁴ What it means to be a 'woman' or a 'man' in sport is not only about whether or how one plays sports but how sport shapes our conception of what we are as 'masculine', 'feminine', 'man', 'woman'. Consequently, there is a growing body of literature not only on the construction of gender identity through sport but also its role in the configuration or erasure of sexuality as identity. One important and prominent thread in this discussion concerns sex verification and the response to those individuals who do not fit absolutist presumptions of sexual binarism. Another concerns the role that sport plays or is constrained to play in defining sexualities and maintaining sexual identities. A number of authors have argued that sport is instrumental in teaching boys not only how to be 'men' but, specifically, heterosexual men, where this term is understood to include the

additional and wholly unnecessary qualifications of heterosexist and (potentially) homophobic.¹⁵ For women, sport's role in defining sexuality has been more complex: while at times providing an outlet for outlaw expressions of sexuality,¹⁶ it has also frequently, in response to external and internalised pressures to appear squeaky 'clean', been more intolerant than its surrounding social context toward non-traditional expressions of either sexuality or gender.¹⁷ Fear of being or merely seeming other than conventionally heterosexual continues to exert a distorting force on participants in both men's and women's sport; in women's sport, this not infrequently manifests as a hypersexualisation of women's presentation that severely undermines the recognition of their achievements relative to those of their male counterparts.

Nevertheless, it could be argued that sport is, as Edwards and Jones (2007) suggest, not a practice that should be identified with such distortions of its inherent potential. Thus, I have argued¹⁸ that sport's promise for the development of identity, including identities relating to gender and sexuality, is in its exploration of self through play. Sport need not impose rigid preconceptions of human possibility but can also open up previously unexplored horizons of self, identity and expression. This, in turn, suggests the potential for sport to provide an opportunity for subversive play, play that rewrites the player and the observer. This is the sort of change that is provoked by the practices described by Saltman (1998), Lock (2010) and Bell (2008), and by those sportspersons who, instead of waiting for mainstream sport to catch up, have opted to devise their own means to play in the ways they need to, as in the case of gay and lesbian sports movements. In doing so, all these players demonstrate not only the permeability of gender norms, but of sport practices. Sport is not fixed; its norms are fluid – as are the identities of the humans who realise them.

There is a sense in which all of the problems before us in this essay have been about identity. Many of the issues raised in these pages could be interpreted in terms of what *sport* is, but an even deeper level of questioning is at stake in the challenge to make sport inclusive of women and of all those who do not fit into the distorting frame of traditional sex and gender binarisms. The viciousness of some responses to women's participation certainly suggests that more is at stake than participation in the activity alone.¹⁹ The presence of women in sport, fully equal and self-determining, is not simply or even primarily a threat to male power as such, although it has this consequence. Nor is it simply a matter of those with privilege being unwilling to redistribute scarce resources or benefits more fairly. It is about who we are and who we think we are, who we are willing to contemplate and to risk being. Women in sport challenge identities that depend on men's *exclusive* access to sport and to the valorisation that attends it. In doing so, they reconfigure not only women's possibilities for identity but men's as well. That is the promise and the risk.²⁰

Notes

- 1 See, for example, Joy De Sensi (1992) and Edwards and Jones (2007: 351–6).
- 2 See Simon (1993–94) and the commentaries of Boxill (1993–94) and Francis (1993–94) in the same volume, for a detailed analysis of these permutations of institutional interpretations of equality.
- 3 See Trebilcot in Vetterling-Braggin (1982); also Postow (1980) and Grim (1981).
- 4 See Howe (2003, 2008).
- 5 See, for example, Howe 'Being and Playing' (2007).
- 6 Following Locke, *Second Treatise on Civil Government* (1988: 3). Of course, utilitarians such as Mill follow a different, if parallel, line.
- 7 Tännsjö may be right about this aspect of the *morality* of the situation but the reality of it, speaking as well as one who has experienced these reactions both verbally and physically, is that there are some battles that one sometimes prefers not to have as the price of *play*.
- 8 English is characterised by Tännsjö and Tamburrini (2005: 183–4) as a 'gender essentialist feminist',

- which would ordinarily indicate a view that there are essentially masculine and essentially feminine characteristics; this would be difficult to square with the claim that the differences between men and women are statistical. In addition, at least some of the proponents of separate sport are also proponents of androgyny, which is also a development of the same general tradition. Tännsjö, in any case, regards the statistical difference as irrelevant. See Sailors (2014) for a recent analysis of English's article that deals more exactly with her arguments concerning segregation.
- 9 Trebilcot (1975). This essay is reprinted in Vetterling-Braggin (1982), together with a number of essays by additional authors who also take up this point.
 - 10 Sport may be better characterised as about the pursuit of excellence; this does not always entail winners in every competition. Sport, in this author's view, has to do with the activity that may *also* allow one to determine who is best, perhaps only on that day, in that place, and so on, but the activity is what makes this possible and meaningful. Tamburrini and Tännsjö's view of sport is instrumentalist and would downgrade participation and subjective experience as, at best, secondary.
 - 11 For a nuanced analysis of such a project, see Paul Davis' 'The Ladies of Besiktas' (2012).
 - 12 See, as antidote to this view, Mary Vetterling-Braggin's report that many women actually find totally cooperative sport frustrating and unappealing (1983: 128–9).
 - 13 With respect to sexualisation, see Paul Davis (2010), for a strongly developed perspective.
 - 14 The literature on this subject is fairly vast but Judith Butler is a possible starting point. See *Gender Trouble* (1990), *Bodies That Matter* (1993), 'Imitation and Gender Insubordination', (1996), *Undoing Gender* (2004).
 - 15 For example, Messner and Sabo (1990), McKay, Messner and Sabo (2000), Brian Pronger (1990, 1999).
 - 16 See, for example, Griffin (1998) and Lenskyj (2003); see also Howe (2007).
 - 17 See, for example, Rogers (1994).
 - 18 Howe (2003, 2008, 2011).
 - 19 A good example of this is detailed in Jones and Edwards (2013); see also Howe (2007).
 - 20 One could develop a Sartrean-de Beauvoiran argument here to the effect that resistance to the possibility inherent in this situation, in favour of clinging to the solidity of being promised by traditional 'masculine' and 'feminine' categories, is a form of bad faith – but that is for another occasion.

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