

A PHILOSOPHY OF  
**SPORT**

STEVEN CONNOR

# A Philosophy of Sport

Steven Connor



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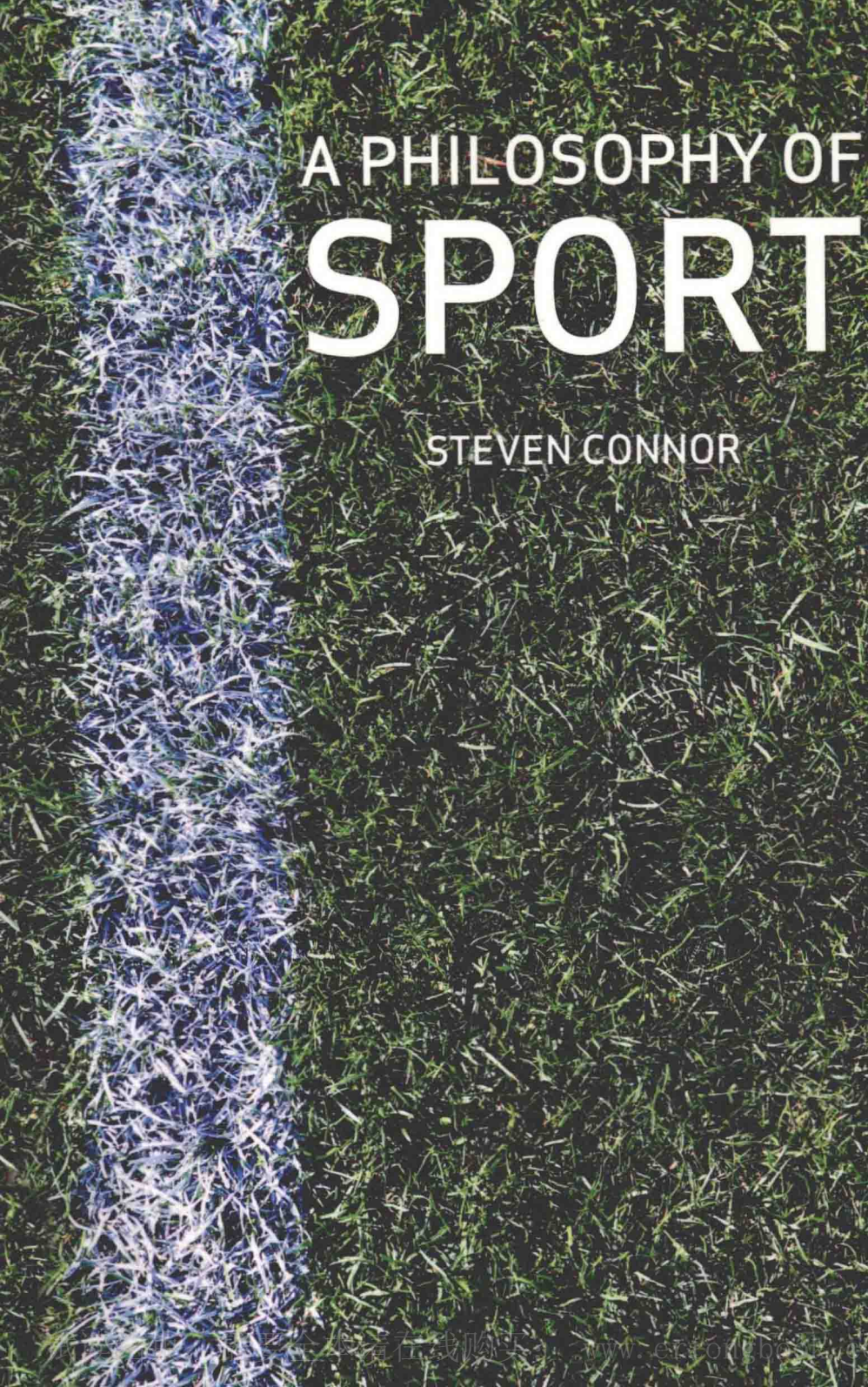
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# Introduction

Sport and philosophy do not, on the face of it, have a very natural affinity with each other. Philosophy, it is popularly supposed, and perhaps even supposed by a few philosophers, is the closest that one may come to the exercise of pure thought, typically, for example, involving the action of thinking about thinking itself. Sport, by contrast, involves the exertion of the body in something like its purest form. Sometimes this gulf between the cerebral and the corporeal can seem violent or tragic, but just as often the maladjustment of mind and body that has impelled so much philosophical speculation has also been the engine of comedy. The sometimes absurd distance of moral philosophy from practical issues is embodied in Tom Stoppard's play *Jumpers* (1972) by representing moral philosophy in terms of gymnastics, and the gap between the physical and the metaphysical is the source of the laughter in the Monty Python sketch that shows an Olympic final between soccer teams of philosophers representing Greece and Germany, the latter led out by their captain, 'Nobby' Hegel. (I should observe here that the game known to the world's billions as 'football', is given the rather prissy name of 'soccer' in this book, in order to distinguish it from the game played magnificently but somewhat more parochially in North America and one or two other places, for which no alternative designation that I can see exists.) As the whistle goes, the philosophers simply begin to stride around the pitch, taking no notice of each other, but extravagantly reasoning and expostulating to the air, the ball sitting undisturbed on the centre spot. Finally, after a sudden revelation bursts in upon Archimedes, the Greek sages put together an attacking move that scythes through the vapouring Germans and ends with

Socrates heading the ball into the German goal. The goal is vigorously disputed by the Germans, as the commentator excitedly explains: 'Hegel is arguing that the reality is merely an a priori adjunct of naturalistic ethics, Kant, via the categorical imperative, is arguing that ontologically it exists only in the imagination, and Marx is claiming that it was off-side.' The comic collision between soccer and philosophy has been enlarged upon in Mark Perryman's *Philosophy Football* and its sequel *Philosophical Football*, which offers transpositions of the intellectual careers of philosophers like Kierkegaard and Derrida (along with somewhat less obvious 'philosophers' like Dmitri Shostakovich and Paul Cézanne) into soccer terms.<sup>1</sup>

And yet, as the fact that the daft head-to-head imagined by Monty Python is played out in the Olympic Stadium may suggest, there are also some odd affinities and parallels between sport and philosophy, perhaps precisely because each is, to slump into philosophical lingo, so obviously the absolute other to the other. This has not always been the case. Sport and philosophy are held, for example, to have had their origin in Ancient Greece, which produced both organized sporting competition, in the form of the Olympic Games – the first taking place around 776 BC and continuing until their suppression by the Christian emperor Theodosius I in AD 393 – and systematized philosophy. In fact, a couple of centuries separates the establishment of the Olympic Games from the beginnings of Western philosophy, in the speculations about the physical world of Thales of Miletus (c. 624–546 BC), Anaximander (c. 611–547 BC), Anaximenes (c. 585–528 BC) and Heraclitus (c. 535–475 BC). But athletic exertion and intellectual enquiry nevertheless seem in this era not to be as obviously opposed to each other as they have become. Plato is said to have been not just a talented poet but also a notable athlete, his name having been changed by his wrestling coach from Aristocles to Plato, from *platon*, meaning 'broad-shouldered'. In his *Rhetoric*, Aristotle defined beauty in sporting terms, as 'having a body fit for endurance both on the racecourse and in contests of strength', and averred that 'pentathletes are most beautiful because they are equipped by nature at one and the same time for brawn and for speed'.<sup>2</sup> The Academy, where Plato taught outside Athens, was originally a grove of olive trees sacred to Athena, which was the site of ceremonial games and races, and many of the meetings of the Academy seem to

have taken place in a gymnasium on the site. Plato's pupil Aristotle taught at the Lyceum, the site of another gymnasium, and the continuing use of the words Gymnasium and Lycée as names for schools in Europe is an ongoing reminder that for the Greeks ΠΕ would have stood for Philosophical as well as Physical Education. *Euthydemus*, a dialogue between Socrates and a couple of tricky sophist philosophers, takes place in the locker-room of the Lyceum, which makes its own satirical comment on the fact that the sophists are said to be

absolutely all-round fighters, not restricted to *physical* fighting as the pair of pancratiast Acarnanian brothers were. [The pancration was a brutal combination of boxing and wrestling.] Supreme physical skill at the sort of fighting which can overpower anyone is only the first of their attainments: they are expert fighters in armour, and can make others the same, for a fee . . . [T]hey have now put the finishing touch to pancratiastic skill. They have now perfected the sole form of fighting they had neglected; they are utterly invincible, so formidable have they become at verbal battle – specifically, refutation of any statement, no matter whether it is true or false.<sup>3</sup>

There is more than a hint of mockery here, of course, but we can nevertheless accept Harold Tarrant's judgement that '[t]here was in fact a strong tendency in the classical period for philosophy to commend and encourage both physical health and the exercise needed to maintain it'.<sup>4</sup> In his *Antidosis*, the Athenian philosopher and orator Isocrates (436–338 BC) compared the teaching of the new discipline of philosophy to the competitive training undertaken by young athletes, affirming that philosophy and athletics

are twin arts – parallel and complementary – by which their masters prepare the mind to become more intelligent and the body to become more serviceable, not separating sharply the two kinds of education, but using similar methods of instruction, exercise, and other forms of discipline. For when they take their pupils in hand, the physical trainers instruct their followers in the postures which have been devised for bodily

contests, while the teachers of philosophy impart all the forms of discourse in which the mind expresses itself . . . Watching over them and training them in this manner, both the teachers of gymnastic and the teachers of discourse are able to advance their pupils to a point where they are better men and where they are stronger in their thinking or in the use of their bodies.<sup>5</sup>

There are few who would make a similar claim now. Among them might be Michel Serres, who dedicates his book *Variations sur le corps* to ‘my gym teachers, my trainers and mountain guides, who taught me how to think’.<sup>6</sup> There is also Heather L. Reid, who proclaims in her essay ‘Socrates at the Ballpark’ that

*Aretē* is the proper and ultimate goal of baseball and philosophy . . . Both activities seek knowledge, ask questions, require an admission of fallibility, encourage the constant and active testing of oneself, and include an obligation to challenge others. Furthermore, these connections are not just accidental or contrived. Baseball is an athletic competition, and like philosophy, it is directed toward the goal of *aretē*, or human excellence.<sup>7</sup>

For the most part, since the Greeks, and until recently, philosophy and philosophers have paid diminishingly little attention to sporting matters. Sport has not been a major or abiding preoccupation of the great philosophers of the Western tradition, or any other tradition, for that matter. Every now and then, of course, we come upon philosophers who happened to be interested in sport. Ortega y Gasset wrote a book on hunting; skiing makes a remarkable and extended appearance late in Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness*; Jacques Derrida was a goalkeeper, and dreamed in his youth of becoming a professional footballer, though never, as far as I know, referred to or made anything of this experience in his writing.<sup>8</sup> But, for the most part, the interest that philosophers have taken in sport is likely to be represented as a private or contingent thing, of no more philosophical significance than the state of the philosopher’s liver or her taste in scarves. Ben Rogers’s biography of A. J. Ayer notes his lifelong devotion to games, and the fact that at an early age ‘he could recite from memory the list

of all the English league football teams in the order in which they stood [and] what he took to be the strongest eleven for every one of the sixteen first-class county cricket teams (a mental list, excluding dozens of rejected players, 174 items long)'.<sup>9</sup> Ayer was also an accomplished cricketer and follower of his local cricket county Middlesex and not-so-local soccer team Tottenham Hotspur, though he stressed the arbitrariness of his passion for these teams – Ben Rogers hints at 'some connection here with his larger sense of the contingency of all our moral commitments – their ultimate groundlessness'.<sup>10</sup> Remembering this, the philosopher Lincoln Allison regrets the influence on him of Ayer's style of philosophy: 'I would compare him to the footballer Jimmy McIlroy of Burnley and Northern Ireland whose casual flicks and arrogant ball-holding made me want to be a genius footballer when my talents were more suited to being a clogger'.<sup>11</sup> Ben Rogers tells the story of a confrontation between Ayer and Mike Tyson, who was forcing his muscled attentions on model Naomi Campbell at a party. When Ayer encouraged him to desist, Tyson rounded on him with the words 'Do you know who the fuck I am? I'm the heavyweight champion of the world'. The 77-year-old Ayer replied: 'And I am the former Wykeham Professor of Logic. We are both pre-eminent in our field; I suggest we talk about this like rational men.'<sup>12</sup> But the point and purchase of such parallels between sport and philosophy is precisely the fizzling little sputters of comic incongruity they effect. Ayer's imprudent face-off with Tyson is perhaps to be seen, not so much as a sporting contest, as a contest between sport and some other kind of game altogether. It is hard to disagree with Paul Weiss's 1969 judgement that 'the opportunity to deal with sport philosophically was let slip away by the Greeks and their followers. From their time to our own, sports have not been taken seriously enough as a source or instance of large truths or first principles.'<sup>13</sup>

Oddly enough, even though sport has been a central preoccupation only of a tiny, if tenacious, minority of philosophers, Weiss's judgement was made just at the moment at which the philosophy of sport began to form and assert itself. There may be very little attention to sport among philosophers in the Western tradition, or Eastern, for that matter, but, since the 1970s, there has been a marked growth in what must be called, for it certainly calls itself, the philosophy of

sport, even though much of it is a kind of second-order application of philosophical theories and arguments developed by philosophers who have not themselves been inclined to see sport in philosophical terms. The *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* began publication in 1973 and was joined in 2007 by the journal *Sport, Ethics and Philosophy*. Among the many titles of the last four decades which hold out the promise of some kind of philosophical enquiry into sport are *The Philosophy of Sport* (1973), *Social Philosophy of Athletics* (1979), *Women, Philosophy, and Sport* (1983), *Sport in a Philosophic Context* (1983), *Toward a Philosophy of Sport* (1985), *Philosophy of Sport and Physical Activity* (1988), *A Philosophy of Sport* (1990) and *The Philosophy of Sport* (2007).<sup>14</sup> Recent years have also seen a growth in the number of writers promising to bring something like philosophical analysis to bear on particular games and sports, with the appearance of titles such as *Baseball and Philosophy* (2004), *Basketball and Philosophy* (2008) and *Football and Philosophy* (2008).<sup>15</sup> Sport has also been given systematic attention by other academic disciplines whose interest has sometimes also seemed in some sense or other philosophical, with the *International Journal of the History of Sport*, *Sociology of Sport Journal*, *Sport in History* and *Sport in Society* all into their third decades of publication.

Curiously, though perhaps I really mean unsurprisingly, the ways in which academic or philosophical writers have tried to bring serious attention to bear on sport have been rather predictable, in that they have tended to recognize in sport only those issues which already count as philosophical. Following Kant, these might be thought loosely to correspond to matters of pure reason (logical categorization), practical reason (morality and ethics) and aesthetics.

They are, I think, exemplified in the three dominant approaches to sport. The first, strongly impelled by Wittgenstein's theory of games, and exemplified in work by Bernard Suits, Graham McFee and Martin A. Bertman, considers sport as a problem of definition or categorization, and typically attends to problems of rules, norms and conventions.<sup>16</sup> Related to this, though it is conducted in a much less formalistic vein, is the substantial literature which has steadily accrued since the 1970s in the history and sociology of sport, which considers sport primarily as a social and historical fact, which is to be understood



against the background of other social facts, political, economic, racial, military, technological.

The second way in which sport has been understood is as a sphere of moral action. This kind of work focuses on ‘why sports morally matter’, or the particular ways in which the sports and games seem to frame problems of justice, fairness and rights.<sup>17</sup> This way of thinking sees sport not as a social fact, but as a theatre of enacted ethical reflection,<sup>18</sup> a way of instancing and examining values, duties and responsibilities, in particular certain ethical problems – the involvement of animals in sport, for instance, or the development of genetic and technological forms of performance enhancement – that seem specific to sport.

Finally, sport can be understood in terms of aesthetics, in terms, that is, of the specific kinds of beauty or value-in-itself that may be held to characterize sporting activity, or specific kinds of response, admiration, joy, and so on, that they may be held to elicit. Hans Gumbrecht’s *In Praise of Athletic Beauty* (2006) is a recent example of this kind of approach.<sup>19</sup> There has been very considerable debate about whether sport can in fact count as art, with writers like David Best being notably, and influentially, doubtful of the aesthetic view of sport, but in a way that has prompted some spirited defences of it.<sup>20</sup>

Naturally enough, there is much that is of interest and value in these three substantial areas of work. But I think it would have to be said that what they illustrate is the fact that no matter how earnestly or honestly philosophical thinking may be brought to bear on sport, the outcome is that sport tends to get reconstrued in philosophical terms. In the end, the tendency of this approach is to treat sport allegorically, as the exemplification or playing out of more general, fundamental or recognizably philosophical issues and implications.

I would like this to be a book that does something else with philosophical analysis. Perhaps because I am not a professional philosopher, and maybe not any other kind either, I have less at stake in making sure that my work is at all points recognisably and respectably philosophical. What I want to do is to bring to bear some perspectives and procedures from certain kinds of philosophy to try to focus as closely and interestingly as I can, and with as little precomprehension as possible, about the kind, or kinds, of thing sport is. This will involve me in not having to be, in fact in actively having not to be, too sure in advance