

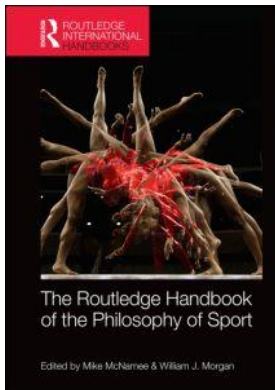
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METAPHYSICS AND SPORT

*Stephen Mumford***Metaphysics**

Metaphysics is the branch of philosophy that deals with the nature of things in the most general and abstract of terms. It thus considers questions such as what kinds of thing there are. But this is so general that the concern tends to be with categories of things rather than particular things. Hence, some of the fundamental questions concern the nature and existence of substances, properties and relations, time, causation, identity, natural kinds and laws of nature.¹

To take by way of illustration the last item in that list of metaphysical notions, a scientist might consider what precisely the law of gravitational attraction is, aiming to find the right equation that describes the exact extent of attraction. But a metaphysician will ask in general what it is for something to be a law of nature. What conditions must something meet to qualify as a natural law? Science is concerned with particular things in their concrete instances and seeks to uncover the empirical facts about them. Thus science discovers and investigates what the specific laws are. But metaphysics, like almost the whole of philosophy, is fundamentally non-empirical and general. Just as one can ask in philosophy what, in general, is the good (in ethics) or what it is to know (in epistemology), so one can ask in metaphysics what it is to be a cause, a particular, or a property.

Metaphysics is one of the four main branches of philosophy, traditionally conceived, together with epistemology, logic and axiology (ethics and aesthetics). There is not, however, a very large literature that addresses explicitly the nature of metaphysics within sport. Introductions and surveys of the philosophy of sport will not always cover the area as a named subject matter. There are some exceptions, however. The first edition of Morgan and Meier (1988), in its first three parts, gathers together many key contributions to the discipline that have a metaphysical or ontological aspect: on the nature of sport, play and games, on sport and embodiment, and on play as revelatory of humanity's metaphysical nature. Hyland (1980) contains a chapter on mind and body in sport. A more recent introduction, Reid (2012), contains two chapters on the nature of play, games and sport.

Even though it is not always treated explicitly, however, there are a number of issues in sport that have a metaphysical aspect: indeed, some metaphysicians think that everything has a metaphysical aspect so sport would be no exception. More than that, however, it can be argued that sport has a very deep metaphysical nature and also that it reveals something profound about the

metaphysical nature of human existence. The metaphysics of sport should not then be considered a peripheral special interest. Rather, philosophers of sport have a duty to uncover and advance the core metaphysical issues within sport. Doing so will provide an understanding of a very important form of human practice: one that arguably is central to the existential nature of humanity. If that is right, sport is as metaphysical as it gets.

What is sport?

As an example of the metaphysics of sport, let us take one of the biggest, and most basic, questions of all in the discipline. What is sport? There is a literature on this question, of course (see Morgan and Meier 1988, Pt. 1), but part of the point is to use the question to illustrate the different approaches we can take in trying to answer it.

A deflationary view of metaphysics would have it that in asking this question, we are involved merely in conceptual analysis: asking what it is that we mean by 'sport' or what is our concept of 'sport'. This is deflationary in the sense that, while many metaphysicians claim that they are talking about things in the world, this approach claims that all we can really consider is our conceptualisation of it. Instead of asking directly 'what is sport?', the metaphysical deflationist says we can only ask what is the meaning of the word 'sport'. This reduces metaphysics to linguistic conventions. There are reasons why some people still find such an approach attractive. Perhaps they think that the world as it is in itself is forever hidden from us, behind a veil of words. We cannot think about the things in themselves but only our own conceptualisations of them. Forebears of such an approach might be found in Kantian approaches to metaphysics (see Kant 1929 [1781]), that say the noumenal world of things-in-themselves cannot be experienced by us, or a Wittgensteinian approach would claim that 'the limits of my language mean the limits of my world' (Wittgenstein 1921: section 5.6).

But realist metaphysicians do not regard themselves as being limited to the asking of conceptual questions. Instead, inspired by Locke's (1975: III, vi, 6) discussion of 'essence', they seek the real essence of a thing: what it really is (what is a 'law', a 'cause', 'sport'). The ordinary concept of 'sport', for instance, might be messy and inconsistent, with no common usage or agreement. How much, then, is there to be gained from looking at how a term is used? Is not that just a matter for linguists or cultural anthropologists? Where would a metaphysician's interest arise, if at all, here? A thing could have a real essence irrespective of how people use words and it is the metaphysician's job to uncover this essence. Perhaps they might even be able to inform a more consistent use of our concept of sport, or whatever is the subject of investigation. Such a realist approach might best be thought of as Aristotelian in origin. Aristotle (1998), in his book *Metaphysics*, thought of metaphysics as first philosophy. It was first in the sense of being prior or fundamental to everything else, including logic and language. The latter two employ notions of truth and proposition that are themselves of a deeply metaphysical nature. Even the logic that we employ should be one that fits with the way we take the world to be.

Let us then tackle the question head-on of what is sport. The most famous answer to this question within the literature comes from Bernard Suits (2005). His account begins from the seemingly simple question of what it is to play a game, famously discussed by Wittgenstein (1953: sections 66, 67). After consideration of various possible definitions and objections, Suits' view is that to play a game is:

to engage in an activity directed towards bringing about a specific state of affairs, using only means permitted by the rules, where the rules prohibit more efficient in favour

of less efficient means, and where such rules are accepted just because they make possible such activity.

(Suits 2005: 48–9)

Suits has a simpler statement of the same idea: game playing is the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles (Suits 2005: 55). He explicitly allows that this might not be what everyone means when they call something a ‘game’. Nevertheless, that is what a game is.

This is not yet an account of sport. It is about playing a game. But we might think that there is some close relation. Perhaps all sport involves game playing though some games are not sport: tiddlywinks, for example. Our account of sport might include Suits’ definition, therefore, but with something else added

What might that be? What turns a game into sport? There are various possibilities, such as that sports are more physically skilful than games (Suits 2007) or that they are conducted in a professional way. Unfortunately, it is very hard to find a single feature that all sports have and ‘mere’ games lack. Not all sport is professional, for instance. While it can be played professionally, there are many who engage in sports in an amateur way or just for fun. Similarly, it is not impossible to imagine professional tiddlywinks, bridge or chess players, even though these are considered to be ‘only’ games. And a game, such as the traditional tug-of-war, can be as physically demanding as a number of sports, even though it is not itself considered to be a sport.

This draws attention to another choice that we have to make in the way that we conduct metaphysics. I said that there was a realist view in which metaphysics was considered to be the search for essences. But one possible response, even from someone with a realist perspective, might be that some phenomena have no essence: and sport could be just such a thing (see Møller and Nauright 2003 for further essays on this topic).

The notion of an essence has been variously understood in metaphysics. Indeed, one deep metaphysical question asks what essence consists in. The basic idea, however, is that there is something that makes a thing what it is. If one considers the element gold, for instance, then the idea is that there is something (having 79 protons, for instance) that makes it gold. Metaphysics might be about finding such essences. However, it seems open that we allow that for at least some kinds of thing, there is no essence for that kind.

Where we think, for some phenomenon, that it is a kind with an essence, then we have a position known as essentialism. An essentialist about sport thinks that it has this sort of defining essence. But perhaps sport is one of the things that has no essence. With an institutional theory of sport, for instance, sports are games that have been given the status of sport by certain socio-historically contextualised institutions (see Mumford 2011: 5, 6; see also Ch. 4 in this volume). Games might have an essence, which Suits has described, but the additional element – that might with it comprise sport – does not. Rather, it suggests that sports are games that we have decided to treat in a certain way. If so, then the search for an essence of sport will be partly mistaken. What made something sport would be in a significant measure a socio-historical matter.

Even if that is true, there are still countless metaphysical issues to be found in sport. In this vein, we can ask questions related to sport such as what is fair play (see Loland 2002), what is a rule (McFee 2004), what is a foul, what is a game flaw (Kretchmar 2005), and so on. This does not rule out that the essence of some such phenomenon does contain an ethical or normative component, as fair play almost certainly does. And it does not rule out that there are deep metaphysical truths that sport reveals, about human existence for instance, even if this is not something that is the essence of sport in the Lockean sense. In the remainder of this chapter, therefore, I sketch some of the core metaphysical issues that ground sport: ones that we might consider central to its nature. These issues cluster around the notion of causation.

Causation in sport

Causation is one of the central issues of metaphysics generally: what it is for one thing to cause another (see Mumford and Anjum 2013). Causation is what connects distinct phenomena. Hume (2007a) called it the cement of the universe. We can see that, in sport, it is the absolutely vital metaphysical notion for without causation there could be no sport.

The competitor in sport is aiming to cause some distinct outcome. In golf, the golfer aims to get their ball in the hole. In football, they aim to get a ball into a goal. In weightlifting, the athlete seeks to raise a weight from the ground in a distinct fashion. In tenpin bowling, the aim is to knock down as many pins as possible with a bowling ball. These are all cases where the athlete aims to cause some event or state of affairs through their bodily movements using their skill, strength and technique. That humans are able freely to instigate chains of causation is why we call them ‘agents’, meaning that they are active with respect to the production of effects. The examples just listed are ones where the athlete exercises their causal powers on some object or tool: to swing the golf club in an appropriate way; to kick a football; to lift a weight, or to bowl a (bowling) ball. But there are many other sporting cases without such tools but, rather, where the agent is exercising causal powers purely within their own body. In the cases of high jump or long jump, swimming and running, the athlete does not cause some other object to move but moves only their own body. The relevant act, in such cases, is to move in a certain way, as fast as possible, as high as possible or as long possible, so as to bodily complete a required task (on bodily movement, see, for instance, Breivik 2008).

It is worth dwelling on just how crucial this notion of causation is to sport. Sport typically involves notions of winning and losing, based on some comparative measure: who crossed the line first, scored more goals, lifted the greatest weight, and so on. It makes sense to reward winners – and indeed pay attention to the actions of the athletes at all – only on the ground that the athletes are causally responsible for the outcomes that are produced. Hence, the goal scorer is congratulated only because they caused the goal to be scored and the weightlifter wins only because they lifted the most weight. Suppose there were no causation. Then anything could follow anything else. And then when one kicks a football, instead of it moving in a direction roughly 180 degrees to the kick, it could do something else completely, such as evaporate. Or it might do nothing at all. Action would then have no point. Its outcomes would be entirely unpredictable: and sport could not then be. A game of pure chance, such as coin-tossing, thus has no sporting merit, either in the playing or the watching, because a participant does not – indeed must not – cause the outcome in any remotely significant way.

What then is this metaphysical glue, which seems to bind one kind of event reliably with another and thus provides us with a basis for action? There are two traditional lines of thought that, despite being old, are still the main options. David Hume (1975, 2007b) argued that there was nothing more in the world than regularity or what he called constant conjunction. One type of event just happens regularly to follow another but there is no necessity or compulsion to it. The cause does not genuinely produce the effect, it is merely that the effect always happens to follow the cause. Humeans, such as Lewis (1973) continue to develop this insight. They think of the world as a mosaic or patchwork of unconnected events or facts, which have no necessary connections between them, but which can have an order in time. Some types of events are regularly followed by events of another type; others are not. Events of type A may always be followed by events of type B but not by events of type C. And if the world is just like this – call it a Hume-world – then the fact that A causes B and does not cause C is nothing more than the fact that the events form this pattern.

Because this is not thought to be sufficiently realist about causation, many other

metaphysicians look back to an older, Aristotelian tradition (see, for example, Aristotle's *Physics* [1996]) in which the active causal powers of things are genuinely productive of their effects. It is not purely a matter of contingency what causes what, as Hume thought, but causes have a more intimate connection with their effects than with other events: they specifically dispose towards them. There are various anti-Humean theories of causation, of broadly Aristotelian origin, and we can call them all realist. The realist would point out, for instance, that Hume's regularity theory invites the problem of inductive scepticism, as he himself acknowledges. Given the lack of real connection between causes and effects, then the fact that all As known hitherto have been followed by Bs, cannot guarantee – or even make more likely – that future As will be followed by Bs. Hume does not deny that we form expectations based on our experience, but the expectation of what will follow future As is not a rational inference. And there is a further consequence, drawn by Groff (2013), that if Hume's theory is correct then an agent cannot claim true responsibility for anything that followed from their actions. In a Hume-world anything could have followed that action. Thus, although the kick of a ball was followed by that ball moving, there was no compulsion that it do so and thus the agent deserves no real credit (nor blame) for its subsequent movement. And Groff's view is that this account of causation effectively robs agents of their agent powers.

Needless to say, the metaphysics of causation is an area of continuing dispute. While the realist sees more to causation than a contingent pattern of events, the Humean asks what basis one would have for this conclusion. If we look to experience, all that we see is one event followed by another. We never see the connection between those events. Humeans thus claim that this additional force or compulsion that is supposedly productive of effects is fundamentally unknowable and we ought not, therefore, to speak of it. Whether causation really can be directly experienced, rather than merely inferred from constant conjunctions, is also a matter for debate. But if causation can be known, it is almost certain to be through our own bodies that we will know it, given that we are both causal agents, doing things, and causal patients, having things done to us (Mumford and Anjum 2011: ch. 9).

Empowered agents

Sport can now be understood as being grounded on – as a condition of its very existence – the exercise of the causal powers of the participants. It is thus premised on the idea of empowered agency, manifesting itself in clearly defined tasks that thus overcome, in Suits' terms, the unnecessary obstacles.

Such empowered agency requires a sophisticated set of skills. Speed alone, without intelligence, would not do it. One needs to know where to run, when to run and how to pace oneself over the full distance. Muscle power alone would not do it. One also needs to acquire specific techniques. And there are many sports that are played with the mind as much as the body, such as in cricket, football, basketball and rugby, where strategy and tactics have a significant impact on outcomes. What exactly the abilities are that ground agency is itself a huge area of debate because it leads us to the issue of free will (see Kane 2011). It seems that we are free agents, in control of our causal powers, and sport is premised on this fact. How there is room in the universe for free will, when so much seems controlled by physical laws of nature, is one type of question. But another is what specific abilities do agents have, that is the basis of their freedom, and which non-agents, such as tables and chairs, bats and balls, lack. All those abilities are likely to be essential to participation in sport. One must be appropriately in control of one's bodily powers in sport. One must be able to choose when to exercise them, in what degree and for how long. Hence, one must have abilities to form desires and intentions, decide

between options, form strategies and plans, be aware of one's environment and obstacles to the achievement of one's goals, and so on.

Sport has an intimate relation with this notion of empowered agency because we can see sport as a way of encouraging through reward the maximum display of an agent's powers, pitting the powers of one competitor against those of another and measuring the greatest display. Humans are capable of running, jumping, lifting and swimming but sport is what spurs us on to display those powers to the maximum extent of which we are capable. For instance, each long-jumper manifests their power to jump, the jumps are measured and then the biggest manifestation of the power is rewarded. And by encouraging as big a display of powers as possible, sport has seen the development of those powers to an extraordinary extent. It seems unlikely, for instance, that anyone would have achieved a jump of eight-feet high without the encouragement within sport to develop such a capacity, requiring many years of training, for instance. And if one considers a sport such as football (soccer), we can see that a competent player must develop a host of abilities, where I am taking an ability, like a skill, simply to be a causal power that is useful for one's purposes. A footballer must be able to run, jump, head the ball, play a controlled and delicate pass, kick the ball hard, twist, turn, be strong, have awareness of positions within the field, and so on. This is a complex sport, measuring and encouraging several of the agent's powers.

The relationship between a causal power and its manifestation is a complicated one, which is a point that should be familiar to every athlete, even if they have not considered it in these terms. In training, one might produce a jump of a certain height in ideal conditions and yet be unable to reproduce it in competition. In other cases, some athletes find that their best performances come under competitive pressure. The key point is that a power can exist unmanifested, just as a vase can be fragile even though it is never broken, and thus an athlete may not succeed in manifesting the full extent of their ability. Sometimes an athlete or a team fails to manifest their superior skill level because something goes wrong on the day. Perhaps they have been weakened by a recent virus or are distracted psychologically. On other occasions, it may be pure bad luck that goes against them. Perhaps some event that is outside the control of any of the competitors could go one way or the other, with a huge effect on the sporting outcome. A ball might hit the post and spin into the goal, or spin away from it. Bad luck might see the stronger team nevertheless lose and thus fail to manifest their superiority.

However, while such luck is seen as all part of the game, we are very keen that both sides have an equal chance of benefiting or suffering from it. Each competitor or team must be given an equal opportunity to manifest their abilities. We sum up this idea with the metaphor of a level playing field. The level playing field is not about giving everyone the same chance of winning (handicap systems are more like this) but giving each an equal chance of showing their abilities. The level playing field is thus supposed to ensure that there is a good chance of an accurate measure of ability being taken. It is not always easy to judge what is fair in this respect. On striking the right balance between skill and luck in sport, see Kretchmar (2012).

What should be clear from all such examples is that while victory in sport is based on individuals and teams of athletes manifesting and having measured their causal powers, the determination of those victories is made comparatively. Hence, whether the manifestation of one's powers in an eight-foot jump is a winning jump is a matter settled only in relation to the other jumps that have been manifested. And in some sports, such as soccer again, opponents come into direct competition in which the aim is not simply to manifest one's powers to the best of one's ability but also to prevent opponents manifesting their own powers. In many sports this second – let us say negative – task cannot be legitimately undertaken: one cannot get in the path of an opponent's attempted high jump, for instance. But in what Kupfer (1983)

distinguishes as directly competitive sport, such as in fencing, one does try to stop the opponent doing what they intend. And it is distinctive of powers that they admit of prevention or interference. An opponent might make a perfectly good lunge with their sabre but see it diverted from its path by a good parry.

It would seem, then, that the causes of a victory are not simply the winner having exercised their causal powers but also the absence of an opponent who could have done better or who could have blocked the power that the victor had exercised. A player might kick the ball to the goal, causing it to go in, but had an opponent been on the line and stopped it, it would not have been a goal. And an eight-foot high jump wins only because of the absence of someone jumping higher. Such considerations tempt some metaphysicians to believe that absences can also be causes. There are, however, reasons to be suspicious of causation by absence. An absence is nothing at all so how can it have causal powers? There really was no athlete jumping higher than the winner so how can that literal non-entity be causally efficacious in producing the victory? For such reasons, it might be best to say that while the absence of a better performance might be a necessary condition of victory – a *sine qua non* – that is not the same as causing it (Mumford and Anjum 2011: 173). Compare someone's birth being a necessary condition of their death: one would not say that it caused one's death.

If sport is so much a competition between the causal powers of human agents, it is hardly a surprise that the issue of enhancement of those powers is scrutinised so closely. It seems that the athlete is allowed to enhance those abilities naturally as much as they like: through training and diet, for instance. It is also the case that some simply have a naturally advantageous physique for certain sports, such as where height is an advantage in basketball. Two areas in which there is obvious concern, though, are doping and genetic modification of athletes, which are deemed to artificially enhance the competitively relevant causal powers (see Chapter 23).

Mutual manifestation

There is a further and highly significant consideration pertaining to the exercise of causal powers in sport. Typically, powers are exercised through mutual manifestations rather than individual athletes displaying their powers in isolation. This requires more explanation. In some cases, an athlete manifests their power in conjunction with some piece of equipment. An athlete may have a strong throwing arm, for instance, but the distance achieved in discus or javelin is also determined by the properties, such as aerodynamic properties, of the object thrown. It is hard to think of any sport in which athletes manifest their powers completely alone, that is, unaided. Even a runner runs faster and easier (for example, less injuriously) with good running shoes, the standard of which has shown clear improvement over time. In sport, the athlete seems perfectly entitled to use the best possible equipment they can get, sometimes within certain defined limits, and yet they are also entitled to full credit for the performance they achieve using that equipment. We do not award medals to the running shoes or the discus itself. Here it seems a case of athletes getting credit for choosing the most suitable equipment that enables them to manifest their powers to the utmost.

Sometimes the mutual manifestation occurs with a machine, as in the case of motor racing. The winner of the race is not determined solely by being the best driver nor by having the best car but by the two in combination. The car and driver have to work well together: what may be the best car for one driver might not be for another. But the quality of the car is clearly so important to the race outcome that there is indeed a constructors' championship as well as one for drivers. There can be dispute over whether some equipment gives an unfair advantage or not. Running shoes have not yet been a matter of controversy, although the prosthetic blades

upon which Oscar Pistorius ran for a time were (Edwards 2008). Were those blades simply akin to running shoes or more an artificial enhancement of Pistorius's ability to run?

There are even cases in sport where the mutual manifestation is with a non-human animal, as in the case of horse racing or show jumping. Again, jockey and horse have to work well together. There may be a fast horse and a skilled jockey which, owing to differences in temperament, are an ill-suited combination. It seems important, however, that free human agency be at least a part of the mutual manifestation partnership that is being tested and measured in sport, which is why some may feel dubious about classifying jockey-less greyhound racing as a sport.

This notion of mutual manifestation is perfectly consistent with the way that many think that causation operates generally (Martin 2008: ch. 5). Effects occur when mutual manifestation partners come together. Hence, while we can think that the ice cools the drink or that the drink melts the ice, what we might have is a single process that is initiated when the ice and the drink come together in partnership but which could be described either from the point of view of the ice or of the drink. Causation in sport thus fits the model.

Parts, wholes and goals

The most significant case of mutual manifestation is in team sports, where the individual members must form a functioning mutual manifestation partnership with their team mates. The mutual manifestation partners here are other human beings, rather than equipment, machinery or animals. Success in team sports tends to come when the individual players can give themselves over to the whole such that they behave as a single cohesive unit, exercising its collective powers, rather than being a mere aggregate of the individual powers of the constituent players.

This raises metaphysical issues of wholes and parts and indeed holism versus reductionism. The reductionist view is that a whole is simply the sum of its parts. Add them together, duly arranged, and one has the whole. But another view is that the whole can be something more than a mere sum of parts. Someone who thinks this is called a holist or sometimes an emergentist. One might think that there is something more to a person, for instance, than just a collection of flesh and bones. One might even say that mental phenomena emerge from the otherwise purely physical cells and neurons of the brain.

When a sports team functions at its best, it is easy to think of it as an example of holism. Similarly, one could think of the team as having an emergent character not necessarily found at the level of the individual players. The coach's job might be to ensure that the team is indeed more than merely an aggregate of individual players by getting the team to play a certain way. Evaluations may differ but the German national football team is one that historically has been thought of as better than the sum of its parts. Certainly, they have had very good players but they have not necessarily been the very best individual players in the world at the time. And yet they have a fine track record of winning world championships. For this to happen, team members might have to be willing to give up their individuality to the whole: to make personal sacrifices and not play as they would usually play, for the good of the team. Bobby Charlton was thought to have done this in the 1966 World Cup Final where he did not shine because his role was limited to neutralizing Franz Beckenbauer. This was effective and the team as a whole benefited though Charlton's individual performance did not. The idea is that there are different roles that need to be played within a team and the individual player has to put this need first so that the team can become an organic whole. Brian Clough was a coach who was thought to be a master of taking relatively ordinary players and putting them together like a

jigsaw puzzle into a whole that excelled, resulting in two European Cups won by a relatively small club.

What counts as the manifestation of powers for the complex wholes of team sports also becomes a complicated matter. During football, there are many individual contests, with players running, jumping, tackling and kicking. The players that compose the team are displaying their causal powers here. But it is whole teams that win, lose or draw, just as it is the whole team that scores a goal together. Certainly, one player gets the final touch before the goal but the team has put him or her in a position to do so. Indeed, individuals are not even allowed to play unless part of a team with a minimum number of players. Similarly, although a person needs eyes to see, it is whole persons who do the seeing, not the eyes. An eye on its own could do nothing. Thus, the power to win the game is a candidate for an emergent power, found at the level of the whole, where it is a mutual manifestation, belonging to the whole team, of the powers relevant to football. The actual victory is then determined when these collective, arguably emergent powers of team A are pitted against those of team B. Such considerations seem to apply to every team sport.

The stronger team – that is, the team with the greatest extent of this power – will tend to win though they need not always do so. Powers dispose towards certain outcomes but because they can always be prevented, there is no guarantee that they will succeed. As remarked above, the opposition is attempting to prevent a team from manifesting its powers, and a team may fail also through sheer bad luck. It can be argued that the interest of sport to participants and spectators crucially depends on the best team tending, but no more than tending, to win the game (Mumford and Anjum 2014). If sporting outcomes were necessitated – for instance, if the strongest team always won – then it would be dull to watch and pointless to play. The weaker team would know that they literally had no chance. But if the outcomes were completely contingent or random, sport would have no interest either. There has to be some connection between ability and outcome. The area of metaphysics that concerns necessity and possibility is known as modality. It is arguable that sport is premised on there being a modal strength than it less than necessity but more than mere possibility: an intermediate dispositional modality in which sporting abilities tend towards outcomes without guaranteeing them.

Powers, existence and inexistence

Given that sport is a voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles, why do we bother to do it? Why tackle an unnecessary obstacle? That we appear to do so freely might reveal something very important about the human metaphysical core, as a number of others have suggested (see, for example, Fink 1960; Esposito 1974; Meier 1980). The thought is that in play we are performing an activity for its own intrinsic value to us; therefore, play (hence sport) reveals our true natures. In the case of sport, of course, many people participate in it for extrinsic reasons, such as to gain fitness, fame or riches. But the vast majority of us participate on an amateur basis and watch sport likewise for the simple pleasures it brings us.

That we freely play sport suggests that we want to exercise the causal powers the sport involves. And it is almost as if sport was invented for the very reason that we could do so in a relatively harmless way; as opposed to war or economic competition, for instance. It must be, therefore, that overall we find it pleasurable to exercise our causal powers and doing so the best of our abilities. A child will run and jump, for instance, just for the sheer unbridled joy of it. Sport regiments and codifies such activities but contains the same expression of freedom: to swim, to throw, to sprint to exercise all the best physical and mental powers at the agent's disposal. Such activities can be pure unalienated action (Algozin 1976), thereby revealing

something of our authentic being. Perhaps it is because empowerment shows us that we are free agents that we find it such a pleasure. And someone who can jump 10 metres is more free than someone who can jump only 2 metres. The former has more possibilities open to them (see Esposito 1974) as they can do everything and more than the latter can do.

Returning to an earlier issue, it is through embodiment, it can be argued, that we are causally engaged with our world: that we are able to know causation first-hand. Suppose one is arm-wrestling an opponent. One attempts to push down the other's arm. Here, one is agent: exercising one's causal powers, aiming for a victorious outcome. At the same time, the opponent is attempting to prevent your victory. Here one is causal patient: having a causal power exercised upon one, aiming to prevent one's victory. In that bodily sensation, one proprioceptively encounters the active and passive sides to causation. And one feels that an exercise of one's power can be prevented or thwarted by a counteracting power in the opposite direction. Correspondingly, one feels a power acting on oneself that one can at least attempt to resist. Proprioception thus reveals direct experience of causation, in an argument going back at least as far as Thomas Reid in 1788 (Reid 1983). Arguably, it also reveals causation's irreducibly dispositional nature (Mumford and Anjum 2011: ch. 9). It gives us experience of a power tending in a direction but which can be counteracted.

We are rational embodied agents. Causation is our way of interacting with and hence engaging with other agents and the world around us. Being causally powerful is what it is to exist, to be real, according to a view in Plato (the Eleatic reality test from Plato's *Sophist* (1961: 247d–e), for how could something be real if it could make no possible difference to anything else?. To freely exercise powers is thus to be alive. Without any such an ability, one has ceased to be a person. With no causal powers at all, a thing has ceased to be. Sport thus reveals something of the essence of humanity and of existence generally.

Summary

I have tried to show that even though metaphysical issues have not figured prominently within the tradition of the philosophy of sport, they are nevertheless there and, what is more, they are at the very heart of sport. Indeed, it is hard to see how one could have a true grasp of the nature and existence of sport unless one is sensitive to its metaphysical foundation. I have indicated what I think this foundation to be and I have taken causation to be the central notion, given that it creates the possibility of human empowerment, both physical and mental, which sport is all about. For metaphysicians of a realist inclination, the claim that sport rests on a metaphysical basis should come as no surprise. Indeed, it is just an instance, as noted, of the Aristotelian view that metaphysics is first philosophy.

Note

- 1 See Mumford (2012) for a beginners' introduction and Le Poidevin *et al.* (2009) for detailed accounts of many of the issues discussed here.

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