

INTRODUCTION  
TO THE  
PHILOSOPHY  
OF SPORT

Heather L. Reid

PHILOSOPHY OF SPORT  
ELEMENTS OF PHILOSOPHY OF SPORT

# Introduction to the Philosophy of Sport

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ROWMAN & LITTLEFIELD PUBLISHERS, INC.  
Lanham • Boulder • New York • Toronto • Plymouth, UK

Published by Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.  
A wholly owned subsidiary of The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc.  
4501 Forbes Boulevard, Suite 200, Lanham, Maryland 20706  
www.rowman.com

10 Thornbury Road, Plymouth PL6 7PP, United Kingdom

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Information Available

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Reid, Heather Lynne, 1963-  
Introduction to the philosophy of sport / Heather L. Reid.  
p. cm. -- (Elements of philosophy)  
Includes bibliographical references (p. ) and index.  
ISBN 978-0-7425-7060-3 (cloth : alk. paper) -- ISBN 978-0-7425-7061-0 (pbk. : alk. paper) -- ISBN  
978-0-7425-7062-7 (ebook : alk. paper)  
I. Sports--Philosophy. I. Title.  
GV706.R4395 2012  
796.01--dc23  
2012028670



The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of American National Standard for Information Sciences Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI/NISO Z39.48-1992.

Printed in the United States of America

# Introduction to the Philosophy of Sport

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# Acknowledgments

Morningside College and the Ver Steeg Faculty Development Fund have provided time and support without which this book would not have been possible. I am likewise grateful to my teachers, students, and colleagues for their encouragement and inspiration, especially those who offered specific help with this manuscript: Susan Brownell, Daniel Campos, Christos Evangeliou, Warren Fraleigh, John Gleaves, Drew Hyland, Scott Kretchmar, Bill Morgan, Jim Parry, Graham Priest, and Larry Theobald. I am particularly indebted to Mark Holowchak and Jesús Ilundáin who made detailed comments and suggestions on the entire manuscript that significantly improved its quality and clarity. Thanks also to Sherry Swan for her endless administrative support, even from overseas.

# Introduction

## *Why Study the Philosophy of Sport?*

I must confess from the start that I have done some extraordinary things for sport. We can leave aside the hours training in the rain, the nights spent on strangers' couches, the thousands of miles on interstate highways, and the scarred knees and elbows of my cycling career—for these might be explained by the enthusiasm of youth and the intoxicating dream of competing in the Olympic Games. But what about the things I've done as an adult, as a philosophy professor trained in logic and value theory, presumably able to distinguish what is important from what is not? I have curled my toes into a rough, stone starting block and then raced barefoot across the ancient track of Greece's Nemean Games. I have ridden my road bicycle up a steep alpine climb and then waited shivering on the side of the mountain to cheer the exhausted racers of the Giro d'Italia as they struggled past. Crazier than that, I then rode the bike back down the hill, threading my way through the crowd of wobbling spectators, my thin tires skittering on the bumpy dirt road. Where does this come from? Why do I care? Why did I get up at four in the morning to watch an Olympic opening ceremony from Italy? These may seem like crazy things, but I am not crazy, and I am hardly alone in my passion for sport. There are reasons behind these passions, and they are not trivial—neither is sport.

Sport is a significant human activity. Its origins reach back into the depths of history and its contemporary practice reaches across cultures and continents. Sport, furthermore, is a meaningful human activity. Some people devote large portions of their lives to it, many people practice it on a regular basis, and most people at least watch it on television—especially when the Olympic Games come around. It is surprising, given the importance so many

people attribute to sport, that philosophers have more or less neglected it as a subject of serious inquiry. Despite sport's metaphysical relationship with art and play, despite its ethical association with virtue and fairness, despite its political connection with education and democracy, and even despite Socrates's comparison of himself to an Olympic athlete,<sup>1</sup> serious philosophical discussion of sport did not take hold until the latter part of the twentieth century. There are probably good—or, at least interesting—explanations for this. But the purpose of this book is not to discover why sport hasn't been studied philosophically in the past. Rather, its purpose is to demonstrate why sport should be studied philosophically now and in the future.

We can learn much from the philosophical study of sport—not just about sport but also about ourselves, about society, and about philosophy. Because sport has important metaphysical, ethical, and sociopolitical dimensions, philosophers of sport must engage with all of these philosophical disciplines in order to study it properly. And because students are often familiar with and curious about sport, the philosophy of sport is an excellent platform from which to launch into the general study of philosophy. Students' experience as athletes, or even simply playing games, provides a foundation for discussion of metaphysical issues such as the relationship between games and play, mind and body, and even sport and art. Sport can also serve as a moral laboratory in which theories like deontology, consequentialism, and virtue ethics can be experienced and tested in a controlled environment. Finally, sport is a social experience through which we encounter political issues such as democratic responsibility, social categorization, and the challenges of globalization.

A good philosophical understanding of sport can also help teachers and scholars to communicate difficult philosophical concepts. Philosophers as varied as Plato, Thomas Hobbes, and Jacques Derrida have used sports metaphors to explain important parts of their philosophy. As a young scholar of ancient philosophy, it was Plato's use of athletic examples and metaphors that connected with my own sports experience and gave me insight into his theory of moral education, the subject of my doctoral dissertation. As a professor, sport philosophy has pushed me beyond the comfort zone of my academic specialty and invited me to interact with scholars and concepts from across the philosophical spectrum—not to mention related disciplines such as archaeology, history, and kinesiology. Just as sport improves athletes by subjecting them to challenges, philosophy of sport improves scholars by challenging them to think seriously about this rich and complex human practice.

In this book I have endeavored to provide an introduction to the philosophical study of sport that not only covers the charted terrain but also looks up to survey the horizon and suggest future paths for this very young discipline. I have tried to create a structure that reflects the traditional division of



philosophy into metaphysical, ethical, and sociopolitical issues and, as much as possible, to link them together. For example, chapter 3, which explores sport's metaphysical connection with play, is linked with chapter 8, which uses play as a consequentialist criterion in sport ethics, and also chapter 12, which applies these (and other) discussions to the issue of sport in education. Likewise, chapter 4 links sport and games, chapter 9 relates games deontologically to fairness, and chapter 13 applies the concept of fairness to the use of social categories as classifications in sport.

I have avoided the temptation to organize chapters around particular issues such as cheating, doping, violence, commercialism, college sports, Title IX, and so on. These and many more specific topics—as well as many different sports—are instead sprinkled throughout the text in their appropriate philosophical contexts. Just as a beginning athlete should try several sports and strive for general fitness, a beginning philosopher of sport should study several issues and try for a general understanding of the subject. A good philosophical analysis of something like the amateur regulations in intercollegiate athletics, for example, depends on a political understanding of the purpose of the activity, which demands sensitivity to the ethical issues involved, issues that are based on the metaphysics of the practice. This book begins at the roots of sport philosophy, with its ancient history and Olympic heritage, and then works its way through metaphysics, ethics, and finally politics to arrive, hopefully, at the flower of understanding.

Although I carve up the philosophy of sport according to traditional philosophical divisions, my aim is to achieve a whole much greater than the sum of its parts. What we have in this book is not only an outline of this fledgling academic discipline and a summary of much of its pioneering work but also an invitation to join the conversation by connecting these issues to one's own athletic experience. It will be obvious that some topics have attracted more interest than others; in several cases, I have not been able to provide a full survey of the important literature on that subject. It will be obvious as well that I have my own perspective on the field. I have inevitably left out essays, books, or even entire topics that some of my colleagues might deem essential. I can only reply that I have done my best to provide an organized and readable introduction to the discipline that looks both at its past and toward its future, but most of all inspires the reader to think about sport philosophically here and now. Sport is a significant human activity that, beyond its intrinsic worth, has enormous educational potential. It is only by achieving a deeper understanding of sport that we can help it to function in service of the human good.

*Siracusa, Sicily*  
*April 2012*

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# I

## History and Heritage

We begin with history and heritage not only because philosophical studies should be informed by the history of their subjects but also because there is an important link between the history of sport and of philosophy. The obvious connection is that the two practices share a common birthplace in ancient Greece, but there is also a sense in which the knowledge-seeking spirit characteristic of philosophy was originally exhibited in Olympic-style sport. Before the Greeks got hold of it, athleticism seems to have functioned primarily as a political tool for demonstrating a leader's divine favor and worthiness to lead. We find this function also in Homer, as when Agamemnon claims victory in the javelin event or Odysseus takes back his kingdom by winning an archery contest and stringing the royal bow. But Homer also describes Olympic-style sport, in which the outcome is uncertain and left to the contest to decide—at the risk of challenging existing social hierarchy.

I call this familiar style of sport "Olympic" because I believe it was competing claims to honor among the diverse tribes present at the Panhellenic sanctuary of ancient Olympia that motivated the use of a fair and impartial mechanism for choosing someone to light the sacrificial flame—the mechanism of a footrace. Just as early Olympic sport sought answers through impartial testing rather than preexisting belief, early philosophy sought answers about the world through the testing of ideas rather than the passive acceptance of mythology or orthodox beliefs. Just as sport is essentially blind to social assumptions and distinctions, philosophy sought to liberate truth from cultural tradition. Sport revealed furthermore that excellence could be trained and was not merely a matter of birth, perhaps inspiring philosophers

like Socrates and Plato to find ways of training virtue through competitive debate. From these roots sprang also the phenomenon of democracy, and its values remain embedded in sport. Philosophy, democracy, and the Olympic Games are commonly counted among Greece's gifts to the modern world. The spirit of sport is visible in all of them.

The Olympic Games were revived at the end of the nineteenth century as a deliberate expression of philosophy. This philosophy, called Olympism, was not based on the ideas of Plato and Aristotle, so much as the beliefs of the European Enlightenment. Furthermore, it was the work of not professional philosophers but rather a group of idealistic enthusiasts, led by the French pedagogue Pierre de Coubertin. Its lack of analytic rigor and precision raises the question of whether Olympism is really a philosophy, but it may also explain Olympism's success as the guiding principle of such a complex and multicultural organization as the Olympic Movement.

Taking a flexible approach we can discern in Olympism the main branches of philosophy: metaphysics, ethics, and politics. Olympism's metaphysics posit a conception of an ideal human that exalts body as well as mind and emphasizes balance and harmony, but the portrait is not so specific as to exclude any gender or ethnicity. Olympism's ethics refer to universal fundamental principles without spelling out what they are—a weakness that turns into a strength when facing the challenges of multiculturalism. Sport provides the common culture that unites the diverse individuals in the Olympic Movement, and the structure of sport reflects such moral values as equality of opportunity and the pursuit of excellence. Sport also serves as the foundation for Olympism's political goal of peace. By requiring people to put aside their differences, treat one another as equals, and tolerate their differences, the Olympic festival creates a model for peaceful coexistence that depends not on a civilizing authority but rather on cooperation. Olympism, to be sure, is a thin philosophy, but it is one intimately connected to sport that has withstood the test of time.

## *Chapter One*

# **The Ancient Hellenic Heritage**

Imagine yourself at the conclusion of a conference championship game in college basketball. The gymnasium is packed full with euphoric fans, the victorious players writhe on the floor in glee, and the coaches shake hands and exchange solemn words as the ritual of cutting the nets down begins. Now imagine that the microphone is given to a famous sports commentator who has been asked to say a few words about the historic victory. He stands at center court as a hush comes over the stands. He looks up toward the heavens and then begins his speech:

Creatures of a day!  
What is someone? What is no one?  
A dream of a shadow is man.<sup>1</sup>

These poetic-philosophical lines are part of an ancient Greek athlete's victory hymn, but how out of place would they seem in sports today? The arena may stand on a university campus and the building may be full of students, but philosophers, poets, and other intellectuals are usually sequestered in ivy-covered stone buildings—they don't wander into the gymnasium. If we were in ancient Greece, however, the philosophers would be running the gymnasium and poets would staff the sports information office. Athletics and philosophy were close enough in ancient Greece that the great poet Pindar not only described men as dreams of shadows, he nicknamed Olympia the "Mistress of Truth."<sup>2</sup>

It is not just coincidence that philosophy, democracy, and Olympic-style sport share a common birthplace in ancient Greece. There are important conceptual resemblances between these three things, and it should not be forgotten that the eldest of the family members is, in fact, athletics. The conventional date for the founding of the Olympic Games is 776 bce, al-

though the first running contest there happened much earlier. Philosophy arrived on the scene hundreds of years later, sometime in the sixth century bce, while democracy showed up even later, near the end of that century. The resemblance between these three practices begins with their ability to sort out competing claims to virtue, truth, and governance, without capitulating to existing social hierarchies or resorting to the use of violent force. Indeed, sport seems to have helped the ancient Hellenes to question the validity of natural aristocracy and the truth value of mythology. These seeds of doubt were sown partly by intercultural exchange between the diverse tribes and intellectual ideas present at the Olympic Games, as well as the foreign cultures contacted through overseas trade. The evidence that even lower-class athletes could achieve excellence through training likely inspired the educational activities of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. Sport was not the subject of serious philosophical reflection in ancient Greece, but philosophy itself was closely linked with sport.

## HEROES AND HIERARCHIES

When looking for the origins of what we now call sport, we arrive inevitably at the epics of Homer. The *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are foundational in many ways, but their often overlooked accounts of athletics offer important clues not only for understanding the nature of sport today but also for providing perspective on how sport has changed since those ancient times. Homer describes athletics more or less as they existed in his own era, around the eighth century bce, though he purports to be recounting events that happened much earlier, around the twelfth century bce. And in fact, Homer's contests have much in common with the athletic practices of earlier civilizations such as the Mesopotamians, Egyptians, Minoans, and Hittites. The most important commonality is the perceived link between athleticism and human virtue, specifically the worthiness to lead.

As early as the third millennium bce, the athletic ability of ancient leaders like Gilgamesh of Uruk was taken as evidence of their divine favor or at least partially divine status. A hero, in ancient parlance, was part deity and part mortal. For instance, the Greek hero Heracles (Latin: Hercules) was the son of the god Zeus and the mortal woman Alcmene. The Mesopotamian king Gilgamesh is likewise described in the epic that bears his name as two-thirds man and one-third god.<sup>3</sup> Egyptian Pharaohs were also thought to be the children of gods. Indeed, the link between divinity and kingship survives right through the Roman emperors (who often had their own cults) to the seventeenth-century notion of the divine right of kings. Belief in a ruler's divinity was no doubt of great comfort to societies that attributed most natu-

ral phenomena to the capricious will of gods. But even modern politicians like to associate themselves with the divine; they advertise their religious beliefs and invoke divine names during speeches. The conceptual link between athleticism and divinity also persists in modern-day descriptions of athletes as “heroes,” or even euphemistically as “gods.”

What is remarkable about ancient leaders is that they used athleticism to prove their divine association and royal desert, or at least they tried to. As one might expect, the reality of a leader’s athleticism did not always live up to the propaganda. The kind of live demonstrations we expect of great athletes today were at least carefully controlled and often completely avoided. Indirect evidence for a leader’s greatness was preferred, such as the (apparently embellished) story about the Sumerian king Shulgi, who is claimed in a song to have run one hundred miles in a single day with rain and hailstones “lashing at his back.”<sup>4</sup> In other cases ancient kings’ “athletic feats” turn out to be staged game hunts, fixed boxing matches, or ritual acts of little difficulty. At Egypt’s Festival of Sed (circa 2600 bce), the pharaohs ran uncontested around two posts placed a mere fifty-five meters apart—hardly proof of superhuman athleticism.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps this ritual was a reenactment of some ancestral feat like Shulgi’s, but it is hard to believe that it could convince skeptical subjects of their leader’s divinity. Then again, perhaps there was simply not much doubt—or not much point in doubting—the king’s worthiness to lead. By the time of Homer’s epics, however, that had definitely changed.

The funeral games dedicated to Patroclus in the twenty-third book of Homer’s *Iliad* end with a scene eerily reminiscent of ancient sporting practices. King Agamemnon is named winner of the javelin event and awarded the prize without ever making a throw. As supreme leader, his superior athleticism is presumed and honored without having to be subject to a test. This turn of events contrasts sharply with the overall theme of the poem, however, which revolves around a dispute over Agamemnon’s worthiness to lead and his refusal to subject his authority to any kind of challenge. What we have in *Iliad* is a novel situation in which many kings—Achilles, Odysseus, and their peers are all the supreme leaders of their individual tribes—have been removed from their familiar homeland hierarchies and asked to join together as equals to fight for a common cause. The situation provokes competing claims to *aretē* (excellence or virtue), or a “crisis of value,” in which each man’s claim to social honor must be renegotiated.<sup>6</sup> The athletic games staged in book 23 provide a kind of model for that: a relatively open process for (re)distributing honor according to merit.

In the *Iliad*’s games we recognize many familiar aspects of sport: a (relatively) open call for voluntary participation, a common understanding of the rules, a uniform starting line, responsible referees, the resolution of disputes about fairness, the selection of victors, and the awarding of prizes. There are



also important differences: only members of the upper echelon are allowed to compete, prizes are not always awarded according to contest results, and gods and goddesses interfere with the contest to help their favorites and hinder rivals. The competitive spirit is clearly recognizable, however, and as it does today, the competitive nature of Homeric society extends well beyond sport. The Homeric conception of *aretē*, or more precisely, *aristeia*, is inherently competitive: it can be neatly expressed in the oft-quoted phrase “being the best and outdoing all others.”<sup>7</sup> What is revolutionary in Homer in contrast with earlier forms of sport, however, is that one’s *aretē* is not presumed on the basis of social status or ancestry; rather, it must be publicly demonstrated through action—in war, in government, or even in athletic contests. In this context, sport begins to resemble in some measure a form of inquiry rather than propaganda, and so it begins to acquire what I call its “philosophical” or truth-seeking nature.<sup>8</sup>

### ANCIENT OLYMPIC PHILOSOPHY

Like philosophy, sport should begin in wonder and uncertainty.<sup>9</sup> When contestants line up on a starting line in Homer’s *Iliad*, there is usually uncertainty—an authentic question about who will prevail. In the *Odyssey*, the Homeric epic that describes Odysseus’s decade-long return home after the Trojan War, sport is used to prove *aretē* and worthiness to lead. The journey-worn hero overcomes doubt about his nobility by performing athletic feats on the island of the Phaeacians and wins back his queen and his kingdom in Ithaca by triumphing in an archery contest.<sup>10</sup> So, in the *Odyssey* there is doubt, but sport still affirms the aristocratic status quo in a way not so very far removed from the earlier “feats” of Egyptian and Mesopotamian kings. It was with the advent of the ancient Olympic Games that sport would seriously dissociate itself from man-made hierarchies and exhibit authentic philosophical wonder and uncertainty, by leaving questions about virtue and worthiness up to the contest itself.

The motivation for this change was ultimately religious. Long before athletes began to compete at Olympia, the site was a Panhellenic sanctuary that honored all the gods and served all the tribes of Greece. As in Homer’s *Iliad*, the bringing together of diverse tribes for a common cause—even the religious cause of worship—was not without its conflicts. Each tribe brought its own social hierarchy to the officially neutral sanctuary, so when the time came to select someone to light the sacrificial flame, the choice was not as easy as simply pointing at the king. Furthermore, it mattered to everyone that someone pleasing to the god was chosen for this honor because the benefits believed to be provided by the gods—such as successful harvests and recov-