



playing games

An introduction to the philosophy
of sport through dialogue

randolph feezell

'Randolph Feezell uses a dialogue between fictional characters, including one who is skeptical about the value of sport, to illuminate ethical issues in sport, including investigation of the value of competition, the nature of cheating, and disputes about gender equity. Feezell is not only a master of creating insightful dialogue, but also presents us with a comprehensive and informed debate about sports, their value, and how they might be conducted ethically that is both entertaining and nuanced. *Playing Games* succeeds in remaining accessible to a wide audience while providing readers with an analytically acute treatment of wide ranging issues in the philosophy of sport.'

- Robert L. Simon, Walcott Bartlett Professor of Philosophy, Hamilton College, USA

What is sport? Why does sport matter? How can we use philosophy to understand what sport means today? This engaging and highly original introduction to the philosophy of sport uses dialogue – a form of philosophical investigation – to address the fundamental questions in sport studies and to explore key contemporary issues such as fair play, gender, drug use, cheating, entertainment and identity.

Providing a clear, informative and accessible introduction to the philosophy of sport, every chapter includes current sporting examples as well as review questions and guides to further reading. The dialogue form enables students to engage in debate and raise questions while encouraging them to think from the perspectives of athlete, coach, spectator and philosopher. The issues raised present real and complex ethical dilemmas that relate to a variety of sports from around the world such as soccer, athletics, baseball, basketball, hockey and tennis.

No other book brings this rich subject to life through the use of dialogue, making this an indispensable companion to any course on the philosophy or ethics of sport.

Randolph Feezell is Professor of Philosophy at Creighton University, USA. His classroom and research interests include ethics, philosophy of religion and philosophy of sport. He is a member of the editorial board of the *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* and is the author of six books as well as numerous articles and reviews. Feezell played baseball at the University of Oklahoma and has coached baseball at virtually all levels, including over 10 years as a college assistant and hitting coach. He has played semiprofessional baseball, AAU basketball and tournament tennis.

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Randolph Feezell



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I am grateful for permission to use parts of two chapters previously published in the following books:

“Baseball, Cheating, and Tradition: Would Kant Cork His Bat?” in *Baseball and Philosophy: Thinking Outside the Batter's Box*, edited by Eric Bronson, Open Court, 2004.

“The Pitfalls of Partisanship,” chapter 4 in *Sport, Philosophy, and Good Lives*, Randolph Feezell, University of Nebraska Press, 2013.

THE CHARACTERS

As the dialogue progresses we find out a few details about the particular lives of the characters, but for the most part, they are what they say in these pages. We become acquainted with their perspectives, how they think and express themselves. Although I take them seriously as individuals, they often say things that are rather typical; they offer claims and make inferences that are familiar when people talk about sports. They say the sorts of things about sport and philosophy that are heard in classrooms, on sports talk radio, and on television; they express ideas that people read in newspapers and online. To the extent that their discussions remotely resemble real conversations, we must assume that their relationships are buoyed by an interest in philosophical conversation and, for all but Skylar, a deep interest in sports. To the extent that the characters examine both familiar and unfamiliar ideas about sports, the dialogues attempt to deepen our conversations about contemporary athletics.

LOGAN: Lover of sports; passionate fan; consistently endorses the view that sport is primarily about competition and winning.

SKYLAR: Artist; some knowledge of sports; a critic of the contemporary obsession with sports; develops an interest in the concept of play as the dialogue progresses.

RILEY: Trained as a teacher; interested in psychology; has played some sports; questions the efficacy of philosophical thinking.

PAT: The main instigator of the conversations; background in computer science and philosophy; deep interest in sports and philosophy; an “amateur” philosopher (not an academic).

J. K.: Appears in “Dialogue three” and later; Pat’s friend who teaches a course in sports ethics at the university; often called upon to provide some scholarly background for topics in the dialogues.

CONTENTS

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	<i>vi</i>
<i>The characters</i>	<i>vii</i>
Introduction	1
Dialogue one: Why philosophy of sport?	6
Dialogue two: What is sport?	25
Dialogue three: Sportsmanship	48
Dialogue four: Cheating and running up the score	66
Dialogue five: Trash talking and gamesmanship	84
Dialogue six: Competition and winning	101
Dialogue seven: Drugs and sport	122
Dialogue eight: Gender and sport	142
Dialogue nine: Fans and role models	161
Dialogue ten: Sport and meaning: do sports matter?	185
<i>Index</i>	<i>201</i>

INTRODUCTION

In the following I intend to provide a clear, accessible, and informative introduction to philosophy of sport and sport ethics. While the issues I choose to discuss are largely unsurprising, my method is somewhat unusual. My introduction takes the form of an extended dialogue among a small group of friends. I ask the reader to approach the text in the same spirit or with the same attitude one might take in reading one of Plato's dialogues or Hume's great examination of "natural religion." We might initially wonder whether the real historical Socrates said those things or whether Philo is obviously a fictional representation of the skepticism of a real person, David Hume. These questions are relevant, yet at some point we are drawn into the philosophical conversation and what matters is following the arguments, evaluating their strengths and weaknesses, wondering where the arguments are going, and thinking about the issues for ourselves. Of course, I do not put my dialogues in the same class as Plato's or Hume's, either in quality or in literary content. The contrast with Plato is apparent. I still get excited when I read an early Platonic dialogue because I love the main character that Plato depicts. Socrates is full of arguments and baffling questions (Do the Gods love the pious because it's pious or is it pious because the Gods love it?), but his irony and passion for getting things right are what I love. For me, the character is often more important than whatever positions he happens to hold. My characters are interested in philosophical discussion of sport, but we don't know much about them. Their arguments reveal something about their worldview but little about them as persons. I've become closely acquainted with them in writing the dialogues, and I see them in certain ways. I don't, however, expect readers to see them as I do, nor to have any substantial picture of the characters' personalities and deeper attributes. I expect the reader to engage their questions and arguments – that's all. My dialogues are philosophical conversations, not literary explorations. The stars of the show are the arguments, not the characters (although, I confess, one of the characters is my favorite).

2 Introduction

I have a number of goals for this book, some of which may be more effectively achieved by writing dialogues. First, readers may gain a better feel for philosophy itself. Philosophy is a recognizable and relatively distinctive human activity, across time and culture, yet it's an oddity of our educational system that most students, at least in America, arrive on campus at our colleges and universities with little or no knowledge of philosophy as an activity. People have asked (and continue to ask) questions and have sought to find reasonable beliefs about what is real, what we can know, and the nature of value. The search for reasonable belief involves seeking the best reasons for belief, so constructing and evaluating arguments are central to philosophy. The dialogue form shows the reader the give and take of philosophical discourse: argument and counterargument, pro and contra, thesis and antithesis. Philosophers raise fundamental questions, clarify meaning, make distinctions, offer arguments, and consider objections to their arguments. The dialogue format can show philosophy in action. And, if Western philosophy is a series of footnotes to Plato, then the precedent for this kind of philosophical writing is well established.

Next, readers will gain an understanding of this particular area of philosophy. I have taught a course on philosophy of sport since the 1980s, and there is no course I teach that occasions more questions about its content than philosophy of sport. "I see you're teaching a course on philosophy of sport. What is it? What do you study in that course?" The dialogue format isn't the only way to show people what philosophy of sport is about, but its accessibility and clarity may make the introduction smoother, lubricating an otherwise puzzling friction between expectations formed on the basis of previous educational experience and the novelty, even the strangeness of philosophical thinking. Early on, some of my characters offer the kinds of comments that I have repeatedly heard in philosophy classes (especially introductory classes) for almost forty years. Aren't truth and meaning relative to the person? Isn't philosophy hopeless? Is there any progress in philosophy? What's philosophically interesting about sports? (What could be philosophically interesting about sport?) The first dialogue jumps right in, assumes there might be some prevailing skepticism about the conjunction of philosophy and sport, and attempts to meet readers where they are (assuming that many readers will be either students or persons who typify certain cultural prejudices).

As I've said, the issues that I have chosen to examine aren't idiosyncratic. There is a substantial literature on most of these topics, written by academic philosophers and specialists in sport studies. The dialogues address a number of central issues in philosophy of sport, so a reader will become acquainted with some of the central questions that philosophers of sport have examined in the last thirty or forty years. What is sport? What is sportsmanship? What is cheating and why is it wrong? Is it wrong to "run up the score," trash talk, and engage in gamesmanship? Is competition good? Does winning always establish athletic superiority? Are there good reasons for banning the use of performance-enhancing drugs? What is sex equality in sports? Is there an ideal type of fan? Are celebrated athletes role models? Do celebrated athletes have special responsibilities to be good role models? Do sports matter? These aren't the only philosophical questions that can be raised about sports,

but they are important and representative of both the discipline and the kinds of questions that reflective persons ask about sports.

Readers will also become acquainted with the range of theoretical options one might take in answering these questions. Whether an introduction to philosophy focuses on main texts or the perennial problems of philosophy, it's often important to place a certain approach in the context of a wider range of possible answers and arguments. For example, in the *Meditations*, Descartes defends a dualistic theory of mind, which contrasts with various forms of materialism. He defends substance dualism rather than property dualism and offers famous arguments for his position: an argument from introspection and an argument whose conclusion is supposed to follow from premises pointing out that the mental and the physical must be metaphysically independent because they have different properties. An introduction to philosophy of mind maps the conceptual geography and helps the student understand competing positions in terms of central arguments.

Likewise, this introduction to philosophy of sport allows the characters to express and to explore the range of possible answers to central questions in philosophy of sport and sport ethics and to evaluate the kinds of arguments that have been offered for competing positions. Sometimes people have the impression that philosophy is simply a matter of expressing opinions on profound questions. When a new acquaintance found out that I am a philosopher and teacher, he asked me, "What are your favorite sayings?" He proceeded to attempt to impress me by showing how many "sayings" he knew about great philosophers. He especially liked the "sayings" of the existentialists: "Live dangerously!" "We're condemned to be free!" "Life is absurd." What was missing in his view of philosophy was the central role of argument, whether we understand it phenomenologically or the way in which analytic philosophers typically offer reasons for belief. Philosophy is an activity and a process, something that one does. It's not merely the possession of fundamental ideas. It's an inquiry that seeks true or reasonable beliefs. The dialogue format allows the reader to see that answers that at first appear obvious may need to be refined, amended, qualified, and altered because of an appeal to examples or a seemingly powerful counterargument. The dialogue format allows the reader to appreciate philosophy as inquiry, the role of argument in philosophy, and the strengths and weaknesses of a range of arguments that have been offered to defend answers to central questions in philosophy of sport. At times, my characters help each other (and the reader) see the shape of the discussion by summarizing the various approaches in terms of unifying categories. For example, they distinguish three approaches to cheating: the absolutist, the traditionalist, and the realist. They describe three different views about the goodness or badness of competition. They summarize different perspectives on the use of performance-enhancing drugs: the substance libertarian, the moralist, the sport essentialist, and the gamewright (the creator or inventor of a game).

I believe the dialogue form is also particularly useful in raising questions, showing that the issues are real, complex, and ongoing, and asking readers to think for themselves. In a sense, I ask each reader to become a member of the discussion

group and actively to contribute to the conversation. In my mind there are no privileged participants, although it's clear that two of the characters have a broader and deeper background in philosophy than the others. The discussion mirrors an actual classroom in which philosophy is taught. There are questions and more questions. Each student is encouraged to offer an answer, provide an argument, and be responsible for responding to further questions and reasons.

Are there disadvantages in writing dialogues, given the goals that I have mentioned? I can imagine that some might find it more difficult to follow the arguments and to sort out what's going on in this kind of philosophical writing. In response, I attempt to help the reader (or teacher) by providing a more visible structure to highlight main points in the conversation: section titles, lists of main questions, reconstructions of central arguments in premise–conclusion form, and summaries of main points and approaches to the issues. I hope the guideposts will not seem too pedantic or restrictive or “teacherly.”

Another problem is that readers (and teachers) might be impatient when they find themselves looking for a conclusion. There is a standard form of philosophical writing in which the author is required to state her thesis early on, in an introduction that includes a clear, declarative sentence of the form: “In this paper (or chapter) I will argue (support, hold, defend the claim, assert) that p (where p stands for some proposition). This practice in philosophical writing is embodied in requiring students to write a “thesis defense paper.” Of course, some texts may have a thesis but no explicit thesis statement. In the classroom I often begin the discussion of a text by asking, “What is the thesis?” Writing dialogues leaves matters more open than this. Does each dialogue have a thesis? Do any of the dialogues have a central thesis? These are actually difficult questions for me to answer. Some will think I'm being disingenuous by saying this, because I have written essays in which I have argued for positions on many of these issues. At points, one or more of the characters express my own views and offer arguments that I have made. The careful reader will see the arguments lead in a certain direction and might think that the author stacks the deck in favor of his own position. Undoubtedly I do construct certain discussions in such a way as to lead to a position that I find most reasonable. On the other hand, I try to be charitable to opposing views, to tweak the weaknesses of positions with which I am sympathetic, to appreciate complexity, and to examine some issues about which I'm more unsure. I once wrote a dialogue in which I examined competing positions, and I was sure that my own views came out clearly in the discussion. One reviewer criticized the dialogue for failing to make my own position transparent. My conclusion about the dialogue? I was successful in being both charitable to a position with which I disagreed and sufficiently self-critical in seeing possible weaknesses in my own arguments.

There is another issue that some readers may raise. To put it bluntly: people don't talk like this. These aren't real conversations. The writing may be off-putting because the dialogues sound too much like academic philosophers talking to each other. However, I think the danger resides in the other direction. It may be worse to attempt to make the conversations sound like everyday talk. That may make the

discussions sound even more artificial or unrealistic. It's better to drop the pretense. I don't pretend that people talk like this, as a matter of fact, although I would insist that the style of conversation we find here is a real possibility and a worthy ideal, at least in certain contexts. Once, many years ago in an introductory philosophy class, I played a recording of the famous BBC debate between Fr. Frederick Copleston and Bertrand Russell. We listened to the part of the debate in which Copleston presents and defends the argument from contingency for the existence of God and Russell offers a spirited skeptical response. The first student question: "Were they reading from a script?" No, I said, they actually talked like that: arguments offered in terms of premises and conclusions, insightful questions, clarification of meaning, counterexamples, counterarguments, analogies, and summaries of main points. I want my discussions to flow, in order to enhance clarity and coherence in a way that contrasts with many everyday conversations. Why not take Copleston and Russell as our conversational models?

Here's something else to keep in mind. In the first dialogue, my friend Pat, the instigator and leader of the group, asks whether it's all right to record the conversations. Therefore, we can assume that there's a recording of these discussions. In the final dialogue, we find out that Pat will leave, travel, and work on a book on philosophy of sport. Suppose that Pat transcribes and edits the recordings in order to make the conversations more clear and coherent. Thank you, Pat, for transforming their original discussions into a more readable and informative format!

I don't want to leave the impression that the characters express only the views of students or popular views that are expressed when people talk about sports in the wider culture. Often the characters discuss texts that are the basis for the discussion. (Pat directs the suggested reading.) Sometimes, J. K., a teacher of a class on sport ethics, is asked to explain the views and arguments of a philosopher whose work is discussed in the course. At times the characters discuss a central text that is the basis for the discussion. At the end of each dialogue I include a brief list of suggested readings along with comments that explain the textual basis of various parts of the conversation. I want to thank the authors whose work is either directly or indirectly discussed in the dialogues. I hope I've given credit where credit is due. I encourage the reader to consult the original sources to see how and what I have learned from them. In some cases, the readers may want to read some of my other work to see how I've dealt with the topics elsewhere.

Dialogue one

WHY PHILOSOPHY OF SPORT?

- A Sports and philosophy
- B What is philosophy of sport?
- C Isn't sport about competition and winning?
- D The relation of sport to other concepts
- E Clarifying the attraction question
- F Philosophical analysis
- G Conceptual relativism
- H Classical conceptual analysis
- I Sport is entertainment
- J Skepticism about definition and philosophical progress
- K Family resemblances

Introduction

In the first conversation, Pat, the purported instigator and leader of the discussion group, helps the other characters begin to understand what it would mean to take a philosophical interest in sport. Why does sport attract so many people? Pat calls this the “attraction question” and suggests that philosophy of sport begins with an attempt to understand the concept of sport and its relation to other concepts, such as play and game. Riley is skeptical about the attempt to analyze the concept of sport, while Logan thinks it's obvious that sport is simply about competition and winning. Pat explains “classical conceptual analysis,” and the group considers whether various candidate analyses of the concept of sport are successful in terms of the attempt to find necessary and sufficient conditions for being a sport. Pat responds to Riley's conceptual relativism by showing that the conversation has made progress; it has revealed some strengths and weaknesses of various popular claims about the “definition” of sport. Finally, Pat explains an alternative approach to conceptual analysis,