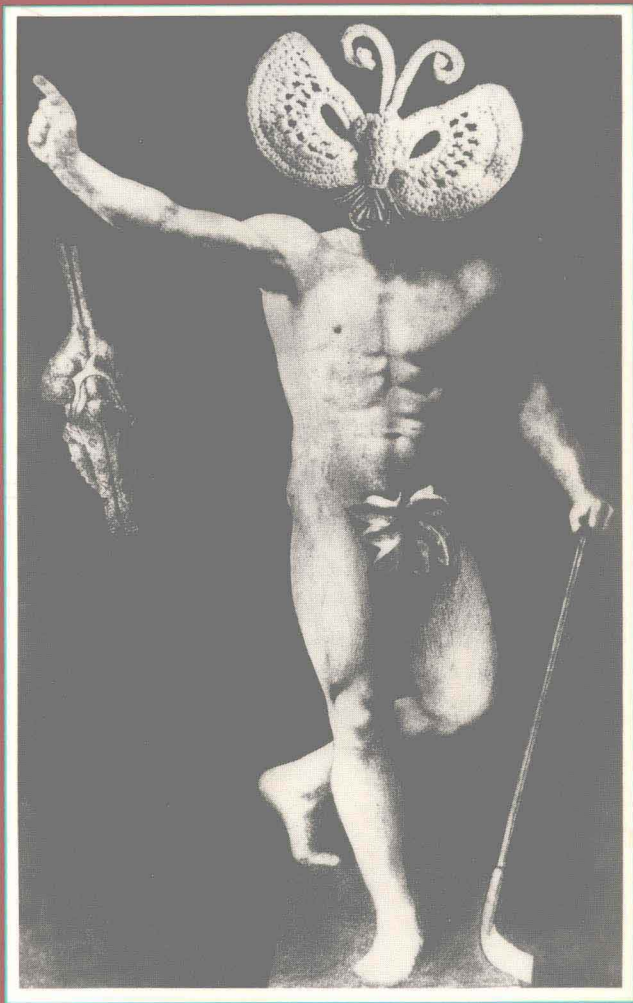


Talking a GOOD GAME

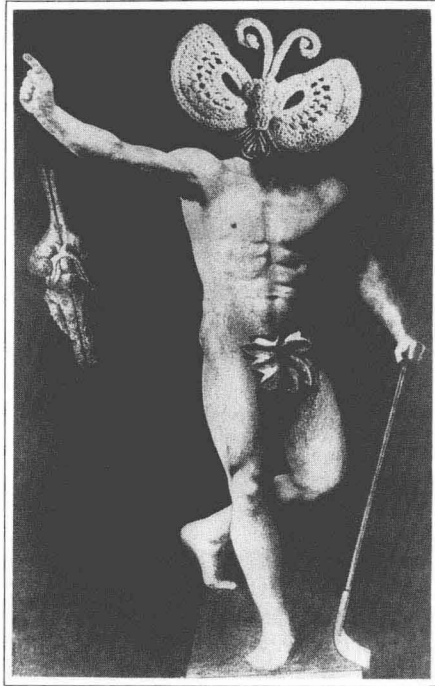
Inquiries into the Principles of Sport



Spencer K. Wertz

Talking a GOOD GAME

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For Charlotte

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INTRODUCTION

Chasing Paradigms

I

PHILOSOPHY since the mid-twentieth century has undergone many twists and turns to arrive where it has in the nineties. In the next few pages I shall try to explain where this book fits into that story and how I got involved with its subject matter. A global picture of philosophy will be sketched here, and a more detailed view will follow in chapter 1.

In his *Philosophical Investigations*, Ludwig Wittgenstein (d. 1951) directed our attention to language and its importance in understanding the concepts that make up our webs of belief or our conceptual scheme. So instead of looking for meaning *outside* language (such as in behavior or ideas), he directed our attention *within* language—to look at how certain words are used or function within a given language or specified realm of discourse. Such a description Wittgenstein called “a language-game.” This insight into the nature of meaning and language and its application to philosophical problems became known as the Linguistic Turn.

Soon after this revolution there came a correction, because these philosophical investigations had become simply semantic ones that had little reference to life and its activities. Philosophy had quickly turned into theoretical linguistics. With the newly found emphasis upon language, we had lost a vital part as Wittgenstein had pictured it: “I shall call the whole, consisting of language *and the actions into which it is woven*, the language-game.”¹ Philosophers soon realized that they had abandoned an important part of Wittgenstein’s holistic project, so we took another course. This

time it was known as the Pragmatic Turn. We began to look for needy areas to apply our skills of conceptual clarification. We were now interested in understanding *actions* along with practices, institutions, and conventions founded on those actions. Applied philosophy became a major concern among a great many philosophers. Some of them began entering hospitals to talk with medical personnel about ethical problems in health care. The kind of literature produced from such an encounter was truly pragmatic: it faithfully reflected the concerns and problems medical staff faced in dealing with the sick and chronically ill. But it also tied theory to practice and consequently made theory more useful and accountable. Philosophers wanted to be helpful and wanted their work to be useful and a reliable companion in difficult times—times of philosophical decisions.

Some of us, having witnessed the success of medical ethics and the impetus it gave applied philosophy, began looking around for other needy areas to apply our philosophical (especially analytical) skills. Not having ventured far from the playing field, I became interested in analyzing the actions, practices, institutions, conventions, and talk of the sports world. By “sports” I mean games that depend upon the exercise of physical skills, and I include the spectators as well as the participants and the officials of these activities. So I set out to examine the playground, although this time primarily as a philosopher and secondarily as an athlete. In high school I had lettered in almost every sport, and in my senior year I practiced the martial arts. Judo changed the way I thought about the world and myself. In a way it prepared me for my major in college, philosophy, which included Oriental thought. After ten years of study I returned to pursue a philosophical understanding of those activities that have meant so much to me over the years. This book represents my passionate concern for both sport and philosophy. With the reluctance of a mother letting her child enter the world without her for the first time, I set this book before you. As Plato says in the *Phaedrus*: “Once a thing is put in writing, it rolls about all over the place.”² I just hope it is ready to roll in the directions I have anticipated.

If nothing else, I think the time is right for the appearance of this book, because sport has undergone a major transformation. This “revolution” took place primarily in the mid-seventies, but it has continued in the eighties and nineties. In the remainder of this introduction, I shall describe in broad terms the transformation sport has undergone culturally as well as philosophically. This account is admittedly simplistic, but the overview will serve to unify my inquiries. The chapters in *Talking a Good Game: Inquiries into the Principles of Sport* will give some of the details of this cultural transformation or revolution, although this is not by a long shot the whole story—the notes and the selected bibliography are other places to look for further philosophical investigation. This book is my interpretation of what happened in the realm of sport during my professional career in philosophy thus far. If I generate further interest, I will consider my inquiries here a success.³ Let me remind the reader that my interpretation has been along the lines of the traditional areas of philosophy. The sequence also follows the order of the evolution of sport in this century. Metaphysics or theory of reality sets the agenda in chapters 1, 2, and 5; ethics (primarily examining the decline in moral values in sport) in chapters 3 and 4; epistemology or theory of knowledge in chapters 5, 6, and 7; and finally aesthetics (primarily examining the ascent in aesthetic and artistic values in sport) in chapters 8 and 9.

By “revolution” I have in mind the sort of activity that Thomas Kuhn described for the history of science.⁴ I am employing the more global use of “paradigm” below; Kuhn elaborates: “It [the term “paradigm”] stands for the entire constellation of beliefs, values, techniques, and so on shared by the members of a given community” (p. 175). The paradigm may also be used as a model or example in place of explicit rules for the solutions of remaining problems or issues, especially in an area of interpretation I am exploring (“sport”) in which there are no explicit, agreed upon rules. Paradigms work in place of theories. Earlier Kuhn says that the “lack of a standard interpretation or of an agreed upon reduction to rules will not prevent a paradigm from guiding research. . . . Indeed, the existence of a paradigm need not even

imply that any full set of rules exists" (p. 44). Both of these senses of "paradigm" are used in my study.

Margaret Masterman did a careful elucidation of Kuhn's conception of paradigm and found over twenty distinct uses of this methodological term.⁵ She divides them into three categories (p. 65): (i) metaphysical paradigms or metaparadigms, where "paradigm" is equated with a set of beliefs, a myth, a way of seeing, a map, a standard, an organizing principle governing perception itself, or something determining a large area of reality; (ii) sociological paradigms, where "paradigm" refers to a recognized scientific achievement and Kuhn speaks of it as being like an accepted judicial decision or a set of political institutions; and (iii) artifact or construct paradigms, which Kuhn speaks of as tools or textbooks ("classics") and as actual instrumentations. Such diverse uses of the term, however, should not be viewed as a setback. The complexity of meaning helps capture and organize the extremely diverse phenomena we are talking about here, because it can be parsed into multiple levels or dimensions. (Chapter 9 addresses this and related issues.) But equivocal uses of "paradigm" can lead to confusion. As Kuhn reflects:

For it [the sociological sense of the term] I should now like some other phrase, perhaps 'disciplinary matrix': 'disciplinary', because it is common to the practitioners of a specified discipline; 'matrix', because it consists of ordered elements which require individual specification. All of the objects of commitment described in my book [*The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*] as paradigms, parts of paradigms, or paradigmatic would find a place in the disciplinary matrix, but they would not be lumped together as paradigms, individually or collectively. Among them would be: shared symbolic generalizations, like ' $f = ma$ ', or 'elements combine in constant proportion by weight'; shared models, whether metaphysical, like atomism, or heuristic, like the hydrodynamic model of the electric circuit; shared values, like the emphasis on accuracy of prediction . . . and other elements of the sort. Among the latter I would particularly emphasize concrete problem solutions, the sorts of

standard examples of solved problems which scientists encounter first in student laboratories, in the problems at the end of chapters in science texts, and on examinations. If I could, I would call these problem-solutions paradigms, for they are what led me to the choice of the term in the first place. Having lost control of the word, however, I shall henceforth describe them as exemplars.⁶

So Kuhn reserves the term “paradigm” for (i), metaphysical paradigms or metaparadigms, since he later describes (iii) as problem-solutions paradigms or exemplars and (ii) as disciplinary matrixes. Paradigms work in place of theories in certain realms of discourse, and this is especially true of the region of sport, and it is also a realm where multiple paradigms are at work. The rich complexity of “theory” or modeling is captured by the three senses of *paradigm* as they are operative in the sports world. They should be kept in mind as we turn to other methodological issues.

Kuhn conceived of major historical change or revolution as a critical transition from one paradigm to another. He takes “paradigms” to be universally or at least generally recognized achievements that for a time provide model problems and solutions to a community of practitioners. When a paradigm is displaced by another, that transition or revolution alters the perspective of the community that experiences it, and that change of perspective should affect the structure of postrevolutionary thinking, writing, and talking. One such effect is the shift in the distribution of technical literature or concepts, and it is to be studied as a possible index or barometer to the occurrence of revolutions. The popular and technical literature on sport of the seventies and eighties provides such an index for philosophers and other scholars to describe and analyze part of a broad cultural change in the world today. Something like this happened in the world of sport, and this book is an account of that revolution or transformation.

In the nineteenth century, the British or Eton view of sport held sway. It extolled the virtues of amateurism, sportsmanship, and the conventionality of sport. These elements are what I call the old paradigm. In Kuhn’s terms, the old paradigm forms a shared set

of assumptions that we use to perceive the world, to explain it, and to predict its behavior.⁷ As Adam Smith says: "When we are in the middle of the paradigm, it is hard to imagine any other paradigm." The old paradigm of sport gradually changed and developed until the early twentieth century, when profound technological developments and the economic growth associated with it created a series of crises in the world of sport. Late in the nineteenth century, the emerging paradigm had undergone significant change with the growth of professional sports. We began to see the corruption of sport and the eroding of those values, especially moral values, associated with the Eton paradigm in the mid-twentieth century, but it had been threatened earlier. The recent erosion is discussed in the early chapters of this book, especially in a section of chapter 2, in most of 3, and in 4. Communities operating in the middle of the Eton paradigm are basically conservative and reinforce the values of the Establishment. Once a paradigm is in place it doesn't change easily; there is vested interest at stake. People cling to tradition and seek guidance from the past.

The new paradigm in sport to emerge in the mid-seventies came from Oriental philosophy.⁸ In the words of Adam Smith, sport became a Western Yoga. Katsuki Sekida published the long-awaited *Zen Training: Methods and Philosophy* in 1975. A year earlier Tim Gallwey began the "inner game" movement in the semitechnical, popular literature on sport: first it was *The Inner Game of Tennis*, and soon followed books dealing with the inner game of other sports—golf, skiing, running, and so on. Chapter 5 examines this literature and discusses its more important philosophical ideas. In sum, Asian thought made its unexpected popular arrival by way of the sports world. The clash of these two paradigms has led to a transfiguration of sport from a dominance of moral values to one of artistic and aesthetic values. Chapters 8 and 9 discuss these controversial values in sport. This alteration has not only changed our thinking about sport, but changed ourselves. Perfection and excellence came to replace equality and fairness as central concerns. Winning, unfortunately, rather than the performance itself, became the measure of perfection and excellence for many.

However, before we discuss the change in the value structure of the sports world, we need to explore the realm of philosophy, since it is that area which analyzes those structures in our multiple worlds. Chapter 1 discusses the philosophical methodologies employed throughout the book, although I have a few words to say about them here. In 1975, when I started examining philosophical issues in sport, I was startled by the rich diversity and fertility of the problems I encountered. Cases taken from the sports world generate novel ideas and connections rarely seen or appreciated in other worlds, such as the art world. In other words, there are phenomena uniquely or characteristically associated with the world of sport. A flood of philosophical questions enter our discussions when we contemplate these phenomena. Students and colleagues alike have begun to see that sport is indeed an important area for philosophical investigation. I hope to convince skeptics of this claim through the ensuing chapters. Some of the questions that continue to challenge our thinking about the sports world are: What is sport? (This is a fundamental question to which we keep returning.) When does sport cease to be sport and become something else, like criminal conflict or an art form? What is cheating? Can stalling in a tennis match or in a basketball game be considered cheating? Can one cheat at surfing? What are the concepts of winning, losing, competing, and the kinds of knowing necessary in playing? Is "choking" in the psychological sense an intentional action? Upon examination, there appear to be several good answers to these questions. Many of them make up the very fiber of the world of sport.

The controversy that often fills the sports pages of magazines and newspapers can in many cases be traced back to the two paradigms. This book is an attempt to develop these paradigms into perspectives from which sport is viewed and critically examined. Many of the chapters employ "cases" from the pages of magazines and newspapers for philosophical analysis. In large part, "ordinary language" or analytic philosophy is practiced here because of the reliance upon sport-talk.

Ordinary language philosophy is a method of doing philosophy that developed in the mid-twentieth century in England and

quickly spread to the United States. (Wittgenstein and his teacher, Bertrand Russell, plus their students were instrumental in its growth and acceptance by a large part of the philosophical community.) It is still commonly practiced in one form or another among philosophers today here and abroad because it offers a way both of obtaining results and of judging the merits or success of those results. Before this revolution in philosophy, philosophers appealed to introspection, intuition, reason, common sense, experience, or human existence to justify the claims they made about the world. They still do make these appeals, but ordinary language, at least, has provided some ground for agreement, and appeals to that ground could be made along with the more traditional ones. I have been eclectic in my approach, borrowing whatever seemed to be called for at the moment: pragmatism usually dictates my route. Kuhn's idea of using a community's literature as an index for judging important changes in thinking enhances the method of ordinary language philosophy.⁹ Indeed, Russell's dream of a philosophy that would be truly a community endeavor could be realized in practice as *criticism*.¹⁰ Needless to say, there are problems, especially methodological ones, associated with ordinary language philosophy and analytic philosophy generally, but they are inconsequential compared to the results that can be established by such a pragmatic philosophy. The study of the language of a given subject, like sport, yields important truths and interpretations of that subject, from which to develop philosophic perspectives.

So, what is sport? The Wittgensteinian answer is that sport is what commonly passes for sport in the sports pages of our newspapers and magazines. Of course, not all sport-talk is equal; some of it is better, more interesting philosophically, than other kinds of sport-talk in those pages. Philosophers must dig their way through the salary disputes, strikes, polls, trades, scandals, and gossip. They must discover intelligence and ideas in the midst of all these columns. Thus, the way to achieve a degree of moderate success in philosophy is to trace the way that a given phenomenon is experienced and discussed, and to show where and how other philosophers who have analyzed it have gone astray or have hit the mark,

or to provide such an analysis if it is absent. An analysis of cheating, the subject of chapter 3, is a good example of the procedure.

On the basis of sport-talk, and the experiences it interprets, the philosopher's job is to build perspectives. The world of sport may be a better or worse place because of our awareness of these perspectives. But at least our consciousness of them places us in a position from which we can change those conventions and institutions that make up the world of sport. Some of the book's perspectives are broad, embodying major cultural differences, as evidenced in my use of paradigms like those of the East and the West and old and new, while others are more narrowly focused on specific families of sport actions, for example, "choking" in chapter 6.

The world of sport is very much like those of the humanities and the arts. If one wants to see what is going on in the world of sport, one has to be appreciative and sympathetic in order to penetrate what Michael Novak called "the inner life of sport."¹¹ One must look below the surface of games and look at what surrounds them to find what is valuable to analyze and to discuss. For the key to understanding the games lies in seeing them in the proper surroundings or context: think of Wittgenstein's language-games with games themselves, just as he did but in greater detail and with more elaborate analysis. His initial insight led to a development of a field of study. The meaning or sense sport has is discerned from its context. Much of this is missed unless one is "tuned into this world," to use a phrase from the contemporary German philosopher in the existential/phenomenological tradition, Martin Heidegger.¹²

Essentially the same point can be made from the literature of the analytic tradition. In "Logic and Conversation,"¹³ H. P. Grice describes language or discourse in the following manner:

Our talk exchanges do not normally consist of a succession of disconnected remarks, and would not be rational if they did. They are, characteristically, to some degree at least cooperative efforts. Each participant recognizes in them, to some extent, a common purpose or set of purposes, or at least a mutually accepted direction.