Sport and Life

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I am not (nor, sadly, ever have been) an exponent of any sport at a level above the barely competent, unlike some other writers in this collection. Moreover, I have long since abandoned efforts at engaging in sport and now merely watch it, again with no special powers of analysis or understanding. But one's level of competence and understanding do not, fortunately, determine the importance in one's life of things, and sport has played a large, and I think largely enhancing, role in my life. So I am writing as someone with a lifelong interest in it with the aim of examining this thing, sport, trying to articulate what it is that I have been engaged with, and what it has given me. I am assuming that my own attitudes towards sport are not eccentric or unusual and so these reflections growing out of my own experiences will resonate with others. In effect I am engaging here in what is normally thought of as central philosophical task, that of trying to live an examined life – a life in which one of its components is to reflect hard on the nature and value of some of its other components. It would be, of course, a terrible mistake to think, as some philosophers are supposed to do, that an unexamined life is *not worth living*, an attitude which consigns the vast majority of lives to worthlessness, but we are, probably, committed to thinking that the reflective examination of our lives represents something good.

I want to begin by clarifying, to some extent, the questions, or at least the tasks, that I aim to pursue under my rather portentous title. There is a use of 'life' in, for example, talk of 'work/life' balance in which life contrasts with work and, perhaps, with other things as well. But there is also a very general use of 'life' in which someone's life is what he or she does or endures while alive. In that use, which is mine, one's 'work' is one part or aspect of one's life and cannot be contrasted with it. In this sense of 'life', also, it is not something we can be without and so need to 'get'; all we can get is a *better* life. Clearly, in that general sense of 'life', sport is a part of many people's lives, mine included, in some form or other. But we tend to evaluate elements in lives as making the life good or perhaps bad, or perhaps as simply neutrally filling it. I want to ask, therefore, of what value sport is to our lives? In fact, this question rather hovers over my discussion and re-enters more explicitly near

doi:10.1017/S1358246113000337 ©The Royal Institute of Philosophy and the contributors 2013

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246113000337 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the end. There is a second and related question; what does engagement with sport offer us? What do we get out of sport? What attracts us to sport? Or, perhaps, what do we see in sport? The first question is, as we might portentously put it, a question in value theory; the second group of questions are high level psychological ones. I pursue this psychological sort of question most of the time. The two sorts of questions are not unrelated of course. Part of their relation is as follows. If one can list what sport gives us, say, P1 to Pn, then if sport is of value it must presumably be because amongst those things Pi to Pn there is something that is good for us. The answers to the psychological question will then contain part of the answer to the value question. But to nominate something as value-enhancing it must earn that title in some way and what qualifies something as *value-enhancing* is not at all easy to say. I shall not attempt to say here. I have, though, a third aim. Even if I do not really succeed in answering my first two questions in a way that strikes people as plausible, I hope that I shall say some true things about sport which will at least shed some light on what this thing we call 'sport' actually is, and which, I am assuming, everyone reading this has an interest in.

I should add that I am not interested here in looking at, or thinking critically about, the current status of sport in popular culture, something that raises many questions. I want, rather, to focus on and capture what might be called the *basic nature* of sport and what it offers us.

Since I am at this point engaged in specifying aims, and hence, in a sense, locating motivations for the inquiry, I want to take a small swipe at the significant figure of Professor Hans Gumbrecht, the famous American literary theorist, who has written a fascinating book on the nature of sport, entitled *In Praise of Athletic Beauty*.[1] His manifest aim (or part of it) is to provide some sort of defence of his own life-long passion for sport in the face of the rather weighty scepticism about it that he senses amongst his academic and intellectual colleagues. I share Gumbrecht's desire to engage with the attitude that he encounters in academics. That attitude is not simply a lack of interest in sport, on encountering which one can simply say 'Well, I can talk about something else, you know', but of adding, by insinuation, the thought – and proud of it! The insinuation in that little coda, that an interest in sport is really a sign of a misspent life, should not go unchallenged. Gumbrecht's text is one from which I have learned much and with which I shall engage in the

[1] Gumbrecht (2006). I am very grateful to Professor Annette Richards (of Cornell University) for bringing Gumbrecht's book to my attention.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246113000337 Published online by Cambridge University Press

course of this talk, but at this point I wish to distance myself from one idea he floats. When Gumbrecht starts his investigation he motivates it by conjecturing that engaging in such an investigation might heighten his enjoyment of sport. As he puts it: 'Would this attraction become more intense if he knew its reason? Perhaps, … sports do not need this kind of wordy blessing. Still, he would not want to exclude the possibility that trying to understand his fascination may intensify his pleasure…'[2] To understand this passage you need to know that Gumbrecht is, for some reason, writing about himself in the third person. The 'he' is him, Gumbrecht. In response, I am tempted to say that given how intense Gumbrecht's interest in sport has already, by the point where this passage occurs, been conveyed as being it is most unlikely that it *could* become more intense. But more significantly, I suggest, we should not think that philosophical reflections about sport are, or need to be, motivated by the prospect of enhancing our enjoyment of sport; they are, rather, motivated by our shared desire to understand and evaluate ourselves and our lives, doing which is *itself* of intense fascination to us.

1. Sport

I want to begin with the question – what is sport? This is, I believe a rather difficult question. The difficulty is compounded by the evident fact that the word 'sport' is used in different ways. When Lear says that the Gods kill us for their sport, he is using 'sport' simply to mean what they get fun from doing. We need to stipulate that we are using 'sport' in the sense in which rugby and cricket and sports, and where a group of people can engage in or *play* sport. Even here, though, we can start by noting that the word 'sport' has that often encountered ambiguity between mass noun and count noun. We can say that Martin does a lot of sport and David does a little sport. We can also say that Martin enjoys three sports and David only one. Can we say, though, what it is to engage in sport? It is natural to start with the following proposal; to engage in sport is to engage in competitive *games* in which the activities which the games involve are *strongly physical*. According to this proposal the notion of sport grows out of the overlap of the more general notions of competitive games and of strongly physical activity. Giving the talk of sport this focus excludes games which are not strongly physical – such as chess and bridge. It also excludes

[2] Gumbrecht (2006), 16.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246113000337 Published online by Cambridge University Press

strongly physical activities that are not games – such as fell walking, rock climbing, or going to a gym. Now, what makes this proposal attractive is that it fits many prominent examples of what we call sport, examples such as football, cricket, rugby, and the myriad examples of sport engaged in during the Olympic Games. They are undoubtedly physically intense and competitive. This proposal also excludes some examples a definition should exclude. However, it is not a totally precise elucidation and it needs, as we shall see, to be revised. I want to illustrate it and to improve it a bit by considering some difficult cases.

Consider first ancient gladiatorial fighting in the Coliseum. Was that sport? It was, of course, intense physical activity, relying on skill and bravery, and there were, in its context, what we might call 'winners and losers', and, further, watching it (and no doubt taking part in it) would have been terribly exciting, but it was not a game, and so according to the present elucidation, not sport.[3] It was rather a matter of a life and death struggle, a struggle to survive, which spectators enjoyed watching. I think that this implication of the suggested definition is not unacceptable. Gladiatorial fighting should not be counted as sport.

But there are three worries. First, it is not clear that engaging in sport requires that one is taking part in a *competitive game*. One possible example is fox hunting. That is not a competitive game but it is standardly called a sport. However, it may be suggested that in a certain sense there is competition in fox-hunting. It is a case of man versus beast. There is, in a sense, a struggle in that activity between individuals. Normally sport involves a struggle between humans, but sometimes between humans and other animals. Maybe, then, this sort of example does not show that sport need not be competitive. The second difficulty for the proposal concerns the notion of 'intense physical activity'. This is not a clear notion, but further there seem to be what we call sports which do not involve intense physical activity. Examples are darts, snooker, curling, and perhaps golf as played by many people. In fact, there are two sorts of case here. There are sports where the physical effort involved even performing them at the top level is not intense, (such as darts) and there are non-intense ways of doing sport (such as golf played by retired, or even non-retired, academics). These examples seem to show that neither

[3] This case brings to our attention that we talk of winners and losers in contexts where it is not a game, properly speaking, that is going on. Talk of winners and losers relates to success or failure in fulfilment of goals, and the distribution of gains and loses.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246113000337 Published online by Cambridge University Press

feature in the suggested elucidation is strictly necessary for sport. The third difficulty is that the definition fits activities that we would probably *not* call 'sport'. Think of computer games in which participants have to employ intense physical activity, for example, pressing buttons very quickly and moving levers, etc.

In relation to the last point I want to suggest that we can draw a distinction between games where the rules explicitly relate to physical achievements, such a getting a ball into a confined area, and games where the rules are specified in other terms, for example, killing a dragon in a computer game. My suggestion is that even when taking part in the latter games involves physical efforts, they do not count as sports. In contrast, the former do.

Most sports if done well involve intense physical activity, but not all do, and you can engage in sport without being intense at it. An alternative attempt at specifying the type of activity that is necessary in sport is that it is physical activity where there can be degrees of skill and ability. Throwing a dart with accuracy is something at which some people are very skilful, despite its not being in any normal sense intense. So perhaps the physical activity in a sport must be such that one can become skilful at it. Another way of putting this is to require that the physical activity be, in some sense, difficult, hence different skill levels determine outcomes. A second striking fact is the extent to which the activity in sport involves controlling the movement of objects in space. Sometimes the moving objects are the participants themselves, as in a race. At other times they are projectiles, such as darts, arrows, and balls. Sometimes the controlled moving objects are things on which or in which the participant is travelling – as in horse racing or car racing, both of which are counted as sports.

So we end up with the following characterisation of sport in the relevant sense; sport is a *competitive physical activity engaged in as a game* in which the there is a goal *where the achievement of the goal involves physical difficulty in controlling the spatial movement of objects of various kinds*.[4]

2. Sport, Games and Rules

I have done the best that I can, here and now, to elucidate the general notion of sport. What I want to do, though, is to focus my discussion

[4] The physical intensity of a lot of sport flows from the fact that competition about winning pushes players to participate with intensity, to which other players respond by themselves becoming as, or even more, intense.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246113000337 Published online by Cambridge University Press

on sports which are both competitive games and relatively physically intense. I accept that that is not the whole of what is called 'sport', but this kind of sport forms a large and undoubtedly central case. It is what people tend to think about when the nature and value of sport is discussed. If I can say something about it then it will amount to an account of the bulk of sport.

We do not need at this stage to say anything about the general notion of relatively intense physical action (perhaps involving control of moving objects, including the agent, and potentially gradable in terms of levels of skill). We can simply take those notions for granted. But what of the notion of a (competitive) game? In the previous section I simply relied on a shared understanding of the idea of a game, and of engaging in an activity as a game. But the idea of a game requires some attention. At this point there comes into view one of the most famous sayings in 20th-century Philosophy – Wittgenstein's remark that the concept of a game is a family resemblance concept. This is, I believe, Wittgenstein's main contribution to the philosophy of sport.[5]

So this is a suitable place and time to pause and reflect on Wittgenstein's famous thesis. Wittgenstein's attitude to the concept of a game is two sided. There is a negative side – according to which there is nothing in common to all games. Clearly Wittgenstein means – common to all and only games – he cannot be ruling out that all games have some highly general common feature that maybe all human activity shares. In fact, when Wittgenstein looks for something in common he actually mentions as a candidate being amusing, but being amusing could not represent something that all and only games share, for things other than games are amusing! Despite this being his candidate, Wittgenstein cannot really be looking for such common feature. The positive side is that the notion of a game should be thought of as a family resemblance concept – it gets applied on the basis of a 'complicated network of similarities, overlapping and crisscrossing'.[6]

[5] It might be said that Wittgenstein's remarks about rules could equally well be called a contribution to the philosophy of sport. As a general comment that is true. The chief problem is that it is very hard to say what Wittgenstein is proposing about rules. On one interpretation Wittgenstein is suggesting that rules cannot really tell us what to do. Given the centrality of rules to sport it is to be hoped that Wittgenstein, so interpreted, is not right.

[6] Wittgenstein (1953) sections 66 and 67.

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Now, why does Wittgenstein hold the 'nothing in common' thesis about the term 'game'? We should note this. The nothing-in-common thesis is not equivalent to the thesis that 'game' is indefinable. In the first place, there might be some linguistic formula that could be regarded as equivalent to 'game' but if it, the second expression, worked by picking out its extension without latching onto something in common between all the cases, its existence would not count against the 'nothing-in-common' thesis. For example, though this is not plausible, it may be that all and only games are played; so one could define games as things that people play, but if 'play' itself did not work by picking out a common feature this sort of definability would not refute the 'nothing in common' claim. On the other hand if it were true that 'game' is indefinable that would not mean there was not anything in common to all and only games, it would simply be that 'game' is our term picking that out, and we have no other terms that pick out the common feature. Wittgenstein's reason is that he looks across the set of games and cannot find anything in common between all of them. Now, it is clear that as a procedure, or method, this is not conclusive; failure to find any such thing may simply be an oversight, rather than there being nothing to detect. Further, it is perhaps not entirely clear what Wittgenstein is looking for. What amounts to there being something in common for these purposes? For example, should we say there is something in common to all siblings? Well, we might say; they are all either brothers or sisters. But is that something in common between them all, or is it not something in common but rather two things neither of which is common between all? The answer to that is not clear. There is a further consequence of Wittgenstein's method of argument. It is quite clear that Wittgenstein is happy with the idea of there being something in common between different things, and this means that he cannot be thinking of the idea of family resemblance terms as somehow the solution to the problem of universals, a reading that once had its supporters. He would have to face the question as to what is implied by there being something in common between different objects, and cannot sidestep it.[7] Further, we should not simply accept the idea that the truth of the 'nothing in common' thesis, if it is true, would imply the 'family resemblance' thesis. The relation appears to be more complex than that. For example, it may be that there is nothing in common because we apply the term 'game' to

[7] I do not mean to imply that there are important metaphysical implications of that.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246113000337 Published online by Cambridge University Press

two sorts of case, both of which are tightly definable, but which are linked by their sharing a certain feature. This candidate structure would sustain the 'nothing in common' claim but not the 'family resemblance' claim.

So perhaps the jury is still out on Wittgenstein's main thesis in the philosophy of sport.[8] The next step in the debate here would be to propose and test out suggestions about what might be in common to all games. That step will not be taken here.[9]

Now, Wittgenstein's stress on the nothing in common thesis is, for him, linked to the idea that generalisations across the category in question, that of games, cannot be found or given. It maybe we cannot propound much in the way of tight generalisations about games *as a whole*, but we can, I want to suggest advance intelligible generalisations about *sport* as I am understanding it. I want, in order to illustrate this, to engage in a sort of armchair derivation of the character of sport as we know it based on some obvious features of, what I might call, our human condition.

(1) Sports have rules; the rules specify what is permissible in the conduct of the sport, and they specify what counts as winning. These rules in effect define individual sports. There is of course some looseness here, in that the rules of a game can be modified, but it is still treated as the same game. In my lifetime the LBW rule in cricket has been changed, but it remains the game of cricket. Further, and obviously, participants need to know what the rules are. Engagement in sport, therefore, depends, on understanding.

(2) The achievement that counts as winning normally has no significance except as its being treated as winning for that game. Thus, consider football. Managing to get a round ball into a particular area (the goal) has no point or significance in itself. This is what leads some people, critics of sport, to regard

[8] I am inspired to push against Wittgenstein's dictum by a story that C. B. Martin once told me. He wrote a paper in which he simply repeated Wittgenstein's thesis about games, and sent it to be typed. When they typist handed it back to him she said that Wittgenstein was wrong and she offered a unified characterisation of games which Martin could not fault. Sadly Martin had forgotten the characterisation when he told me the story.

[9] I regret that the analysis by Bernard Suits of games in his book *The Grasshopper; Games, Life and Utopia* was not known to me when writing this, nor were the very illuminating discussions of games and sport in Hurka (2006) and Tasioulas (2006). I hope to consider their ideas elsewhere.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246113000337 Published online by Cambridge University Press

sport as pointless. They say that there is no point in striving to achieve a pointless goal. This attitude overlooks two obvious things. The first is that these activities derive a significance from being that which counts as winning in relation to the game. And I believe that very few people are blind to competition and its link to motivation. I am relying here on the fact that humans are competitive and understand and can be motivated by the goal of winning. These psychological facts themselves of course need explaining but for the purposes of explaining the role of sport in our lives we can take them as give, as part of the psychological background which can be appealed to in explaining sport. But, second, human motivation does not really respect some general notion of pointfulness. Sir Edmund Hillary plainly wanted to be the first man (or one of the first two) to climb Everest, and no one is really puzzled about that desire and his devoting massive resources to realising it, but one is hard pressed to discern what the point of his being the first man is.[10] It represents a desired and motivating goal that is not mysterious to us, but where no real general point to achieving the goal can be discerned.

(3) The physical processes that the sporting games that we play involve, such things as running very fast, or swimming fast, or kicking a ball, or catching and running with a ball etc., reflect the natural world-involving activities that the human body is capable of, and they are all activities that we can develop skills in. We are creatures who can run and catch and kick and throw and swim, etc. This reflects our shared physical nature and capabilities. Two things follow. First, we do not have sports that involve processes we simply cannot do. Humans cannot fly unaided and so we don't have sports based around that process. Second, we chose activities where there is something approaching a commonly found ability, to put it somewhat roughly. There is no excitement or enjoyment in a sport where only one person can really do it well, say because he or she has some abnormal monstrous throwing arm. And although we organise sporting events where competitors come from all over the earth, *given our shared humanity*, should we encounter physically quite different creatures from

[10] I mean by 'pointlessness' that anyone, including Hillary himself, would be hard pressed to say why there is anything better about him being the first man rather than someone else.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246113000337 Published online by Cambridge University Press

outer space there would be no point in having intergalactic Olympic games.[11]

(4) As I have suggested the activities that sport involves or takes up are the ones that reflect our physical nature and potentialities. But the rules reflect our nature in another way. In devising the rules of a sport, the rules of legitimate procedures and the rules about winning, we need to specify them at a level that we as humans can apply them, that is to say with respect to features that we can *detect or observe*. Thus we can tell unaided that a ball has travelled over a line, or that someone is ahead of someone else or that a pass is forward, and so on. So sport is centred on physical activities that we can perform and which are processes that we can observe. Technology influences this, by expanding what is in effect observable. If judges can replay events in slow motion or use time pieces that are very accurate, the performances can be checked in ways previously impossible. The rules of sport, then, reflect our human *perceptual* capacities, as much as our human *actional* capacities.

3. Two Perspectives

The most fundamental point to make about sport is that it figures in our lives in *two* basic ways. We can be participants in sport – play rugby, or cricket or football or baseball – and we can be spectators of sport – we can watch games of rugby or cricket or football or baseball. Now, from a cultural, or as one might say, economic point of view, there is no doubt that sport is primarily something that people observe. Paradoxically, and here I speak about Britain, we are in the grip of both an obesity epidemic, partly because most of us don't participate in sport, and what might be called an obsessive interest in watching intensely physical sport. For most of us, then, the role of sport in our lives is as occurrences to witness. But that comparative sociological truth does not determine for us as theorists about sport which way of relating to sport is more fundamental. I

[11] There is a connexion here with the issue of prosthetic devices in sport, an issue raised by the ambitions of handicapped athletes. It seems evident that if the devices do not give the athlete an enhanced level of performance as compared to how they would perform with a natural limb in place of the prosthetic device then there is no good reason to exclude them from the competition. Determining whether this is so might be difficult, and we cannot demand precision.

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want to argue that a proper understanding of sport should start from thinking about it as something we participate in, or 'do'.

I think that the appeal of this approach can be supported by comparing sport and art, in a general sense. I'll take music as my example. I do that for two reasons. The first is that I myself like music and so think about it. But second it has a structure in some ways like sport. Thus, musicians do not create enduring objects – they rather engage in a process of music-making. Sportsmen likewise engage in a process – that of playing the game. The process itself does not create an enduring product. Now, with music there are also the two perspectives that we find with sport. We can be participants in making music, and we can be spectators of music, we can listen to music. It seems to me that unless we regarded the product of musical activity, that is music itself, as something which appealed to us, something that offered us something, there would be little point in participating in its production.[12] So a theoretical understanding of music making has to start from determining the significance for us of the product of musical activity – which is to say music. Along with this goes the following feature of musical activity or participation; the participant needs to check that the product of their activity has the right qualities – their fundamental intention has to be to produce something with the right qualities.

Now, it seems to me that participation in sport is quite different. People do not participate in sport because they regard the activity as producing something that appeals to, or has an interest for, observers or spectators. Further, they do not need to check on whether they are producing something that appeals to the spectator, which gives a point to what they are doing. Rather, the appeal to them of their activity is simply that of engaging in a physically intense competitive game; and what they primarily need to attend is whether they are *winning within the rules*. The precise qualities of what they do and produce is irrelevant. So to understand why we engage in sport we do not need to understand anything about what sport gives spectators.

In contrast to this, it is surely part and parcel of being a sports spectator that one understands what is being observed as a competitive game of the sort it is. Watching involves us understanding (or

[12] It is important not to exaggerate here. We should acknowledge that the appeal to people of making music is multifarious and complex. The claim is that, on the whole, we participate in creating music because of what hearing music gives us.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246113000337 Published online by Cambridge University Press

attempting to understand) the process and that involves understanding the actions of the participants in relation to their goals and the possibilities open to them. This is confirmed by how much better as spectators are those who have played.

The sense then in which the participant point of view is primary is this; people participate because of what they as participants gain from participation; spectators merely get something from observing others who are participating, and that depends on their understanding the observed activities as competitive games.

4. Being a Spectator and Appreciation

I have tried so far to illuminate what sport is, and to argue that we should think of spectators as engaged in watching a sporting activity which itself does not get its point from what it supplies to spectators. How then should we think of what watching sport gives us?

Confronted by this question I am moved to make a few pretty obvious remarks.

(1) It is not to be expected that there is a single answer to this question. Being a spectator at sport is, in this, like being a country walker – engaging in it offers multiple satisfactions. But it is also true that spectators themselves approach the activity of being a spectator in different ways and so it means different things to them. The diversity, then, lies both in the complexity of what is offered and also the diversity of attitudes brought with spectators.

(2) I am going to draw a contrast between two sorts of spectators. I shall call them, perhaps with some linguistic infelicity, the disinterested and the interested, by which I mean spectators who do not care who wins and those who do care, who, as we say, support some competitors. Let me first say a very few simple and obvious things about the disinterested. They witness an evolving time limited struggle, which is played out before them. It is unscripted, and so a context where genuine creativity can be witnessed; you can try to understand the behaviour of the agents; so it engages the analytical intelligence, and presents a strong sense of an evolving drama. But it involves as well overt and intense physical striving aimed at a manifest goal, that of winning. In this it offers what for example watching animals hunting or birds swooping, etc., offer us. It seems to

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me that these different things are simply of interest to us as humans – they are the kind of thing that engages our attention, and we get intense satisfaction from witnessing.

(3) Of course the interested spectator has a further dimension of engagement to the proceedings. They have, as it were, an affection, often very strong, for one side or competitor. With that is generated all that extra intensity of watching those we care about. This caring can have many sources but a major one is what people call their sense of identity, your sense of who you are and what you are and where you belong. To be somewhat autobiographical, I am English, and support England, and a Yorkshire man and support Yorkshire cricket, and am tied to Leeds and support Leeds United. These identificatory urges are deep, ineradicable, enhancing and probably beneficially tied to sport.

(4) Another aspect strikes me too. I have been talking about the basis or essence of engagement with sport as a spectator. This is naturally taken as a passive, merely observational role. But that overlooks the active dimension of being a sports spectator. You can be part of a crowd that seethes with emotion and you get caught up in the activities of the crowd, singing, shouting, standing up, publicly reacting. But also you urge your side along and give them advice, an activity that is transparently pointless, (we even give such advice when watching on television), but it is all part of the role of a spectator, a role we play with gusto.

I have been attempting to describe what we might call the 'pay offs' or interests of being a sports spectator. In what I have described there is, I believe, nothing that is hard to understand, and nothing that anyone could regard as objectionable or unacceptable upshots. They are, surely, pay-offs that if they were generated in other contexts (as indeed they are) would not be criticised or scorned.

5. The Aesthetics of Sport

It seems to me that sports lovers have been tempted to search for what one might call higher pay-offs than the ones I have described. More specifically, the idea that strikes many as correct is that what the spectator gains is an aesthetic pay-off. This is, as I understand it, the central theme in Gumbrecht's reflections, which I mentioned

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earlier. It is evident from the title of his book. And here is a characteristic passage from his book.

> 'If, by drawing on Kant's work, I insist that watching sports does indeed correspond to the most classical definition of aesthetic experience, it is not to give a new aura to noncanonized forms of pleasure. As I have said before, sports do not need that badge of honor – they are already wide open for everybody's potential enjoyment, and this is one of the more positive (and most frequently observed) features of athletics. Furthermore, I would never deny that watching sport has a downside: it can foster stress, aggression, addiction, and poor health habits – you name it. I only hold that these attractions (or attractive nuisances, depending on your point of view) should not distract us from the central and conceptually most obvious explanation for the widespread popularity of sports – their aesthetic appeal.'[13]

The question is whether this 'explanation' is the obviously correct one. I want to generate some scepticism about it in the course of making a few remarks.

(1) If we suppose for the moment that being an aesthetic experience amounts to being an experience of beauty it is clearly true that since beauty is, we think, something that occurs naturally, for example, a natural sunset or a mountain or a plant can strike us as beautiful, we should certainly expect that amongst the multifarious aspects of sporting activity there will be beauty to be found. For example, a perfect off drive executed by Michael Vaughan is a thing of beauty. It would, then, be churlish to deny that sport presents examples of beauty.

(2) The question is, though, about the *centrality or scale* of this aspect of sport since there is no dispute about its presence *in some cases*. One thing to remind ourselves of is that many sports that intensely engage spectators offer, or seem to offer, few examples of beauty. Think of rugby, both league and union, and soccer, boxing, and wrestling, to name but a few. The exclamation 'How beautiful!' will hardly ever spring to the spectator's lips when watching these games. Or so it seems to me. What the spectator witnesses, and what is likely to be expressed in a exclamation, is the skill, the strength, the speed of action and thought, the intelligence, the bravery, and the sheer excitement and intensity of conflict.

[13] Gumbrecht (2006), 39 – 40.

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Now, this objection to the centrality of 'beauty' and the aesthetic can be responded to in two main ways. The first would be to contest the claim that such aesthetic features are rarely present. All I can do here is to affirm my own sense of its rarity, and leave the reader to make up his or her mind. The second way of responding is to concede its 'rarity' but to claim that it does not deprive it of its role of what sport centrally and fundamentally gives spectators. One problem with this response is that it deprives a lot of sport of what it locates as the real pay-off of sport. That is unfortunate in both a defence of sport, and in an analysis of its appeal to us. Further, it fails to correspond to how spectators themselves evaluate what they observe. Spectators do evaluate sporting encounters. Now, as far as I can tell, such evaluations do not exclusively attend to the aesthetic; the spectator can regard a contest of exceptional ugliness, say a rugby game in wet and muddy conditions, as a marvellous game, offering them precisely what they were looking for. That makes it unlikely that the desired feature is aesthetic.

(3) Talking of the sensing of beauty also leaves out the whole intensity generated for the sports spectator by supporting someone involved. When I go to a concert to listen to beautiful music I do not think of myself as supporting, or as being behind, the London Symphony Orchestra or Pollini. Equally, I do not exhort them to perform better or try to help them at crucial moments. I do not shout 'Come on the brass section – get involved!'. This whole dimension of being what I called an 'interested' spectator is absent when the central point is the perception of beauty.

(4) It is also relevant to recall the point that engagement in sport, the participant's point of view, is, as I have argued, not aesthetic either. The participant does not aim at beauty or any other aesthetic upshot. That is not the point of their role in proceedings. How odd then if the spectator's point of view, which of course involves his or hers active understanding of the process they are witnessing with such intensity, is primarily and centrally with such *accidental* aesthetic results.

(5) Another reason for thinking that the aesthetic payoffs are not the central ones when watching sport is this; let us suppose that people primarily want an aesthetic payoff from sport, and are simply watching it with that aim, and that they have no understanding of sport as anything else, no understanding that is of the goal of winning, or of tactics or strategy. They simply view the whole thing as an aesthetic performance. How many people

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> would then be spectators? Try to estimate just how much aesthetic pay-off sport would give them. My own estimate is that very few people would then be sports spectators. If you share this estimate then you should not place aesthetic payoffs as the basic appeal of being a sports spectator.

I hope that these observations seem to have some weight. We can, I want to suggest, think of Gumbrecht's distortion of the point of watching sport as an example of an all too prevalent type of philosophical error. It is an example of what I propose to call Mistaken Assimilations.[14] Gumbrecht, and others, love sport, and they wish to defend or in some way validate that feeling. The temptation is to assimilate what they are defending to something that their critics (or felt critics) do attach importance and value, namely beauty and the aesthetic. Assuming that this is a mistaken assimilation the consequence, or at least one consequence, is to deprive most sport of the pay-off or value that they single out, and so to offer no convincing defence or understanding of it at all. I myself propose that the correct reaction at this point is to simply accept that being a sports spectator offers us the pay-offs that I have described, and not to try to understand it as, fundamentally, an example of some other pay-off.

Mistaken Assimilations also invite an unwanted response by those to whom they are addressed. If the critics of sport who are being addressed start the discussion by acknowledging the value of art and aesthetic experience, then, when they are persuaded that watching sport yields such a pay-off, they can revise their attitude to art, and perhaps limit its value to special cases, or begin to wonder about its value in general. To assimilate sport to art invites a revision of one's attitude to art.

6. Bentham and Mill

I have tried at various stages to bring my discussion of sport into contact with philosophical discussions and the issue we have arrived at, which is what is the relation between sport and art, is

[14] Mistaken assimilations are, I suspect, prevalent in thought about many of our basic activities. Amusingly one case involves the understanding of art itself. There is a perennial temptation to think of art as conveying deep and perhaps otherwise inexpressible meaning to us. But this is to assume that the basic point of art must lie in a message we extract from it. In reality, I believe, there are no such messages – and the value of encounters with art should be understood in other ways.

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one which has generated important philosophical debate, notably between, of course, Bentham and Mill, and I wish to scrutinise that debate briefly at this point. How did this famous disagreement go? Bentham started it by saying that 'Prejudice apart, the game of push-pin is of equal value with the arts and sciences of music and poetry.'[15] When discussing Bentham later J. S. Mill summarized this opinion as 'Push-pin is as good as poetry'. Bentham's wonderfully provocative remark in effect expresses the claim that there is nothing better to (or about) engaging with art – for example reading poetry and listening to music – than there is to engaging with sport – by playing push-pin, or football. Now, as I read the debate Mill was opposed to Bentham's opinion. Countering Bentham's opinion was part of what Mill was attempting when he proposed the distinction between pleasure of different qualities, those with the so called 'higher quality' being in some way better or more valuable, although when he does this in *Utilitarianism* he does not there use sport as an example of an activity which generates only a lower quality pleasure. However, if Mill intended the higher/lower quality distinction to bear on Bentham's view he would need to classify push-pin as what we might call a 'lower' activity. How should we adjudicate this debate?

Bentham's argument would be that the value of something for someone consists in the pleasure it produces, and clearly push-pin could produce as much pleasure as listening to poetry.[16] This argument is not persuasive *for us* because we do not accept the simple hedonistic conception of value (for an individual) on which it is based.[17] Mill himself was not opposed to the hedonistic framework, but sought to avoid the conclusion, which he thought (or felt) was wrong, by introducing the idea that pleasure itself can have different quality, that with a higher quality being *better* for the individual. No-one can feel that Mill's way of opposing Bentham is satisfactory. In the first place when we grade things in relation to their quality, (as opposed to quantity), which we certainly do with, for example, cloth or wine or grass, we do so (roughly) by envisaging how well

[15] Bentham, J, (1830), 206.

[16] I am taking it here that Bentham's claim is about the value for a person, and is not about the communal moral value of these things. Given his framework there is not a great deal of difference between these two issues, of course.

[17] An influential moment in eliminating the hedonistic framework was Nozick's argument based on the idea of the experience machine in *Anarchy, State and Utopia*.

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different examples of the general kind would contribute to some end. Thus the higher quality grass grows better and yields a better looking lawn than lower quality grass. But with pleasure there is no function or role that it has in relation to which different cases of pleasure can be compared. So the whole talk of different qualities here lacks application. Further, Mill's proposed test for the higher quality of the pleasure produced by two activities is that people consistently prefer one of them to the other. Amongst many comments that this proposal should attract is that by that standard Mill should either have said that probably push-pin produces a higher quality pleasure than poetry, since people predominantly prefer it, or concede that in fact there are no differences in quality, since no pleasures pass the test for being of the higher quality. Third, when he develops his view Mill's idea is that activities can be divided into the physical and the intellectual and that it is the intellectual activities that produce the higher quality pleasures.[18] But if we take sport, including push-pin, it is obvious that it is intellect involving; as I stressed earlier participants must understand the rules and be able to apply them, which, amongst other things, practically always requires numerical skills. The lower animals cannot participate in this type of activity. Ironically, engagement with art, such as listening to music, or looking at pictures, seems *relatively* unintellectual. We simply savour the sounds and sights and engross ourselves in them. Perhaps lower animals can do that. I am not, of course, seriously downgrading the intellectual requirements of engagement with art, but trying rather to remove any sense of a contrast here between art and sport. For these, and other reasons, Mill's defence of the superiority of art to sport, seems to be a tissue of mistakes.

Now, although Bentham's straightforward, and within his framework relatively cogent, argument cannot be accepted, there is, I believe, some reason to feel sympathy with his conclusion. Consider this; recently I saw that there was an Arts week in Durham, and part of that consisted in brightening up the city by decking it with glowing coloured balls. I assume that will be allowed to be art, and to encounter the lanterns while walking around the city is to encounter art. Now the question that deniers of Bentham's view face is what is more valuable or better for someone in encountering such coloured lights as opposed to encountering and engaging with a cricket game in the same city or playing a game of rugby there. Indeed, what does the encounter with the lights actually give us? Roughly they add interest and charm to our visual experience. To which we can add; so,

[18] See Mill (1861) Ch 2.

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amongst other things, does witnessing a cricket game. If we wish to take the case of poetry we need simply to reflect on the experience of listening to Pam Ayers, a popular poet. It is engaging and fun, but so is watching Kevin Peterson.[19]

I cannot here make a serious attempt at uprooting the idea that the experience of art (or, perhaps, Art, with a capital 'A') presents us with some uniquely treasurable features, but reflection on art *in the round* makes that idea difficult to take seriously. I want to suggest though that some such illusion often represents what one might call the reciprocal partner of the error of Mistaken Assimilations. The illusion is that of supposing that the activity to which the one we start with is being mistakenly assimilated is itself one where the pay-offs are *very special and obvious*, whereas in fact it is no clearer in the second case than in the first what the pay offs actually are. I should add that my previous criticism of what I called Mistaken Assimilations in no way depends on the correctness of this briefly developed suggestion.

7. Conclusion

I have talked mostly about witnessing sport and what that gives us. I suggested that we can discern in watching sport pay-offs of a kind that we can all appreciate. This appreciation depends on acceptance of certain psychological claims, for example that we have a taste for excitement and drama, for witnessing skill, for being part of a group and in consequence supporting some of the participants. Above all we should avoid what I call Mistaken Assimilations, in which we think of the point of witnessing sport as being its provision of features which we value *in other areas*.

But I want, finally, to return to the point or points of engaging in, or participating in, sport. One aspect of that is what we get from engaging in competitive games generally. Suffice it to say that they form an immense part of practically all our lives, in some way or other. But I shall not explore games and competition here. The second aspect is that with sport the medium for the game is (usually) intense physical activity. Now, that is something that humans engage in outside sport. People hike and run and climb and exercise. The ubiquity of this kind of activity in our lives suggests that it is part of our nature to engage in it. So participants in sport are, according to this, combining

[19] If there is no case for saying that art *per se* is, somehow, better than sport *per se*, it remains open how to compare particular cases.

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competition with a fundamental element in our nature. Indeed this element – physical activity – is so much a central part of human life that it merits being labeled a human good. Its enforced absence in lives makes them worse lives. On this conception, which I am proposing but do not here have the space or resources to defend properly, engagement in sport is an instance of a general fundamental human good – bodily activity.[20]

We can, I want to propose, unify and illuminate a number of the themes in this essay by seeing ourselves as having an animal nature, because animals are what we *are*, and sport as we know it can be regarded as an expression of the sort of animal nature – psychological, cognitive and physical – that we, human animals, have.[21]

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[20] Because it is philosophers who try to draw up lists of human goods, and their own passion is for more intellectual activities, their lists tend to ignore the very basic physical goods which I am suggesting need acknowledging.

[21] I am very grateful to Anthony O'Hear for the invitation to be part of this series, and to Adam Ferner for his encouragement and help, and to both of them for discussion on sport. I have also benefited from discussions of these issues with Richard Edwards, Ann Higginson, Rory Madden, Brent Madison, Paul Robinson, Katherine Snowdon, Nicholas Snowdon, Victoria Snowdon, and Jo Wolff.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246113000337 Published online by Cambridge University Press