Metaphysical Issues in Sport

Socrates typically began philosophical discussions with a “What is x?” question—an initial attempt to conceptualize or even define the subject. Metaphysical questions ask about the fundamental nature of things, and so the first question Socrates would ask in a metaphysical discussion of sport would be simply “What is sport?” When I ask my own students this question, they usually answer by listing examples: football, basketball, tennis, high jumping, and so forth; but this approach quickly runs into obstacles. First, there is debate about whether some activities, such as fishing, cheerleading, bowling, and mountaineering, are sports. Then, in order to answer that question, we need to agree upon the characteristics we take to be essential to sport. We need a definition that lists the necessary and sufficient conditions for something to qualify as a sport. So perhaps we go back to the list of things we all agreed to be sports and start looking for characteristics that they all have in common. Do all sports have written rules? Do they all have competition? Do they all require physical prowess?

The question and the process we use to answer it are important because our metaphysical understanding of what sport is directly influences our normative conception of it, that is, our account of what sport should be. Before we can claim that it is wrong to break the rules, to take performance-enhancing drugs, or to run up the score against weaker opponents, we first need an understanding of the nature and purpose of the primary activity. At the same time, in the pursuit of a metaphysical understanding of sport, we must always keep an open mind. For every serious attempt to conclusively define sport, there is a serious contention that sport is, by nature, indefinable.
Some say that an accurate definition of sport is not only impossible but also undesirable, first because we can understand things without defining them (indeed, we need a preexisting understanding just to test the definition), and second because thinking that we do have a definition might lead to the conclusion that we already understand sport and therefore have no need to think about it further. The lesson here is that it is much more important to ask and explore the question “What is sport?” than it is to find a definite answer. Just as dribbling, shooting, and passing comprise the “fundamentals” of basketball, the debate about what is and is not a sport, the negotiation of characteristics essential to sport, and the comparison of theories about the nature of sport comprise the “fundamentals” of sport philosophy.

Applying Socrates’s famous “What is” question to sport and athletes yields a variety of answers. In this section we will explore the relationships between sport and play, games, art, and virtue-centered social practices. Sport has important metaphysical relationships with all of these things, but at the same time it is identical with none of them, and to understand it metaphysically we need to consider how these various facets fit together to create sport as we experience it today. We will also consider the metaphysical nature of athletes and observe how contrasting views in the Eastern and Western traditions might affect the practice and understanding of sport. It is from the metaphysical foundations that we establish in this section that we will go on to evaluate the practice of sport in ethical terms. From the fundamental activity of trying to understand essentially what sport is, we can turn to the question of how it should be practiced.

One of the first and most influential answers to the metaphysical question “What is sport?” is that sport is a form of play. On some level, this link seems undeniable. No matter how seriously cultures or individuals take their sports we never seem able completely to tear them away from the roots of play. We play games, competitors are called players, and even the most complex and orchestrated movement is called a great play. When a serious professional like Serena Williams plies her trade, we say that she is playing the game of tennis. At the same time, what Williams is doing seems a far cry from the paradigm of lighthearted child’s play. When I was a kid, I used to play with model horses, building them barns out of cardboard boxes, “feeding” them breakfast cereal, and repairing their broken legs with electrical tape bandages. It can be hard to see anything more than a linguistic connection between “playing” model horses and “playing” middle linebacker in the National Football League. But philosophers make a good case for a metaphysical link between sport and play, even if they disagree about what that link is and whether it should be preserved. What is clear is that we cannot deny, and should not ignore, sport’s connection to play. Sport may not be identical to play, or even a specific subset of it, but in order to understand what sport is we must first try to understand play.

Reactions to the idea that sport is a form of play are generally of two kinds. First, there are those who believe that it debases or trivializes sport. Sports today, they say, are serious business, in both the psychological and the economic sense. People may play around with sports by tossing a ball in the backyard or staging an informal soccer game on the beach, but competitive sport demands planning, dedication, toil, and persistence. The kind of spontaneous, lighthearted frolicking we associate with play contrasts sharply with the sports ideal of superlative achievement earned through years of training.
and practice. In real sports, winning is the most important thing, not pleasure. True athletes are not consoled by the refrain “It’s only a game!” Sport is rightly taken seriously because it provides important educational and economic benefits. Student athletes play sports to finance their educations. Professional athletes dedicate themselves to sport just as doctors and lawyers dedicate themselves to medicine and law. They make sacrifices, strive for excellence, and earn a living, sometimes even a fortune. It is not child’s play! On this view, linking sports with play belittles the efforts of serious athletes and ignores the social importance of athletics. Modern sports, from this perspective, seem to be almost the opposite of play.

On the other hand, there are those who believe that thinking of sport as play actually elevates or ennobles sport. In fact, both Plato and Aristotle exalted play as something higher and better than practical business. Aristotle defined as most noble those actions that are done for their own sake. Most of human activity is done to satisfy our needs, but gods have no needs and so they have the luxury of doing whatever seems pleasant or intrinsically worthwhile. Since humans should privilege their divine rather than their animalistic impulses, they should strive to engage in intrinsically worthwhile activities. Plato declared that “man is made God’s playingthing, and that is the best part of him.” In *Laws*, it is concluded that the best life is one of play:

Therefore every man and woman should live life accordingly, and play the noblest games and be of another mind from what they are at present.... For they deem war a serious thing, though in war there is neither play nor culture worthy of the name, which are the things we deem most serious. Hence all must live in peace as well as they possibly can. What, then, is the right way of living? Life must be lived as play, playing with certain games, making sacrifices, singing and dancing, and then a man will be able to propitiate the gods, and defend himself against his enemies, and win in the contest.  

In this view, play is among the highest human functions. The practical business of earning a living, winning honors, and advancing socially are all lower concerns—linked to the survival instinct we share with animals. In fact, in an ideal world where all of our needs are satisfied, we would do nothing but play. The educational and economic benefits of sport would no longer be needed, and our games would be uncorrupted by such concerns. In the end, both philosophers who believe that play trivializes sport and those who believe that play ennobles sport seek to understand the metaphysical link between the two. As philosophers we believe that making the world better begins by understanding it better.

In attempting to understand sport as a form of play, many philosophers look to Johan Huizinga’s 1944 book *Homo Ludens* (Man the Player). Using a historical and sociological approach, Huizinga surveys the play element in culture and notes at the outset that play is in fact older than culture and engaged in by animals and not just human beings. Huizinga discusses modern sports near the end of his book, acknowledging that they have been taken with increasing seriousness since the end of the nineteenth century and, therefore, that “something of the pure play-quality is inevitably lost.” It is not Huizinga’s discussion of sport on which philosophers focus, however, but rather his definition of play, which is presented in the first chapter.

Summing up the formal characteristics of play we might call it a free activity standing quite consciously outside “ordinary” life as being “not serious,” but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner.

Here, Huizinga describes play using a kind of *vita negativa* similar to the method some medieval philosophers used to describe God—that is, he defines it primarily by specifying what it is not. Play is not necessary, not serious, not ordinary, and not materially productive. Later, Huizinga offers a more positive definition. “Play is a voluntary activity or occupation executed within certain fixed limits of time and place, according to rules freely accepted but absolutely binding, having its aim in itself and accompanied by a feeling of tension, joy, and the consciousness that it is ‘different’ from ‘ordinary life.’”

In 1958, Roger Caillois critically evaluated Huizinga’s characterization of play, taking issue with, among other things, its disconnection from material interest. Caillois then turned Huizinga’s summary into a six-point list. Play, he says, is “defined as an activity which is essentially:

*Free*: in which playing is not obligatory; if it were, it would at once lose its attractive and joyous quality as diversion;

*Separate*: circumscribed within limits of space and time, defined and fixed in advance;

*Uncertain*: the course of which cannot be determined, nor the result attained beforehand, and some latitude for innovations being left to the player’s initiative;

*Unproductive*: creating neither goods, nor wealth, nor new elements of any kind; and except for the exchange of property among the players,
ending in a situation identical to that prevailing at the beginning of the game.

**Governed by rules**: under conventions that suspend ordinary laws, and for the moment establish new legislation, which alone counts; and

**Make-believe**: accompanied by a special awareness of a second reality or of a free unreality, as against real life.8

It was Cailliois’s list that John W. Loy Jr. used as a starting point for his 1968 effort to define the nature of sport.9 Paul Weiss then incorporated both Huizinga and Cailliois into his own discussion of play, sport, and games in his book *Sport: A Philosophic Inquiry*.

Philosophers quickly recognized, however, that a philosophical approach to the question of play would have to go beyond external descriptions of the activity itself and account for the internal experience of the agent (the person who plays), that is, the phenomenology of play. As David Roochnik puts it, “Play is a quality of activity; it is a vibrant experience that each one of us has had at some time or another. To deal with it in an objective thing is to contradict what it is, and thus destroy it.”10 Roochnik goes on to characterize play as an orientation toward the world; a kind of chosen attitude or “stance.”

“Play is a mode of being. It is a way of comporting oneself, a way of approaching and extending oneself to the world. It is a phenomenon that frequently arises in various human activities. But when taken self-consciously, when chosen as the best way to be, play can become more than a sporadic phenomenon; it can become a stance.”11 Drew Hyland picks up on this idea and goes on to develop a theory of play that defines its stance as one of “responsive openness,”12 but his was not the final word. Today there is no universally accepted definition of play in the philosophy of sport literature.

What we can say, however, is that philosophical accounts of play need to synthesize the agent’s internal experience with the activity’s external qualities. As Angela Schneider puts it, “play is a mode of performing actions rather than a type of action.”13 If we revise Huizinga’s and Cailliois’s lists of (mostly) external qualities according to the internal approaches adopted by such theorists as Roochnik, Hyland, Klaus Meier, Schneider, and Randolph Féezell, we might generate a new characterization of play as voluntary, extraordinary, autotelic, absorbing, and fun. Let us examine each of these as they have been discussed in relation to sport.

**VOLUNTARY**

“First and foremost,” says Huizinga, “all play is a voluntary activity. Play to order is no longer play: it could at best be but a forcible imitation of it.”14 The claim that play must be voluntary is rarely disputed.15 The paradigm case of play as spontaneous frolic clearly occurs at the will of its participants. Even in more formal activities, it is difficult to imagine what it could mean to play against one’s will. We do know of children forced by overbearing parents to play little league baseball, but surely this example is “play” only in a manner of speaking—unfortunate choice of words that fails to capture the true spirit of play. Once I watched my brother in a youth soccer game happily spearing dried leaves on the spikes of his shoes in an isolated corner of the field. He was playing, but not playing soccer. The child on the baseball diamond and the soccer player on the field might, at some point, “get into the game” and begin to play despite their initial reluctance, but until they willingly engage in the activity, they are not playing. As Paul Weiss concludes, “Play ... must be freely accepted, even when it is not freely entered into or freely ended; it is free in the sense that it is carried on by the player only while he desires to engage in it.”16

Cailliois, in the definition quoted above, describes play as “free” rather than “voluntary.” Is there any difference? Cailliois says that sport is free in the sense that it is “not obligatory” and explains that players are “free to leave whenever they choose by saying, ‘I am not playing anymore.’”17 Huizinga also seems to equate freedom and voluntariness, by describing play “first and foremost” as “voluntary” and then identifying its first “main characteristic” as freedom.18 But there are important philosophical differences between the conceptions of freedom and voluntariness. The most obvious is that “freedom” better describes external facts, while “voluntariness” describes internal attitudes. If we think of freedom “negatively” simply as the absence of constraints—as when a person is freed from prison or a student athlete is declared eligible and therefore free to compete—we do not capture the sense in which play is free. The playing of games entails the imposition of constraints—specifically, the constraints spelled out by the rules of the game—not the elimination of them. Even most forms of child’s play, as when I played with my model horses or my brothers played at being “superheroes,” require an acceptance of the constraints imposed by the make-believe world.

Freedom in play is not so much an external fact as an internal attitude—a sense of freedom that is gained, paradoxically, by the voluntary acceptance of boundaries and constraints. According to Hyland, the experience of freedom for finite human beings “must take place within a set of limiting conditions.”19 Sport provides these limiting conditions by marking off a particular place and time, such as the boundaries and time limit of a soccer game, within which we play. Players feel free because these constraints allow them to concentrate fully on the unpredictable events that take place within that time and space. Hyland explains it thus: “The boundaries and time limits of a game perhaps most clearly of all do allow us to focus our consciousness and our bodies in such a way as to pursue to the end a set of possibilities, and so a
realm of freedom." There is a sense, as Caillois observes, in which players' actions are free within the limits set by the rules. \(^{21}\) Realistically, however, athletes' possibilities are limited: I could respond to a tip-off in basketball by performing a backflip—it would even be athletic—but I wouldn't be playing basketball. The freedom we experience by playing sports is primarily psychological freedom that depends on voluntary attitudes, not the elimination of external barriers.

This distinction is important for philosophy because we must consider the possibility that all events, including our personal actions, are predetermined. It could be that our course of life is already programmed and we experience it like we experience a movie, under the illusion that the characters are free to do whatever they choose. Freedom, in that case, can be nothing more than a feeling. John Locke illustrated this possibility with the image of a man unknowingly locked in a room with an old friend. He willingly stays to chat with his friend, oblivious to the external fact that he is imprisoned. Locke concludes that liberty is nothing more than being able to do what we choose to do. \(^{22}\) Perhaps the sense of freedom in sport depends precisely on the choice to play. If so, conscious choice might also transform obligation into freedom as with Albert Camus's Sisypheus, condemned by the gods as his eternal punishment to roll a heavy rock up a mountain, only to have it roll back down to the bottom. Camus imagines Sisypheus liberating himself from his punishment, not by refusing to push the boulder, but by choosing to do it. \(^{23}\) Likewise, a person "made to play," as Weiss says, can play freely if "he willingly does what he must." \(^{24}\)

Of course, true voluntariness and the sense of freedom that comes from it may not be such an easily controlled choice as Camus makes it out to be. Randolph Feezell, who emphasizes the enjoyment inherent in play, links the experience of freedom not just with willingness but also with an individual's ability to identify with the activity. \(^{25}\) He thinks that we feel free within the time and space provided by play because it gives us the chance to be who we really are. \(^{26}\) Drew Hyland likewise believes that we identify with the play experience because it fulfills our human nature as "incomplete and overfull, both given to dominance and to submission, both monadic and relational." \(^{27}\) The feeling of freedom, characteristic of play, according to both, depends on its voluntariness, and its voluntariness depends on our ability to embrace and identify with what we are doing. Freedom in play is an internal perception more than an external reality. \(^{28}\) And in rule-governed activities like sport, the sense of freedom depends paradoxically upon the voluntary acceptance of the limitations and constraints imposed by the rules.

Huizinga's second defining characteristic of play is that it is "not 'ordinary' or 'real' life, but rather a stepping out of 'real' life into a temporary sphere of activity with a disposition all its own." \(^{29}\) The distinction between play and ordinary life, on the one hand, reflects the observations of Plato and Aristotle that things done for their own sake are importantly different from things done to satisfy worldly needs and desires—things done because they have to get done. The idea goes back to the ancient Greek myth of Prometheus, who gave humans the spark of divine intelligence so that they could transcend the realm of animals, which is focused only on survival, and create beautiful things like poetry, music, and dance. In this view, play is separate from—and nobler than—work. It is a view at odds with modern industrialism, which tends to privilege work and production. Industrial societies value play only insofar as it refreshes and restores people to a state where they can work more. \(^{30}\) We might even say that the view of play as nobler than work is not much in favor with modern sports, where a serious approach is demanded, hard work is expected, and financial reward is often sought. Despite this culture (which will be discussed further), the modern sports world does seem to be distinct from ordinary life. As Paul Weiss affirmed, "Sport, athletics, game, and play have in common the idea of being cut off from the workaday world." \(^{31}\)

How exactly is play "cut off" or "separate" from the ordinary world? A common answer is through spatial and temporal boundaries. Says Caillois, "In effect, play is an essentially separate occasion, carefully isolated from the rest of life, and generally engaged in with precise limits of time and space." \(^{32}\) Huizinga also associates play with "secludedness" with its "limitedness." \(^{33}\) He emphasizes here the spatial separation from ordinary life, which in sport is often represented by visible boundaries. The lines that mark off a football field, the plastic tape that carves a mountain-bike course through the woods, and the walls that surround a handball court serve not only to contain the space of play but also to exclude ordinary life. As Huizinga explains, "A closed space is marked out for [play], either materially or ideally, hedged off from the everyday surroundings. Inside this space play proceeds, inside it the rules obtain. Now, the marking out of some sacred spot is also the primary characteristic of every sacred act." \(^{34}\) The stipulation that the boundaries may be "ideal" and the connection to sacred acts betrays the fact that play's apparent separateness, like its apparent freedom, exists more within the mindset of players than objective reality. The physical boundaries and barriers are symbolic and, like the religious rituals, they serve to get participants into the right mood. Play itself is as much a part of real life as anything else. It is the attitude of the players that makes it extraordinary.
Roothmik insists on this last point and denigrates those who would discount the importance of play by deeming it illusory or separate from the real world. He notes that the feeling of seclusion we experience in play is our own doing and not exclusive to the play activities. “A full involvement in any situation will give rise to a unique world of distinctive temporality and spatiality.”35 Play is extraordinary because we view it as extraordinary, or, more accurately, because it is a stance or attitude that is distinct from the stance of ordinary life. Hyland says that in the stance of play “we have a particular relationship with space, time, others, our equipment, etc.”36 He describes this relationship as one of openness (a heightened awareness of our surroundings) and responsiveness (the ability to respond to what happens in those surroundings).37 It is, of course, the bounded nature of the play world that makes such a focused stance possible; by setting aside the concerns of everyday life, we can give all our attention to the task at hand. “Play is full commitment of body and spirit to the activity,” Roothmik reminds us, “it is immersion in the world that is here and now, and it is only this kind of immersion that does full justice to the powers of man to encounter the world.”38 Understood in this way, not as a particular activity, but rather as a focused and committed approach to almost any activity, play is neither illusory nor trivial. In fact, it permits the utmost seriousness within its limited boundaries.39 Play, then, is extraordinary, both in the sense that it lies beyond the ordinary and in the sense that it is something special that deserves to be valued.

AUTOTELIC

The Greek word telos signifies a purpose or end. Aristotle claims that we always act for the sake of some end, and that every end terminates in the final end of happiness (eudaimonia), which is desired for its own sake.40 A thing desired for its own sake, then, is autotelic—an end in itself. Play is generally characterized as autotelic because it aims at no end beyond itself—that is, no external or extrinsic end. The goods sought in play are said to be internal and intrinsic to the task—such as the pleasure gained by playing a good game of bridge. Further, play’s internal goods should not satisfy preexisting needs or obligations. If I go for a run because I need to release some stress, my activity is not strictly autotelic. As Huizinga explains, “Play is superfluous... It is never imposed by physical necessity or moral duty. It is never a task. It is done at leisure, during free time.”41

Early on, autotelicity was widely accepted by philosophers as characteristic of play and valued as a quality of truly worthwhile sport. More recently, however, the nature and scope of autotelicity has been called into question, especially as it applies to sport. If a game is played for the sake of pleasure, is it truly autotelic? What about schoolchildren let out to play at recess so that they can concentrate better when they return to the classroom? Could professional sports ever be autotelic? Caillois revised Huizinga’s claim that play should have no material interest to the stipulation that it be “unproductive,” thereby including casino games but excluding professional sports.42 Paul Weiss interprets autotelicity to exclude gamblers, professional athletes, and even fitness buffs. “If engaged in for the sake of health or money,” he claims, “play ceases to be play at the point where these-objectives dictate what is done.”43 Embedded in Weiss’s apparent stringency, however, is an important caveat: it is only when external objectives “dictate” the action that play ceases to be play. Autotelicity, like voluntariness, depends on internal attitudes rather than external circumstances. I may take up tennis in order to improve my health, and in that sense it won’t be play. But nothing precludes me from becoming pleasantly absorbed in the activity and thereby achieving a state of play somewhere along the line. The difference is not the activity so much as how I think about it.

We might even say of the first case that I am using tennis (to get in shape) rather than playing tennis (for no external purpose). Bernard Suits has helped to clear up much of the confusion here. He employs the term “instrumentalism” to describe the use of games to achieve external goods, including but not limited to prizes and salaries.44 But he distinguishes between instrumental and autotelic activities, not on the basis of the activity, but rather on the motivations of the participant. Echoing erstwhile Olympic ideology, he endorses the amateur attitude of playing “out of love of the game” rather than “love of what the game can produce.”45 But Suits here makes the same mistake that the Olympic Movement did in thinking that external circumstances can reveal internal motivations. The fact that someone dedicates much of her life to achieving excellence in an activity, the fact that she is praised, rewarded, and even paid for performing it publicly, does not entail that she is doing it for the money. In fact, the pursuit of excellence and performance of a task with which one identifies and finds intrinsically rewarding is the hallmark of... a professional! We have all done jobs for the money, but serious careers are a matter of passion. Most philosophy professors I know believe this. Feezell states that teaching philosophy is, for him, “more like play than work.”46 Why do we hold athletes to a different standard?

Perhaps we believe that play-type activities lose some of their value when taken too seriously. Suits complains that Olympic athletes, even though technically amateur (in his day), are playing because they are under immense pressure to win—pressure that is simply absent from informal contests like pickup basketball. He argues that “acting under such a compulsion, rather than the desire to win simply because winning defines the activity one is undertaking, is what turns a game that could be play into something that is
Athletes often say that no one puts more pressure on them than they put on themselves. I think the pressure suits have in mind here is external—the pressure to win for the sake of one’s team, for the sake of one’s country, or for the sake of the honor attached to an Olympic medal. On the other hand, if we require play to have absolutely no external telos, it may end up that hardly anyone ever really plays. Engaging recent research in action theory and psychology, Stephen Schmid argues that the autotelic of play requires both a player’s goal (i.e., climbing a rock) and the goal motivation (because it provides a rewarding challenge) to be intrinsic. In reality, most of us have mixed, even complex, sets of reasons for playing sports, which include at least some extrinsic goods.

Autotelicity remains an important characteristic for play, but perhaps it is better regarded as an ideal than a requirement. Instead of insisting that motivations for play be purely autotelic, we might focus on their value or defensibility. Education, for example, is an excellent reason to play sports, and it might be that achieving the responsively open stance of play is one of sports’ great educational benefits. Hyland shares this view, but he warns that we actually undermine the educational benefits of play by making education our explicit goal. “If I say, ‘Today I will play basketball in order to learn about myself: not only am I unlikely to learn much, I almost certainly will fail to attain genuine play.’” While it is clear that extrinsic goals can compromise or even destroy the experience of play, it is not clear that all extrinsic goals always do. I have met several student athletes who regard their sports as distracting drudgery—something they do only for the scholarship dollars that make their educations possible. I also know student athletes completely engaged in and enthralled by their sports experience. They embody the spirit of play while earning just as many scholarship dollars as those doing sports for the money. As Roetnkin concludes on the question of autotelicity, “Play is a stance to be taken that it is characterized by immersion. It does not follow from this that we should be utterly oblivious to the future. Play does not preclude having a telos.”

FUN

The most obvious intrinsic reason for engaging in play is simply that it is fun. Many philosophies, including Epicureanism and utilitarianism, posit pleasure as the highest good, yet philosophers of sport identify pleasure as a primary characteristic of play less often than one might expect. An exception is Feezell, who says, “We choose to play our games or engage in such activities for no other reason, in many (or most) cases, than the intrinsic enjoyment involved.” Pleasure does not appear in Caillou’s definition of play or in Huizinga’s most frequently quoted summaries of play. But Feezell points out that Huizinga, at one point, calls the fun element “the essence of play.” Fun is perhaps overlooked because it is such an obvious feature of play. If I say that I played around all day, the implication is that I had fun. If I say that I played baseball or soccer all day, the implication is not clear because I may just be using the verb “play” as a manner of speaking again. Sports, sometimes, are not fun at all—and we know that going in. But insofar as sports are or can be a form of play, it seems like they should be fun. Sports completely devoid of fun surely are disconnected from play. Feezell claims, in fact, that once pleasure goes out of sports, an athlete will quit playing. This observation seems to be confirmed by the popular athletic saying “I’m going to play until it quits being fun.” Fun is essentially pleasant.

Where exactly is the fun in play? We say “baseball is fun,” but two kids could be playing the exact same game and one is miserable while the other is happy. Is fun a quality of the activity or of the person participating? Feezell suggests that enjoyment is something intrinsic to play itself. He claims, “Play is engaged in for the sake of the intrinsic enjoyment of play itself” and that this enjoyment makes play “intrinsically valuable.” Feezell takes his account to affirm play’s autotelicity, but he is challenged by Schmid who claims that it begs the question (that is, it assumes as true what it is trying to prove). On the one hand, to argue that autotelic play is intrinsically valuable because it does not depend on anything else extrinsic to the activity is essentially to say that “autotelic play is intrinsically valuable because it is intrinsically valuable.” On the other hand, if play is valued because it produces fun or enjoyment, then “these psychological states are what is intrinsically valuable and one’s participation in a sport is a means to this end.”

Schmid’s challenge seems to reflect Aristotle’s claim that happiness is the only thing pursued for its own sake, but in fact Schmid argues that we can engage in activities for their own sakes quite independently of any pleasure or enjoyment gained. His real point is that pure autotelic play requires purely intrinsic reasons for participating; pleasure and fun are actually extrinsic reasons. This doesn’t mean, however, that fun and pleasure aren’t good reasons to engage in playful activities, or even that they aren’t essential elements of play. As Feezell admits, it is “from the standpoint of the lived experience of the player [that fun] appears as the irreducible and essential element of his activity.” We have returned again to the idea that play is an attitude or stance adopted by a person rather than an externally observable quality of some activity. We further note, with Hyland, that “fun is not the telos of sport; [but] when sport works, when it is the best it can be, it is fun. Fun, too, is a distinctive characteristic of that stance of responsive openness which informs our sporting play.”
Chapter 3

ABSORBING

If we accept fun as a distinctive characteristic of play, and we value play as a mode of participation in sport, the question naturally arises, what is it about playful activities that generates fun? Perhaps the connection lies in play’s ability to absorb us completely. Huizinga characterized play as “utterly absorbing” in his initial summary, but this characteristic was left off Caillois’s list, perhaps because, again, he was trying to describe play as something external rather than an attitude or stance. Weiss recognized that “play is all-absorbing both for the child and the athlete,” but it is the theory of play as a stance that provides the greatest insight into play’s capacity to absorb. In Hyland’s characterization of play as the stance of responsive openness, we can see how the need to remain open and to respond to whatever happens requires absorption in the activity. Games and sports in particular create the uncertainty identified by Huizinga and the doubt identified by Caillois as features of play activities that grab our attention and pull us away from the ordinary—even away from self-consciousness.

There is a sense in which play demands that we leave behind self-conscious intentions and calculations and simply abandon ourselves to the flow of the activity. As Weiss observes, “He who wants to be refreshed through play must forget about refreshing himself, and just play.” Even the early twentieth-century philosopher R. G. Collingwood recognized that play required “capriciousness” in the sense of making decisions “spontaneously or out of habit without any conscious process of reasoning.” In 2008, Seth Vannata applied Edmund Husserl’s phenomenological insight to play, declaring its “defining trait” to be thoughtlessness. “Like the mundane activities of reading out loud or even finishing a spoken sentence,” Vannata explains, “once you are overly conscious of the act, you stumble. In this light, playing can be said to be ‘unconscious.’” Absorption in the flow of play often manifests itself in sport as the phenomenon of “flow,” or “the zone”—a feeling of perfect control and effortlessness even while performing difficult athletic tasks. In fact, psychological studies reveal that the experience of “flow” or “being in the zone” occurs when an athlete’s skills reach perfect balance with the challenge presented by the activity. One cannot force oneself, or even will oneself, into flow—it must arise spontaneously.

On the other hand, an athlete must prepare herself to reach the level of skill necessary to experience flow. In Eastern philosophy, the concept of wu-wei implies a similar kind of effortlessness, one that comes out as result of training and understanding. The Dao de Jing of Laozi reminds us that

The most supplie things in the world run roughshod over the most rigid.
That which is not there can enter even when there is no space.

Getting beyond the self and ‘not thinking’ are likewise important ideas in Eastern philosophy that can be applied to sport. Vannata recognizes this, adding that the Western tradition of phenomenology, specifically Husserl’s idea of passive synthesis, which recognizes the contribution of our prereflective consciousness to experiences such as play, get to the heart of our absorption in play. Approached from an Eastern or Western perspective, absorption seems to be an important characteristic of play.

Hopefully this chapter has improved our understanding of play as a phenomenon related to sport. One thing clear from the discussion is that play isn’t always sport and sport isn’t always play. But insofar as sport shares some important characteristics with play, we might ask whether those characteristics can have normative application—that is, can they make sport better? First, the connection between voluntariness and the quality of the sports experience is clear. Forcing a child or even oneself to participate in sport is unlikely to result in a positive experience. At the same time, it is possible to willingly accept something forced upon you, as Sisyphus did. But it is always important, in the first place, to understand and value the principle of voluntary participation. Second, we should appreciate the extraordinariness of play and try to make sport a special place apart from ordinary life—even if it is a job. Third, the principle of autotelicity should be viewed as an ideal that might be experienced within play—even if our motivations for entering into sport are often mixed and can be directed at other extrinsic goals. The point is that focusing on those external goals can corrupt the value of play. Fourth, fun is essential to play but not essential to sport. By finding a way to play in sport we are more likely to have fun and maybe to succeed. Fifth, play is all absorbing as is sport performed at the highest levels—especially in “flow.” In sport, unlike child’s play, this absorption depends on a proper balance between challenge and skill, but it is never a bad idea for an athlete to practice not thinking and just abandon herself to the game.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Have you ever felt forced to play a sport against your will? How did it affect your experience? Has sport ever seemed like work to you?
2. In your experience, does having extrinsic goals like prizes or scholarship money inhibit the experience of play in sport?
3. Do you think athletes perform better when they are having fun, or does the experience of fun come from playing well?

4. Have you ever experienced “flow” or “being in the zone” in sport? Did the experience have any of the play characteristics (voluntary, extraordinary, autotelic, absorbing, and fun) discussed in this chapter?

Chapter Four

Sport and Games

The American cyclist Lance Armstrong won seven Tours de France, two more than anyone else in history. He has been accused of cheating in at least one of those Tours by using a banned drug called erythropoietin (EPO). To many, the allegation is not surprising since EPO is believed to have been used widely in the sport as a relatively safe and undetectable crutch to make it through grueling three-week stage races. If the allegation is true and Armstrong intentionally broke an antidoping rule at the Tour, what may we conclude? Should we say he is still the legitimate winner of the race, since such rule breaking was accepted and widespread among pro cyclists at that time? Should we say that he is not the legitimate winner because he intentionally broke a rule and therefore failed to “play the game” as it is defined by the rules? Or should we say that the antidoping rule is a different kind of rule from those that really define the sport—such as the rule that you must complete the course by pedaling a bicycle and not driving a car or flying in a helicopter? Or should we say, most strongly, that that year’s Tour de France was not a bicycle race at all because sports are defined by their rules and (at least) one of the sport’s rules was broken? Implausible as it sounds, the connection between rules, games, and sports at least suggests this radical conclusion.

SUITS ON GAMES AND RULES

One of the most influential answers to the metaphysical question “What is sport?” is simply that it is a set of rules. The most influential correlation between rules and sport is made by Bernard Suits in the process of defining games. In his seminal work The Grasshopper, Suits identifies the elements of