

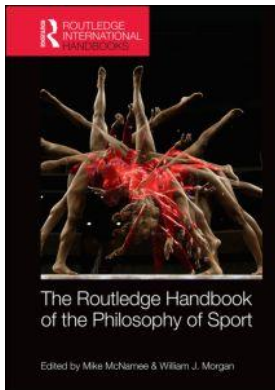
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PRAGMATISM AND THE
PHILOSOPHY OF SPORT*John Kaag***Introduction**

The philosophy of sport cropped up in a rather inhospitable environment. In the 1960s, sport enthusiasts remained largely unconvinced that philosophy could tell them something new about the experience and meaning of physical activity. And the philosophical mainstream remained almost wholly unconvinced that it should spend its analytical powers investigating something as mundane as sport. In its early years, the philosophy of sport worked against the growing tide of analytic philosophy that asked increasingly narrow philosophic questions and answered them in a way that only professional philosophers could understand. If this was the be-all and end-all of philosophy, then sport enthusiasts were right to worry about viability of a philosophy of sport.

The discipline of philosophy, however, had some outliers who still believed that philosophy, at its best, should help people – not just philosophers – think through the business of living, and that this business included cultural processes and trends that defined modern life. These thinkers often traced their intellectual roots to classical American philosophy, and more particularly, to the pragmatism of John Dewey, William James, and C. S. Peirce. There are many ways of defining this philosophical movement, but one of the most basic tenets of pragmatism is the position that truth is to be judged on the basis of its practical consequences. This is the core of what Peirce and James developed as the “pragmatic maxim.” Along these lines, pragmatism insists that philosophy be “world-ready” by attending closely to human experience and aiming to enrich it (see Kaag, 2009). This may sound good to many readers, but pragmatism’s experiential approach was generally out of synch with twentieth-century analytic philosophy. So pragmatism was largely pushed out of the philosophical mainstream after World War II; its concentration on real-world problems and solutions did not mesh with the hyper-specialization of the philosophical analysts. However, as William Morgan and others observe, this made pragmatism very well suited to the needs of the philosophy of sport (see Morgan, 2000, 2007). American philosophers such as Richard Rorty, John Smith, John J. McDermott, Thelma Lavine and Paul Weiss had ties to pragmatism and created a space for philosophy to investigate the intricacies of twentieth-century culture, which included a wide array of sport activity. Morgan suggests that Rorty, especially, opened the door to the philosophy of sport with his insistence that “philosophy is always parasitic on, a reaction to, developments elsewhere in culture and

society” (Morgan, 2000). One of the social developments of the twentieth century was the growing interest in sport, so of course philosophers could and should attend to this trend. Paul Weiss (1969), with his seminal *Sport: A Philosophical Inquiry*, was among the first to do so in any thorough way, which was one of the reasons that he was appointed as the first president of the International Association for the Philosophy of Sport in 1972.

As Morgan mentions in passing, Weiss’s intellectual heritage was decidedly pragmatic (ibid.). Weiss’s place in the history of American pragmatism has often been understated, but it should not be. Weiss was a student of Alfred North Whitehead at Harvard in the 1920s and, with Charles Hartshorne, worked his way through the papers of C. S. Peirce, the originator of an important strand of pragmatic thought. The fruits of this labor between 1931 and 1935 was the *Collected Papers*, a six-volume set of Peirce’s (1960) writings remained the most valuable trove of primary literature in American pragmatism for more than half a century. Weiss was also a doctoral advisor to Richard Rorty, and was most likely responsible for Rorty’s surprisingly kind evaluation of Peirce’s work. All of this is to suggest that the birth of the philosophy of sport as a discipline is inextricably bound to a figure that was very much part of classical American pragmatism. *Sport: A Philosophical Inquiry* (Weiss 1969) defined the landscape of the philosophy of sport for many years and continues to outline many of its most fertile themes. A great deal of work has been done in the philosophy of sport since 1969, but Weiss strikes upon a number of abiding topics in the current discipline. His seminal work – chapter by chapter – also lays out the issues and questions that have always guided American pragmatic thinkers. Indeed, the mere term “inquiry,” the word that Weiss uses to describe his project, is at the heart of pragmatism; and Weiss remains faithful to the meaning of the term. Inquiry, in a Peircean or Deweyan sense, is the process of exploring hypotheses, making contextual generalizations and testing these generalizations against the bumps and bruises of experience to see if they hold up. Notably, this is not a view from nowhere philosophy (Morgan, 2007). As Rich Lally has argued (Lally, Anderson and Kaag, 2012), the activity of sport itself can be viewed as this type of inquiry, but Weiss takes the meaning of inquiry to heart in this first attempt at articulating the philosophy of sport. He wrote a draft of *Sport* and sent it out to sport enthusiasts, coaches, players, experts, and other philosophers (among them Richard Bernstein, another contemporary pragmatic thinker). He received feedback and then started from scratch, revising the book from beginning to end. The result, like all effective pragmatic inquiries, delivered Weiss and his readers to a number of beliefs about the nature and meaning of sport. One of these beliefs, however, is unstated and will be made explicit in the coming pages of the chapter: Weiss’ seminal work on the philosophy of sport reflects most of the dominant themes of American pragmatism as developed by William James, C. S. Peirce, John Dewey, George Herbert Meade, and Jane Addams.

This chapter, which focuses on the relationship between pragmatism and the philosophy of sport, is structured around these themes, ones that Weiss takes up in his various sections of *Sport*: meliorism and perfectionism, habit formation and embodiment, self and community, feminism and anti-essentialism. Weiss, however, does not exhaust the ways in which these pragmatic lines of thought could be extended in the philosophy of sport. Recently, many other scholars have done valuable work to tie the philosophy of sport even more closely to pragmatism. So, while Weiss’ book outlines the way in which the philosophy of sport might draw on the resources of pragmatism, it is necessary in the course of the discussion to highlight the contemporary research on pragmatism and the philosophy of sport. In many cases, this research was conducted by the contributors to the edited volume entitled *Pragmatism and the Philosophy of Sport*, published in 2012 (see Lally, Anderson and Kaag, 2012). The chapter concludes with a critical evaluation of recent work in pragmatism and the philosophy of sport that centers on theoretical issues of realism that Michael Burke has expressed in the last decade.

Meliorism and growth (“concern for excellence”)

Weiss opens *Sport: A Philosophic Inquiry* with a chapter that suggests that sport’s widespread appeal can be traced to a very basic “concern for excellence.” This concern resonates with pragmatism’s “meliorism” and gestures toward a type of perfectionism that runs through the writing of William James and C. S. Peirce. In *Pragmatism*, William James (1995) elaborates on the pragmatic maxim, suggesting that the point of philosophy is not to provide concepts that mirror or correspond to reality, but rather, study the ways in which concepts and beliefs set a “program for more work, and more particularly as an indication of the ways in which existing realities may be changed.” This is an important addition to the earlier discussion of the pragmatic method because it suggests that pragmatism is not simply interested in getting discrete results (pragmatism is often mischaracterized as a crass instrumentalism in this way), but rather focused on the process of effecting positive change in the lives of individuals and their communities. This focus is known as pragmatic meliorism.

As Scott Stroud (2009) observes, James’s principle concern is about the way that ideas make practical changes, and more specifically, practical improvements, to the world in which we live. The task of life according to James is to become better than we currently are: better thinkers, better citizens, better runners, jumpers, swimmers, and bikers. James’s meliorism – following Ralph Waldo Emerson and other transcendentalists – holds that this sort of progress takes many forms and is possible for every human being, not merely the elite few. According to Weiss (1969), sport activity should be understood along these melioristic lines, as a way for many, many people to pursue excellence in their daily lives.

For most pragmatists, athletes, and philosophers of sport, it is the pursuit of excellence (rather than the achievement of any particular excellent outcome) that is truly worth talking about. Weiss (1969) notes that “Most men have no athletic stature, but many of them participate in sports frequently and with great enthusiasm”. But why? William James’s philosophy begins to provide a good answer. As Gerald Myers suggests, James believed that “truth is in the making;” the verity of any concrete belief is always only ever provisional and dependent upon an ever-changing context (see Myers, 1986: 302). This does not mean that progress is impossible, but it does mean that our accomplishments – as thinkers and doers – are moments in a dynamic process and are always opportunities for greater refinement. This is an experiential fact that most athletes know with bone-jarring clarity; for many of them sport activity is primarily about practice rather than discrete victories. Doug Hochstetler, in his essay “Process and Sport Experience” articulates this point nicely and argues that pragmatism’s process-oriented approach can shed light on the processes of sport activity (see Hochstetler, 2003).

Scott Kretchmar’s work in the philosophy of sport reflects similar intuitions, especially the stance that games and sport activity have an aesthetic value that transcends the particular outcomes of victory or loss (see Kretchmar, 1989, 2000). His 2008 article, “Gaming Up Life,” (Kretchmar, 2008) draws the writing of Bernard Suits into relation with William James’s “What Makes Life Significant” in order to explain the value of struggle in sport activity. And, in the spirit of William James, Kretchmar writes:

It is possible then that redemption for an activity that produces the frame-induced sting of defeat will be found more in chance, imprecision, hope, and the desire to play again tomorrow ... Even if gracious intent on the part of the winner is not required by any offer of a rematch, “playing again tomorrow” is still a very rational and civilized thing for both winners and losers to do.

(Kretchmar, 2012)

Drawing on the concept of “thirdness” from Peirce’s philosophy, Tamba Nlandu makes a related point in describing the unifying ideal of sportsmanship and the spirit of the game (see Nlandu, 2008). Similarly, Jill Tracey, in her contribution to *Pragmatism and the Philosophy of Sport*, entitled “Living the Injury: A phenomenological inquiry into finding meaning, argues that the partial achievement of such ideas, and meaning-making more broadly, is always done in the midst of the bumps and bruises of life (see Tracey, 2012). This is place where obstacles can be faced but also where progress can be made.

This sort of strenuous progress is at the heart of pragmatic inquiry. It stands in contrast (although not in a mutually exclusive way) to early forms of perfectionism and growth that have defined classical American thinking. For example, Douglas Anderson, who has written extensively on virtually all of the American pragmatists, suggests that the growth that comes with endurance sport can be understood in terms of the humanizing project laid out by transcendentalists such as Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson. According to Anderson, such physical activities “allow us to realize and re-create ourselves ... [and through these activities] we bring our full range of powers and energies to life – we become fully human” (Anderson, 2001: 141). Transcendentalist interpretations of endurance activity differs from a certain pragmatic approach to sport to the extent that this latter take “envision[s] a more Spartan-like goal of preparing a hearty society to face the difficult contingencies of their booming industrial culture” (Hochstetler and Hopsicker, 2012). Pragmatism risks becoming fixated with the notion of progress, a danger that Anderson sidesteps with his use of the transcendentalists. Hochstetler and Hopsicker, however, contend that the pragmatic conception of growth put forward by John Dewey is not synonymous with crass understandings of instrumental progress. They write:

For Dewey, growth is a continual project, never a particular fixed state or endpoint to be achieved. It is the antithesis of stagnation. He defined growth as ‘the ability to learn from experience; the power to retain from one experience something which is of avail in coping with the difficulties of a later situation.

(Hochstetler and Hopsicker, 2012: 122)

Throughout the growth process, individuals cultivate habits and a certain degree of plasticity. These habits, writes Dewey, “take the form both of habituation, or a general and persistent balance of organic activities with the surroundings, and of active capacities to readjust activity to meet new conditions” (Dewey, 1944: 44). When individuals stake their claim on endurance sport, for example, they develop this commitment through a series of daily decisions (ibid.).

These “daily decisions” are not made on the basis of discrete successes or failures, but for the sake of ongoing meaning-making embodied in particular habits and shot through with a particular quality of feeling.

Habit formation and embodiment

Many scholars in the philosophy of sport have followed Weiss in his observation that habit formation plays a central role in sport activity. Athletes are not born with good judgment. Rather, efficacious judgment develops over time in the context of practice, through activities that instill good habits. As Will Durant summarizes Aristotle: “We are what we repeatedly do; Excellence, then, is not an act but a habit” (Durant, 2005: 61). Peirce and his fellow pragmatists come out of this Aristotelian school of thought and hold the crucial role of habit in human flourishing. Applying this point to the philosophy of sport, Weiss remarks:

Good practical judgment is a habit of using good common sense – which is to say, a habit of using reasonable suppositions regarding what is and is to be, and consequently deciding what one is to do, and when and how. The habit is acquired in large part through the course of daily living; it is accentuated in training and stabilized by practice.

(Weiss, 1969)

Weiss's discussion reveals something important about the philosophy of sport and the way in which its assumptions converge with those of pragmatism. Judgment is never the product of some disembodied mind. This may seem obvious to every athlete, but many thinkers in the history of philosophy have had trouble grasping the point. Ancient thinkers like Plato and modern ones like Descartes and Kant generally denied that judgment arose from bodily processes and practices, and maintained a strict dualism between the body and the mind. Classical American pragmatists, along with Continental phenomenologists, however, objected to this sort of dualism, arguing that cognition was continuous with bodily practices. The habits of thought and judgment had to happen somewhere, and that somewhere were bodies like ours. William James (1995), who founded empirical psychology with his *Principles of Psychology* in 1890, was one of the most vocal proponents of this position. Recently, philosophers of sport have begun to extend James' insights into embodiment and habit formation, arguing that the process of habituation that James articulates in his psychology maps rather neatly onto the process of becoming a seasoned athlete (see Kaag, 2006). Weiss sets the stage for this work in his description of sport practice:

The wisdom that the athlete needs is schematically present in him because of what he did in the past. By going through comparable acts again and again under controlled condition, he builds up the power of quickly estimating what a situation demands and how he is to behave in it.

(Weiss, 1969)

Peirce and James both maintain that habit provides a type of heuristic shorthand for handling difficult situations, and what seems like a single moment of virtuosity is always, or at least usually, a product of the ongoing process of habit formation. In turn, Weiss (1969) writes: Without habit, [the athlete] will be forced to spend too much time in deliberating and experimenting when he has to be right, fast."

It is worth noting that while habit often delivers athletes to satisfying outcomes with surprising speed, it often does not. In these cases, habit cannot negotiate the newness of experience. This is a fact that pragmatists, especially Peirce and James, readily acknowledged. In Peirce's language, experience happens as a "series of surprises." Henry Bugbee, who was not a pragmatist *per se*, but whose "inward morning" provides deep pragmatic insights into the nature of embodiment and meaning-making, was also pointedly aware of the difficulty of fitting rigid habit to the various contours of experience (see Bugbee, 1999). Elsewhere, I have focused on Bugbee's description of rowing to draw out the pragmatic theme of novelty and adaptation and relate them to the psychology of William James. Modern philosophers of sport, such as Drew Hyland, address similar forms of athletic adaptation via the field of phenomenology (see Hyland, 1984, 1990).

Self and community

Being a good athlete is never simply an issue of developing individual excellence through individual practice. Sport, and therefore the philosophy of sport, reveals the way in which individuals develop good habits in the midst of wider communities, communities that also take on certain habits and dispositions. In terms of athletics, such communities are represented by teams, leagues and conferences; the philosophy of sport is interested in the way in which individuals participate in, and define themselves by, these wider communities. This is a focus that pragmatists have always explored and it is one that sets them apart from many in the history of philosophy who have held that the interests of the community stand in marked contrast to the interests and development of individual selfhood (one could think of the longstanding debates between traditional liberals and communitarians). Weiss was perhaps the first philosopher of sport to underscore the way in which the success or failure of individual athletes turns on the situation of team play, the communal context in which athletes perform. He does so by drawing on the pragmatic sociology of George Herbert Mead and John Dewey, stating,

Since each player assumes a particular role and internalizes all the other roles [of team play] within himself point forcibly made by George Herbert Mead – blurs the distinction between himself and the others as helping to produce the outcome and as constituted by it.

(Weiss, 1969)

Weiss is quite good on this pragmatic point, that selfhood is not atomistic, divorced from the development of wider environs, but is instead co-constituted in a transaction with his or her situation. This is what Weiss calls pragmatism's "contextualism." Daniel Campos has elaborated on this point, explaining the way in which fans and players interact to form soccer teams with unique dispositions and personalities. His analysis is explicitly pragmatist and draws from Peirce's discussion of personality, the unifying principle that underlies the relational unity between ideas (see Campos, 2012). Similarly, Tim Elcombe argues that agape is the proper way to understand effective coaching in his "Agapastic Coaching: Charles Peirce, Coaching Philosophy and Theories of Evolution" (Elcombe, 2012). Mead and Peirce were not the only pragmatic thinkers to argue that community was vitally important to the creation of individual selfhood. William James's (1995) notion of the "social self" in his *Principles of Psychology* and the work that Josiah Royce did in moral psychology at the turn of the century reinforced this point.

Two contemporary scholars, Mat Foust and Brent Crouch, argue that Royce's conception of loyalty provides a useful lens to examine modern sports figures such as LeBron James and Hope Solo (see Foust, 2012; Crouch, 2012). Royce is often excluded from treatment of pragmatism, more frequently characterized as an idealist. But he understood his own philosophy as a type of practical idealism that tried to wed the integrity of ideals with the variety of human experience. His philosophy of loyalty (developed in the first years of the twentieth century) aimed to explain how individuals could embody collective ideals and how these ideals, in turn, shaped the formation of individual selfhood. Foust and Crouch suggest that this philosophy goes a long way in explaining how sport teams function. In Crouch's case, however, he ultimately suggests that Royce's model does not adequately explain the situation of Solo or her role on the 2007 women's Olympic soccer team. Crouch points to another American pragmatic thinker, Jane Addams, to supply a type of care ethics that might better address the troubled relationship between Solo and her team.

Interestingly, Crouch's critical assessment of Royce's thought – and the estimation of its shortcomings – mirror the evaluation that Weiss makes concerning pragmatic contextualism in *Sport: A Philosophic Inquiry*. Weiss writes:

Contextualist theories, such as those advanced by G. H. Mead and John Dewey [here, we could add Royce's philosophy of loyalty] ... are admirably suited to describe the athlete in relation to his body, his equipment, his situation, or in a contest or game. But their very success points to a serious inadequacy. The theories are not able to explain how it is that some men [or in the case of Solo, women] are not well adjusted to these, or why it is that they are not willing to rule-regulate everywhere.

(Weiss, 1969)

Crouch (2012), following Weiss, makes the point that work in the philosophy of sport can enrich and revise the standard interpretation of the American pragmatic canon. In some important cases, pragmatism needs to be brought into the present day and tailored to fit new realities.

Pluralism, feminism, and anti-essentialism

In principle, pragmatism is pluralistic. If pragmatism aims to understand and enrich human experience, then it cannot be too choosy about what sorts of experience it starts from. Therefore, pragmatism should be inclusive and open to the experience of individuals who have been traditionally marginalized in society and in the history of philosophy. Here, we see meaningful overlap between social justice movements and pragmatism, and indeed American thinkers such as Jane Addams, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, John Dewey and Alain Locke, who all understood pragmatism's meliorism as extending to the situation of minorities and the underprivileged. What does all of this mean for the philosophy of sport? It means that a pragmatic approach to the philosophy of sport should be interested in the way that sport activity affects and is affected by gender, race, ethnicity, and ability. Pragmatists should remain sensitive to the way that sport is not a one-size-fits-all phenomenon and should be wary of the way that the philosophy of sport can devolve into a sort of ablest mentality.

When we look at Weiss's *Sport: a Philosophic Inquiry*, we see him making gestures in these directions, particularly in his treatment of women in sport. These gestures are undoubtedly insufficient (they were being made in 1969, three years before Title IX was passed into law), but they give pragmatic philosophers of sport a starting point in creating a feminist-friendly philosophy of sport. Weiss opens his discussion of women athletes with the question, "Are women athletes to be viewed as radically and incomparably different from men or as comparable with them, both as amateurs and professionals." That this is a question at all for a philosopher in 1969 is significant; that Weiss opts for the latter option (that women and men deserve to be compared when it comes to many aspects of sport activity and opportunity) is a step in the right direction, but more certainly deserves to be done along these lines, work that Weiss himself is often reticent about taking up. Indeed, many feminist sport philosophers railed against his analysis of the relationship that women athletes have to their bodies (see Young, 1980).

Historically, sport has been a gendered activity. It was thought that men and women were essentially different – that they possessed radically different natures – and therefore the activities they engaged in were to be radically different as well. This idea results from what is commonly known as "gender essentialism." Gender essentialism holds that what it is to be a man and a woman is circumscribed by nature and that there are natural differences between the sexes that express themselves as necessary differences in behavior. Pragmatism, with its emphasis on practice

and transformation through experience, tends to reject all forms of essentialism. There is no fixed and immutable character that defines men and women and therefore the experience of sport should be equal for and open to gender. At many points in his analysis of women athletes, Weiss supports this stance, explaining that women's general absence from the field of sport can be attributed to their being prohibited from practicing certain activities. As a remedy, Weiss states, "A woman must train and practice if she is to become an athlete ... women can improve the functioning of their bodies. This is best done through exercise. And it can be helped through a vital participation in games" (Weiss, 1969). Weiss is not always consistent, however, when he continues to explain the physical training that he has in mind for women athletes: "Their training follows the same general procedures followed by men, with account of course being taken for their difference in musculature, strength, attitudes toward exhaustion, injury and public display" (see Weiss, 1969).¹ Here, Weiss steers off course, belying the very essentialism that pragmatism hopes to eschew. Pragmatists would suggest that dispositions – such as an attitude toward exhaustion and public display – are not essential or biologically determined, but socially defined and reinforced. This position is stated quite clearly in Jane Addams' work with immigrant population in Chicago at the turn of the nineteenth century. Differences in behavior, according to Addams, could almost always be traced to differences in cultural circumstances and context. Indeed, her educational project at Hull House was geared at changing this context for hundreds of underprivileged women in the Chicago area; her success suggested that nurture, not nature, largely determined the potentials of human beings. Weiss and other earlier philosophers of sport occasionally miss this point. At other times, Weiss maintains, in good pragmatic form, that women avoid sport because they "are more firmly established in their roles as social beings, wives and mothers" and therefore have little time for the self-cultivation that can occur in sport activity (ibid.).

In the decades that followed the writing of *Sport: A Philosophic Inquiry*, philosophical work was done in the midst of the debate surrounding Title IX, which supported pragmatist-feminist commitments. In terms of theoretical sophistication, Iris Marion Young's "Throwing Like a Girl" (first published in *Human Studies* in 1980) is unmatched. Young analyzes "feminine" bodily comportment, underlining the ways in which women come to feel inhibited and objectified in bodily processes such as sport performance. This theoretical work has been imported directly into the philosophy of sport, most recently by Leslie Howe in "Play, Performance, and the Docile Athlete" (2007) and by Joan Grassbaugh Forry (2012) in her valuable contribution to *Pragmatism and the Philosophy of Sport*. Here Grassbaugh Forry ties the writings of Shannon Sullivan and those of John Dewey into relation with the feminist scholarship in the philosophy of sport. What is significant in reference to the earlier discussion of habit formation is that Sullivan and Grassbaugh Forry explain the way that habits are constitutive of personhood, and that restrictions on certain actions (like the prohibition against women participating in certain sports) significantly interferes with the formation of women as flourishing individuals (see Tännsjö, 2000; Postow, 1983; and Howe, 2007).

Pragmatism as theoretical intervention

To this point, pragmatic themes have been used to analyze a number of topics in the philosophy of sport. This approach is the one that Weiss and a number of contemporary philosophers of sport have used to employ the insights from the pragmatic canon. In my opinion, it is the most appropriate way to use pragmatism in the philosophy of sport, since it grounds discussions in the experience of athletes and their wider communities in order to enrich and understand this experience. There is, however, another way of using pragmatism that has gathered speed in a number of disciplines including the philosophy of sport.

Recently, many disciplines such as international relations, sociology, and anthropology, have turned their attention inward toward the status of the disciplinary claims that they make, to the basic metaphysical and epistemological assumptions that they make in the course of their investigations. Recently, the philosophy of sport has made a similar move to examine itself and its foundational beliefs about the nature of sport. This, in turn, generates hot debate between scholars who take sides that, at least in the philosophy of sport, have been characterized as “realist” or “anti-realist.” This debate boils down to a disagreement about the status of knowledge claims and the ability to make such claims in reference to particular experiential situations. Can one make claims about a situation if he or she is not in the particular context in question? How can one get perspective on a situation if he or she is in the midst of it? Are there objective facts or values about the phenomenon of sport? These questions have been voiced for years in the history of philosophy. Indeed, the realist/anti-realist debate is a very old one and has taken many forms in the history of philosophy. Sometimes it is called the realist–subjectivist debate. At other points it is referred to as the difference between realism and nominalism. In any event, pragmatism, which emerged at the end of the nineteenth century was intimately familiar with all of these debates and attempted to intervene in the metaphysical and epistemological squabbles. It is therefore of little surprise that contemporary disciplines see pragmatism as a way of ending their in-fighting by providing middle-range theories that have normative weight but are also subject to some revisions (much like habits). This mediating role of pragmatism is on display in political science and international relations theory (see Kaag and Kreps, 2012).

Unfortunately, with perhaps the exception of Giacobbi *et al.*, scholars in the philosophy of sport have not understood pragmatism as making this sort of theoretical intervention in their field of study (see Giacobbi *et al.*, 2005). Instead, some writers, like Davis and Dixon, come too close to equating pragmatism with the linguistic turn of Richard Rorty and therefore dismiss it as nominalist and unable to make reliable normative claims. According to Davis, the papers in the philosophy of sport that draw on Rorty’s philosophy: “confine themselves to describing the process by which change occurs in sport, without making any normative judgments about whether any particular change is desirable or justified” (see Burke, 2006). To be clear, this is a criticism that has always circulated around Rorty’s work and the philosophy of sport risks rehashing some very detailed debates that have already taken place in contemporary epistemology and metaphysics. Michael Williams’ *Unnatural Doubts* (1995) is particular good on the way that Rorty’s philosophy borders on idealism and nominalism, the very sort that classical pragmatists like Peirce took pains to avoid. Michael Burke has defended Rorty from this critique in a way reminiscent of Richard Bernstein’s attempt to save Rorty from being characterized as a relativist (see Burke, 2006).

While Burke’s project is generally well founded, I hope that a pragmatic philosophy of sport avoids getting bogged down in the attempt to save pragmatism from itself. Pragmatism often erred and, as Anderson (2001) points out, when it does it is best simply to own up to its shortcomings (in Anderson’s case, it is better to use the transcendentalists than the classical pragmatists for certain ends). Pragmatism is not a sacred canon that deserves to be defended at all costs. Rorty was more nominalistic than James and much more nominalistic than Peirce, both of whom held that experience should hold a central place in any philosophical outlook. And Peirce, at least, thought of himself as a realist. This is to suggest that pragmatism should not be regarded as an inviolable whole, but rather as a diverse canon that can and should be used for different purposes. For example, Rorty might be more nominalistic than Peirce, but he is arguably more attuned to culture and social–political realities than Peirce ever was. This might make Rorty rather unhelpful when it comes to analyzing meaning and bodily comportment (something Peirce and James are quite good on) but extremely helpful in shedding light,

for example, on the way that advertising affects the supposedly eternal Olympic ideals. And this difference in emphasis is fine.

There is a great deal of secondary literature on pragmatism and the differences of interpretations on the writings of pragmatic thinkers. There is little need for other disciplines to repeat this interpretative work and every need for them to acquaint themselves with the literature that is already out there. This is not to chastise philosophers of sport; contemporary pragmatists working on exegetical and interpretative projects are often wholly unaware of the developments in adjacent and potentially friendly fields of study. Today, pragmatists often neglect sport and writing about sport, and pragmatism as a disciplinary subfield is “thinner” (to use a Jamesian expression) and less interesting because of this neglect. Unfortunately analytic philosophy, with its desire to parse reality with fine and rigid distinctions, has a certain allure (and respect in this academy) and it often attempts to pull both pragmatism and the philosophy of sport into its wake. It is my hope that together pragmatism and the philosophy of sport can resist this draw.

Acknowledgements

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Note

- 1 For a detailed treatment of Addams feminism, see Hammington (2006). Scholars interested in the relationship between pragmatism and feminism should consult Charlene Haddock Seigfried (1996).

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