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ABSTRACT

In this paper I argue that philosophers of sport should avoid value-laden definitions of sport; that is, they should avoid building into the definition of sport that they are inherently worthwhile activities. Sports may very well often be worthwhile as a contingent matter, but this should not be taken to be a core feature included in the *definition* of sport. I start by outlining what I call the 'legitimacy-conferring' element of the category 'sport'. I then argue that we ought not to include such a dimension in our definition of sport, on the grounds that it confuses issues of description with issues of definition: the issue of what sport *does* with what sport *is*. Following this, I consider a Wittgensteinian family resemblance approach to defining sport; Kevin Schieman's argument that sports are necessarily good games; and the oft-cited wide-following and institutional criteria, as arguments for including an evaluative dimension in the definition of sport. I conclude that none succeed, for similar reasons: they either fail to track our common sense intuitions about what does or does not count as a sport; and/or they make it impossible for us to ever describe something a 'bad' sport (or instance of sport). Just as a good definition of, say, art, shouldn't make it impossible for us to describe something as 'bad art', I argue that our definition of sport shouldn't build in a *necessarily* positive evaluation. I conclude by discussing some of the practical reasons why supporters of activities about which there is currently debate as to their status as sports might want to see those activities included under the sports umbrella, but suggest that this on its own isn't a good reason for modifying a philosophical definition of sport to include them.

1. Introduction

In this paper I argue that philosophers of sport should avoid value-laden definitions of sport; that is, they should avoid building into the definition of sport that they are inherently worthwhile activities. Sports may very well often be worthwhile as a contingent matter, but this should not be taken to be a core feature included in the *definition* of sport.

I start this paper by outlining what I call the 'legitimacy-conferring' element of the category 'sport'. I then argue that we ought not to include such a dimension in our definition of sport, on the grounds that it confuses issues of description with issues of definition: the issue of what sport *does* with what sport *is*. Following this, I consider a Wittgensteinian family resemblance approach to defining sport; Kevin Schieman's

argument that sports are necessarily good games; and the oft-cited wide-following and institutional criteria, as arguments for including an evaluative dimension in the definition of sport. I conclude that none succeed, for similar reasons: they either fail to track our common sense intuitions about what does or does not count as a sport; and/ or they make it impossible for us to ever describe something a 'bad' sport (or instance of sport). Just as a good definition of, say, art, shouldn't make it impossible for us to describe something as 'bad art', our definition of sport should not preclude us evaluating a sport in similar terms. In short, I argue that our definition of sport shouldn't build in a *necessarily* positive evaluation. I conclude by discussing some of the practical reasons why supporters of activities about which there is currently debate as to their status as sports might want to see those activities included under the sports umbrella, but argue that the practical advantages of an activity counting as a sport— on their own—are not a good reason for modifying a philosophical definition of sport to include them.

2. Sport and Legitimacy

There is a tendency in some contemporary scholarship in the philosophy of sport to expand the definition of sport to include a wider range of activities. I am not in principle opposed to including some of the more controversial activities—chess, hiking, eSports, etc.—in the definition of sport. It may after all turn out to be the case that a clear-eyed, consistent definition of sport entails that some or all those activities are, in fact, sports. However, I think we need to be careful about how we approach the question of inclusion/ exclusion. In particular, I argue that we should be careful to insist that whether or not borderline activities—such as eSports, hiking, motor sport, and so on—are worthwhile is a separate question to whether they are actually sports (Parry 2018).

One of the problems discussions about sport often face is that there is an assumption—mistaken, in my view—that 'sport' is a *legitimacy-conferring* term. In other words, *if* something can be considered a sport, we can then be sure that it is worthwhile. I think there are many ways that we could cash out this idea: it could be a matter of sport developing certain moral virtues or promoting particular moral values, fostering physical abilities, or specific kinds of pleasure and enjoyment that sport brings about; for the purposes of my argument, we don't need to settle this question. But as a result of including an evaluative dimension into the definition of sport—especially as contrasted with mere 'games' or leisure activities—we end up expanding the definition of sport in other ways to include more activities within it.

For instance, whether eSports is a sport is currently a contested issue. While there are likely those who personally enjoy eSports who argue that it isn't a sport, I think in general it's fair to say that those who approve of the activity tend to fall into the 'eSports is a sport' camp. Presumably, the reason for this is that *if* eSport can be accepted as a 'real' sport, we would then be forced to conclude that eSports is a worthwhile way of spending one's time (or even one's life, in the case of professional eSportspeople). As Kalle Jonasson and Jesper Thiborg point out, 'Computer gaming is, in contrast to involvement in organised sports, not a fully accepted leisure activity, and parents and other adults do not encourage and support the activity in the same manner' (2010, 287); but questions about the worth

of eSports would likely fall away quickly if it became generally accepted that eSports are 'real' sports.

But eSport is a specific kind of activity with its own particular characteristics. Those characteristics may or may not be shared with sports—I'm not going to argue one way or the other on this matter here, though I do elsewhere (Hemmingsen 2020b, 2023a, 2023b). But if eSports is excluded from the category 'sport' due to its particular characteristics, this should have nothing whatsoever to do with whether it is a good use of a person's time, or whether becoming a professional eSports player is a worthwhile career, any more than soccer or table tennis being a sport automatically guarantees that they are good uses of a person's time, or that being a professional soccer or table tennis player is a worthwhile career.

Because of this confusion between definition and evaluation, discussions around defining sport are often misdirected. Instead of the definitional question, the issue becomes about whether we want to say that chess, or hiking, or eSports are valuable activities: and if yes, then we need to modify the definition of sport to make space for them. However, when we're defining sport, I argue that the goal ought to be to bring the important distinctions (as well as similarities) between different activities into relief. But a large part of the motivation for wanting some of the more controversial examples to be brought within the definition of 'sport'—even if they are included as sub-classes (mind sports, nature sports, etc.)—is that being considered as a 'sport' confirms that it is something worthwhile to engage in. If we try to understand sport from this starting point—if our goal is to promote the value of our favoured activities by modifying the definition of sport—the important differences and commonalities between different kinds of activities are going to be obscured rather than illuminated.

3. Evaluation in the Literature

Chad Carlson puts the point about the legitimacy-conferring nature of sport explicitly, arguing that, 'unlike play and games, we seem to treat sport as an honorific, giving it privileged status. To call something a sport is to bestow it with an honor given out only after great deliberation' (Carlson 2016, 16). This point is also captured in the distinction between sports and 'mere' games. For instance, Dennis Hemphill points out that,

> Games, per se, can be thought of as less than the real thing in several other ways. For example, when the claim is made that, say, football is 'more than a game', it is thought that the stakes are higher, as is the case when sport is considered a 'big business', a 'civic religion', or a collective expression of national identity. Alternatively, when the exhortation 'it's only a game' is made during a sporting activity, it is often used as a form of consolation for someone who might be overly disappointed with a loss or as a reprimand to someone who is perhaps taking the game 'too seriously'. In both cases, however, 'game' has the status that it does in contrast to something that is presumably more serious. (2005, 196)

Ibrahim Hilmi too states that 'while sport is an adult activity, games are limited to the young' (1975, 3), and Jonasson and Thiborg note that playing is thought of as 'something that is done by children and young people, not grown-ups'. By contrast, sports can allow a person to engage in similar activities, 'without being accused of being childish' (2010, 289). If an activity is a mere game, then, we are inclined to take it less seriously. Sports, by contrast, are meaningful pastimes.

There are arguably also historical, class-based elements to the positive associations of the word 'sport'. As Felix Lebed describes, not only was 'sportsmanship' associated with the concept of gentlemanliness, but activities were themselves categorised as either sports or (mere) games based on whether they were the leisure activities of the higher class or the activities of the labouring and middle classes (2022, 4).

There is also often seen to be a moral dimension to sport that, at least in part, underlies its value. Sport is associated with 'an ethos, constituted of notions of fair play and equal opportunity', and is 'in general regarded as something that contributes to society' (Jonasson and Thiborg 2010, 287). For instance, Frank McBride argues against the inclusion of 'blood sports'—cock fighting, bull fighting, and so on—on the grounds that 'The elements of cruelty or sadism [in blood sports] go beyond the limits of sport' (1975, 6). Similarly, Jonasson & Thiborg, in the context of the status of eSports, spend some time discussing studies that show a 'short-term effect of aggressive behaviour', as well as others that demonstrate 'positive effects on children and adults playing computer games, such as spatial skills, reaction time, family relationships, parental obedience, social network, school performance and abstinence from drinking alcohol and using drugs' (2010, 294). While Jonasson and Thiborg are engaged in a descriptive endeavour—that is, they're not using the above considerations as arguments that eSports should or should not be considered a sport—they do note that such factors are likely to make a difference as to whether or not 'eSport will become accepted as part of [sport]' (Jonasson and Thiborg 2010, 294). However, in my view, it is a mistake to build moral considerations into the definition of sport as an activity, even if it just so happens that sport often does, as a matter of fact, promote certain values.

4. Sports and Value

The central idea that I want to argue against in this paper is the adoption of what we might call a 'functional' approach to the definition of sport. This view builds in what sport (often) *does* into a definition of what sport *is*. So, for instance, such an account of sport might claim sport is 'the cultivation of moral and intellectual virtue' (Austin 2013, 39) or engage in panegyrics about the ways in which sport 'requires that an individual forego what is in his narrow self-interest for the sake of the team' (Austin 2013, 42); or how sport can function as 'writ large images of life itself', where 'many of the recurring themes and issues of life are magnified and made explicit in the exigencies of a contest' (Hyland 1972, 87).

There is no need to deny that sport can and does do all of this. There is no question that, as Annelier Knoppers et al. put it,

> Values and norms manifest themselves implicitly and explicitly in different ways [in sport] at individual, structural and cultural levels … athletes may behave according to stated and assumed norms (individual level); these values and norms are often embedded in the way sport is organized (structure) and the type of culture that is created. (2001, 17)

My disagreement with this view is when it shifts from describing what sport *can* do to making definitional claims about what sport fundamentally *is*. For one thing, it seems clear that an activity can still be a sport even when it doesn't teach moral virtue. It might often do so, but I think Michael W. Austin is right to say that 'while the structure of sport is

arguably conducive to the development of virtue, the connection in actual practice between sport and moral development is perhaps tenuous at best', since a player can 'abide by the traditions of her particular sport and act in accord with a particular virtue but not truly possess it' (2013, 42).

In other words, sport can do all of these wonderful things, but it doesn't do them *necessarily*. As Johan Steenberger puts it, the values of sport 'do not come from sport itself', but rather because sport is 'embedded in a wider network of values that are current in a given society'. Hence, 'the relation of these values to the concept of sport is . . . of an external nature: the relation between sport and those values is not a logically necessary one, but merely contingent' (2001, 46).

We can see the external nature of these values when we observe that we can still understand something *as* a sport even in cases where it fails to cultivate any of the values that are associated with it. Even if players behave in an *unsportspersonlike* way—that is, even if they are not living up to the values that we like to see in sports people—they don't sudden cease to be *playing* sport by virtue of this. Sportspersonship is a matter of playing the game according to the publicly agreed values associated with that activity or, as I argue elsewhere, according to a certain underlying ethos that comes from any rules-based competition undertaken in the right way (Hemmingsen 2020a). But this is not relevant to defining sports in the first place, or working out what is or is not a sport: either sportspersonship is a contingent matter rather than a necessary one, or speaks to a value so broad that it's no longer relevant when it comes to distinguishing sport from non-sport (Hemmingsen 2020a). For instance, while soccer can teach values relating to teamwork, etc., it's still quite possible for us to *play* soccer without cultivating these values; we don't declare an otherwise identical game not-soccer simply because it fails to cultivate the values that are supposedly inherent in it. Rather, we would at best take it to be an instance of soccer that failed to live up to its potential.

It seems to me, then, that the main problem with this kind of approach is that it confuses two different accounts of the definition of sport: what we might call the quantitative and the qualitative view. The quantitative view is the question of what sport is, in the sense of picking it out as a phenomenon, establishing what activities are or are not sport in the first place. When we ask, for instance, whether eSports, chess, bridge or hiking are 'really' sports, we are approaching the question of sports in a quantitative way; we are attempting to establish what activities do and do not count as sports.

The qualitative view mostly takes the quantitative question for granted. In other words, it assumes that the boundaries of what is or is not sport are (more or less) established, and then asks what tends to be contingently but widely true of those activities. Rather than asking a 'sorting' question, then it's focused on *describing* sport as we find it in the world. Quite naturally, this description will include the very positive values that sport often brings about, as well as our generally positive regard for sports; our sense that sports are usually worthwhile in some way.

The problem arises when we confuse these two questions, where we take our bigger picture qualitative generalisations about sports—and particularly the generalisations about the role and function of sport in society and in relation to moral virtue—and try to feed them back into the quantitative question. Doing so is simply mistaking the role of such descriptive generalisations in the first place. As Allan Bäck puts it, while 'we like

sports and feel that being involved in sports has been a positive influence on our lives', we should avoid the kind of 'emotivist cheerleading' (2009, 217) that leads us to conclude that, as a result, sport is good in a *necessary*, definitional sense: that this value should make a difference when deciding on what activities are or are not sport in the first place.

This is not to say that both kinds of questions are not important. In my view, both kinds of question ought to be pursued. At the same time, though, we need to be clear that they are not, at the end of the day, the same question.

5. Family Resemblance

The above argument is on its strongest footing when taking an essentialist approach to the definition of sport, i.e. that there are certain qualities in common amongst all instances of sport and that the purpose of defining sport is to describe these common characteristics. After all, for the essentialist, if we can find uncontroversial instances of sport lacking in an evaluative dimension (such as the soccer game that doesn't teach teamwork, for instance), then we would naturally conclude that sport doesn't *necessarily* contain an evaluative dimension: that it's not in the *essence* of sport. However, my argument does not *require* an essentialist approach to definition to go through.

One prominent alternative to the essentialist project of the definition of sport is an approach that draws on Wittgenstein's idea of 'family resemblance'. In this view, (to slightly paraphrase) we should 'look and see whether there is anything common to all [sports]. For if you look at them you will not see something that is common to all, but similarities, relationships and a whole series of them at that' (1967, 31). In other words, the goal is not to try to establish common properties shared by each and every instance of sport, but instead search for 'strands of similarities' between the various phenomena that comes under the term 'sport' in everyday usage (Kleinman 1968, 31). As a result of 'looking and seeing', we move away from identifying essential elements of sport, and instead identify 'an overlapping of characteristics that form a complex network of similarities', leading to a definition of sport with 'no common essence but a "family of resemblances" in which the degree of similarity is closest when we consider adjacent members of the family and furthest apart when we consider distant members of the family' (Morgan 1977, 17).

What we find, then, is something like in Table 1, where S_1 to S_5 are instances of sport, and A-F are features (Fogelin 1972, 59):

In the above, there is not a single quality in common between all instances of sport, but rather a 'family of things sharing a system of overlapping features' (Fogelin 1972, 59).

Shifting to a family resemblance approach to defining sport may seem to offer a response to my claim that our definition should not build in to sport the idea that it is inherently worthwhile or value-conferring. For one thing, my previous argument certainly *seemed* to assume that either an evaluative dimension is necessary feature of all sport, or it

Table 1. Sports & Qualities.

S_1	S_2	S_3	S_4	S_5
A	B	C	D	D
B	C	D	E	A
C	D	E	F	B

should be excluded entirely from the definition. By contrast, a family resemblance model opens up the possibility that evaluative factors might be an important feature of some, but not all, sport.

Secondly, Wittgenstein's exhortation to 'look and see' tasks us to pay more attention to how words are popularly used, and I cannot deny that the assumption that sport is value-conferring is quite commonplace. If so, then arguing against including an evaluative dimension in the definition of at least some sport is insufficiently respectful of popular usage.

However, it's important to note that the family resemblance model is not unrestrictedly permissive. After all, the word 'sport' refers to a limited set of phenomena, regardless of which definitional model we use. Supporters of a family resemblance account of sport typically do not think that we can or should chain qualities endlessly, until absolutely everything in existence is brought under the term 'sport' (or whatever concept is being discussed). Instead, sport is a concept that, while lacking an essence, nonetheless has a meaning that delimits it from other concepts. So, while those who take a Wittgensteinian approach to the definition of sport 'are not exclusively preoccupied with commonality', at the same time 'they do not consider it "a waste of time" trying to answer the question "what is sport?"' (Steenbergen 2001, 37).

To put this another way, we shouldn't downplay the 'resemblance' in the term 'family resemblance'. In the above example, for instance, while S_1 to S_5 did not share any *single* quality in common, nonetheless there is an attempt to describe which qualities (A, B, C, D, E and F) are important for understanding the family concept of sport. Hence, while there may be value in avoiding essentialism, the Wittgensteinian also must be careful to avoid complete relativism at the other extreme. If we end up having to conclude that 'sport can not be demarcated from non-sport because there are no limiting criteria'—that there are 'no necessary and/or sufficient conditions based on which the sport family can be demarcated from other families' (Steenbergen 2001, 40)—then we don't seem any better off.

Hence, even for the Wittgensteinian, not absolutely everything can be an important quality relevant to definition. For example, some instances of sport involve players wearing blue uniforms, but there's no reason to think that wearing a blue uniform is sufficiently central to the concept of sport that it should be included in our list of resemblances. In other words, the family resemblance model doesn't attempt to avoid the definitional question of sport by taking an anything goes approach. There are still features of sport that matter when it comes to defining sport, and features that are simply not relevant to doing so. As Steenbergen puts it,

> To deny that there is something common, as Wittgenstein does, does not entail the denial that we can specify a set of necessary and sufficient conditions governing application... It is possible to identify certain necessary and sufficient criteria without also closing the concept of sport by claiming that there must be something common. (2001, 41–2)

What's more, it seems clear that we can be *wrong* about which features are important and which are not. For instance, someone who had only ever encountered ball sports might well think that using a ball of some kind is an important, central feature of sport. However, I can't see any reason why, after encountering, say, badminton and ice hockey, and discussing it with fans of those sports, that not only should this person begin to include badminton and ice hockey in the category of sport, but that they may also come to realise

that they had placed undue emphasis on the use of balls in their previous thinking about sport; that they never should have taken the use of a ball to be a truly central feature of sports in the first place.[1]

I suggest that the evaluative dimension of our understanding of sport is just such a mistake. We may often take sport to be legitimacy conferring, but this is neither part of the essence of sport, nor is it an important quality when considering sport as a family of resemblances. Including an evaluation dimension in our definition of sport is along the same lines as thinking that having blue uniforms or using a ball are important for defining sport: it's putting too much emphasis on qualities that don't deserve it, that are not— when pushed—of truly central importance.

Of course, those who argue that an evaluative dimension is a central element of at least most sport and should be one of the qualities that we identify as constituting the resemblance between many different instances of sport are likely to respond by point out that being legitimacy-conferring *simply is* a common part of the ordinary usage of the term 'sport' in a way that blue uniforms and ball use are not. If we, as Wittgenstein suggests, ought to prioritise 'looking and seeing', then there should be little doubt that sport is not definitionally value neutral (even if there may still be value neutral members of the sports family at the margins). In other words, while Wittgensteinian anti-essentialism doesn't guarantee on its own that sports are definitionally value-laden, when we combine this with the second plank of the family resemblance approach—a strong interest in the common usage of words—the claim that the definition of sport should completely lack an evaluative dimension seems harder to sustain.

However, just as Wittgenstein's anti-essentialism is not without limits, so should we be careful not to over-rely on popular usage of a term when trying to understand it. William J. Morgan discusses precisely this point when he argues that we are well advised to,

> heed Heidegger's caveat that man exhibits … a natural penchant for engaging in what he calls 'idle talk' … a rather loose and uncritical type of conversing – one concerned neither with completeness nor correctness of expression – which understands and interprets everything from the taken-for-granted stance everyday man assumes in his daily dealings in the world. As such, the act of disclosure (communication) evinced in this taken-for-granted posture towards the world perverts itself into an act of covering up in virtue of its failure to penetrate the familiarity by which we understand the world in our daily round of activities, a familiarity which prevents us from entering into a more fundamental relationship with that which is talked about. (1977, 29)

In other words, while ought to be careful not to ignore everyday usage—as this leads to merely stipulative definitions—at the same time we shouldn't overly defer to common usage, as this 'overlook[s] the rather obvious limitations and inconsistencies of conventional language' (Morgan 1977, 29). There is still a role for the philosopher to play, even from a family resemblance perspective, in clarifying concepts, a process which may very well include pointing out that popular usage has gotten certain things wrong. In my view, the popular idea that sport definitionally involves a value laden dimension is just one such error.

So why is the common usage of the term 'sport' that includes a value laden dimension wrong? For one thing, it seems clear that there is *no* specific *class* of activity that is included under the umbrella of sport that necessarily *must* be evaluatively positive to be included as an instance of that activity. Cricket may

often teach important values of sportspersonship, for instance, or rugby the value of teamwork; but when they fail to do so, we don't declare that no cricket or rugby match took place. Competitive swimming may develop qualities of self-discipline; but it also may not, and it surely counts as competitive swimming nonetheless. Often sport helps with physical fitness and the development of bodily coordination: but the seagulling soccer player who gains none of these benefits is still participating in a game of soccer, albeit poorly. Even in terms of enjoyment, children forced into Saturday morning sports by their parents may gain no plea-sure from it; and the same may be said about some professional players, for whom playing the sport becomes merely a job. But this doesn't seem to affect our estimation that sport is being played in these cases, even if we take them to be regrettable in some way.

In short, the challenge for those who think that our definition of sport should include an evaluative dimension to find one single value that makes a difference to *any* sports activity in terms of whether we think that it counts as an instance of that kind of activity in the first place. That is, even when looking at whether to include individual activities within the wider sports umbrella as being that *kind* of activity (an instance of soccer, cricket, swimming, cycling, etc.), it's still not easy to see how evaluative features make much of a difference.

As argued previously, then, the issue seems to be that even when taking a family resemblance approach to the definition of sport we ought to distinguish between the quantitative—definitional— question and the qualitative—descriptive—question. Even if we reject the idea that there is an essence to the concept of sport—that it is a family of resemblances—if we are focusing on the question of what features allow us to pick out examples of sport, or settle controversial cases, evaluative features rarely seem to help.

Are eSports, chess and bridge sports or not? Should we include them within the sports family of resemblances, or not? It's not going to be enough, regardless of our approach to definitions, to say that anything that anyone uses the term 'sport' to describe is thereby a sport. So even the family resemblance approach needs to—and should be able to, in principle at least—work through this question. But it's difficult to see where an evaluative quality can help us to do so. Even when it comes to features such as bodily movement, why understand this in an evaluative sense—e.g. 'sport (necessarily) develops our fitness and bodily coordination (and is therefore good)'—rather than a purely descriptive sense —e.g. 'sport tends to involve certain kinds of movement'—given that this promise is sometimes not met even when it comes to unequivocal instances of sport?

Perhaps the only area where evaluative qualities play a plausible definitional role are so-called 'blood sports', such as hunting or bullfighting, where moral objections to these activities are sometimes taken to exclude them from being a sport. But even here, it seems to me that the disagreement tends to be about whether these are *good* sports, or *morally permissible* sports, rather than whether they are sports in the first place. Certainly, they have been considered sports in the past, and I think it's plausible to interpret the claim that we should no longer consider them *sports* as being another way of saying that we should no longer provide them with the kinds of legitimacy and institutional support that go along with being included within the sportfamily, confusing practical considerations (such as government subsidies, visa access, moral approval, etc.) with definitional ones.

In short, even if we adopt a Wittgensteinian family resemblance approach to defining sport, so long as we still take it as important to identify central characteristics of sport (even if not essential ones), and so long as we are not asked to *uncritically* accept the popular usage of a term, then we still have good reason to think that our definition of sports should not include an evaluative dimension.

6. Necessarily Good Games

We can find a slightly different way of including evaluation in the definition of sport in the work of Kevin Schieman. Schieman argues not that sports have a necessary *moral* dimension, but rather that sports are simply '*necessarily* good games' (2016, 60, italics mine), and that 'our judgments about what constitutes a sport track a game's quality' (2016, 47). Under this view, if particular eSports such as *League of Legends*, or mind sports like chess, are *necessarily good games* then (putting considerations like physicality aside for the sake of argument), they are also sports.

While Schieman's argument captures the common-sense attitude that being classed as a sport is a desirable thing, distinguishing sports from non-sports on the basis of an evaluation of the quality of that activity as a game is mistaken, for two reasons.

First, Schieman's central claim is that an activity[2] is identified as a sport by virtue of its popularity, which in turn is a result of its quality as a game. In his view, *good* games are 'able to provide a sustainable, competitive venue that encourages the pursuit of ... excellences' (2016, 51), whereas bad games are not. These good games are sport, whereas the bad ones fail to reach the required standard: they 'might make for an enjoyable diversion with friends' (2016, 52), but are merely idle pastimes, not sports.

However, I think Schieman underestimates the extent to which a game being 'good'—in the sense of offering a sufficient challenge to maintain our attention and promote our excellences—is a result not merely of the structure of the game *qua* game, but also the quality of the competitors, i.e. the extent to which 'quality' is really built into the game *itself*, rather than how we contingently engage with it. In other words, while I agree that there is (often) a relationship between popularity and the quality of a game, whereas Schieman argues that being popular is a sign that it is a good game, I argue that it is a good game at least partly *as a result of* it being popular. If a lot of people are interested in a game and take it seriously, the average quality of the players improves. In *competitive* games, it is the quality of that opposition that usually determines the level of skill you need to attain yourself, the extent to which you're required to push yourself to improve, and ultimately the extent to which that activity can support a sustained quest for excellence over the long-term.

For instance, the central activity in ice hockey is to hit the puck in the opposing goal. Even I, novice ice skater, could probably accomplish this task ... just so long as the other players were sufficiently inept that they couldn't block my shot. What makes this task a *challenge* in ice hockey is that the other players are trying to *stop* you from getting the puck in the other goal. In the higher levels of the sport, they are *extremely good* at preventing opposing players from getting the puck in the goal, and so the players on the offensive are pushed to increase their own skills in turn. Even activities that are not directly competitive, such as running, are like this: running is easy; running faster than other trained runners is not.

We can see this in a comparison between basketball and yukigassen (competitive snowball fighting). Whereas basketball is much more popular than yugikassen, and while the level of skill required in basketball is typically going to be much, much higher, it's difficult to say whether this is because basketball is objectively a better game, or whether its popularity—and concomitant skill level—is due to the contingent factors that led to its popularity. I think it's easy enough to imagine a world in which the positions were reversed; in which basketball were some obscure, niche activity, perhaps played only by children, but yugikassen is extremely popular. In such a world, someone like Schieman might well be arguing that basketball is not really a sport because the level of skill required is so low, and that it can't—unlike yugikassen—hold our attention for very long.

Second, if quality is an *internal* feature of sport, then it becomes completely impossible to say that there are bad sports. Calling an activity a *bad sport* and calling an activity *not a sport* becomes merely two ways of saying the same thing: 'bad sport' is a redundant expression. This seems to me to be clearly wrong: we should be able to discuss and debate whether or not a sport is good, valuable or worthwhile—including whether it is a well-crafted game—independently of the question of whether or not the thing we are discussing is a sport in the first place. Schieman's view makes this impossible.

7. Wide Following and Institutionalisation

Other common ways of (implicitly) including an evaluative dimension into the definition of sport is the oft-stated definitional criteria of 'wide following' and 'institutionalisation'. For instance, Graham McFee argues that 'it seems correct to disallow as sports activities which lack . . . a following—those which had just been invented, for instance; we should wait to see if the new activities "take"' (2004, 19). Such a stipulation builds into the definition of sport, as in Schieman's case, that they should be 'good' in some way (even if the precise way they are good is left vague). After all, presumably in waiting to see if an activity 'takes', we are waiting for a collective judgement about that activity's worth.

But again, we can have 'bad' video games, cars, companies, art, pedagogical techniques, and so on, without that thing ceasing to be a video game, car, company, work of art or pedagogy. So why can there not be 'bad' sports? There seems little be gained by building in that sense of value from the start.

The institutional criterion seems to me to be similar to the 'wide following' criterion, and mistaken for some of the same reasons, though with some additional confusions of its own. According to the institutional status criterion, an activity can only be a sport if it has 'a technological and organizational sphere . . . [and] is developed providing, among other aspects, a substantial body of experts, including coaches, instructors, researchers, historians, and statisticians' (Meier 1981, 86). For Jim Parry, 'a sport has achieved institutionalisation if it has managed to provide a coherent representation of itself to its national and international constituencies, evidenced by national and international federations' (2018, 9). This criterion is also found in Suits, specifically the concept of 'stability' (2007).

It's certainly true that many of the activities that are *uncontroversially* instances of sport do have strong, well-developed institutions, and perhaps we might include institutionalisation in some *descriptive* discussions about sport as we find it in the world. But at the same time, it's unclear why this should be a *definitional* criterion of sport.

For example, take any individual sporting match—let's say a particular cricket test match between the Australian national team and the New Zealand national team. In our world, this match is going to be the outcome of a complex institutional history that brought it about. But we can imagine the sporting equivalent of a Boltzmann Brain scenario (Albrecht and SORBO 2004): an alternate reality in which a group of Kiwis and a group of Australians spontaneously come together, having decided on a set of rules for a competition between them. Those rules happen, purely by chance, to be identical to the rules of cricket as stipulated by our International Cricket Council (ICC). We might further imagine that, for reasons of national pride, the players train seriously beforehand, so that their skill levels are the same as the players in our world. And thanks to the deep-seated competitiveness of Australians and New Zealanders when it comes to any kind of physical competition, these individuals have no problem raising the money to build a one-off stadium and gather an audience for the match.

Here we have two absolutely identical matches of cricket, one that has institutional backing and one that doesn't, but that (we might imagine) proceed in an identical fashion. It just doesn't seem to me to be plausible that one of these activities is a sport, and the other is not. In terms of the qualities of the activity itself, there is absolutely no difference between them, and it's difficult to see what is gained from distinguishing them. Those who argue for an institutional criterion for sport, then, need to explain why these two identical activities should be evaluated differently in terms of whether they are sports. I'm not sure an answer to this is likely to be forthcoming, at least without a circular definition or a blunt stipulation.

A more everyday example of this thought experiment is in something like the following: as a child, I regularly played cricket matches after school in our school tennis court. These matches were taken very seriously and would often stretch—like test matches— over several days. However, the rules of these matches were nothing whatsoever like those of the ICC. For instance, the matches would usually take place between myself and my friends Eddie and Warren on the one hand; and our after-school caregiver, Sean, along with a shifting collection of anonymous kids one or two years younger than ourselves, on the other. To ensure balance between the two sides, the younger children would typically have two 'outs' per innings, whereas myself, Eddie, Warren and Sean would have only one. We would use a tennis ball rather than a cricket ball. There was no wicketkeeper, only an 'auto wicky', i.e. a section of the fence behind the batter that would count as 'out' if the ball hit it on the full. The fence of the tennis court had eight poles distributed along it: hitting the fence within the first four poles was worth two runs (on the ground) or three runs (on the full); hitting the fence beyond those poles, or on the back fence, would be four runs (on the ground) or six runs (on the full). As always, *over* the fence anywhere was six runs and out. Needless to say, the ICC would not have approved.

It seems to me that a supporter of the wide-following or institutional criteria would be forced to describe this activity as not *really* sport. The following of this game was limited to the four of us, plus some half-hearted interest on the part of the younger children (we didn't hold back, so they usually didn't last long enough to get enthusiastic about the game). And though it had very clear, comprehensive rules that were understood by all players, I would hardly describe this as a deep institutional structure. But at the same time, it seems bizarre to describe what we did as anything other than 'sport': if someone were to ask me what I did after school every day, surely it would be odd for someone to object

to the answer 'I played sport'. But if an activity like this is sport, then sport does not require a wide following *or* established institutions as a *definitional* matter.

Furthermore, as Cem Abanazir points out, the institutionalisation criterion leads to some extremely difficult questions about precisely *when* something becomes a sport (2018, 4). How much institutionalisation is actually required? What kinds of institutions count? As Klaus V. Meier puts it, 'Any recourse to institutionalization, as an integral, necessary component of the essential nature of sport . . . is arbitrary' (1988, 17).

Meier argues, as I do, that we should separate out metaphysical from contingent features of sport, and that our concern when defining sport as philosophers should be with the former, rather than the latter. The institutionalisation criterion, however, is irredeemably contingent. 'Much has been made', Meier says, of the customs, traditions, organizational features, external perspectives, and other trappings which surround many sports. However, these components appear to be modes of conducting and regulating the sport occurrence which add color and significance and enhance particular aspects, but in a very basic sense they are peripheral concerns, ancillary or accidental to the basic nature of the enterprise, not part of the essential constitutive form of sport and not part of its ontological status' (1981, 87).

As a result, the institutional criterion is merely a stipulation, rather than a 'real or descriptive definition' (Meier 1981, 89). If our interest is in the activity itself, rather than its social relations, then institutionalisation is not relevant. This does not mean, of course, that no attention should be paid to the issue of institutionalisation, merely that we need to recognise that it is not important to the definitional question.

Of course, sociologically speaking it's easy to see why the wide following or institutional criteria make sense. Because in addition to legitimacy-conference, there are also concrete, practical benefits of being included in the category of 'sport', and that rely on a level of institutionalism to be actualised. For instance, being considered a sport would mean that professional eSports players have access to P-1A (athlete) visas in the United States (Llorens 2017, 9); in South Korea recognition by the Korean Sport & Olympic Committee has meant that professional eSports players can avoid mandatory military service (Kane and Spradley 2017, 3); and in the US recognition of eSports as a sport has meant a significant increase in varsity scholarships (Kane and Spradley 2017, 5). From the perspective of aspiring or professional eSports players, these are all potentially huge benefits. Similarly, in many countries the state promotes sport via subsidies or tax exemptions (Hallmann and Giel 2017, 1) or investment in infrastructure (Llorens 2017, 9); and official status is often accompanied by increased access to sponsorship (Jonasson and Thiborg 2010, 293). Being officially considered a sport therefore has significant economic benefits (Hallmann and Giel 2017, 1). As Leslie A. Howe puts it, 'sport recognition is an important step for entitlement to funding, access to physical resources and use of facilities, and a voice in the determination of the practice (2019, 8)'. Without 'formal associations and specific administrative bodies (Meier 1981, 86)', it is highly unlikely that governments and organisations would have confidence in extending to an activity the kinds of benefits described above. But it's difficult to see why this should matter in terms of how we should go about defining sport philosophically.

These kinds of practical concerns also illustrate one of the key problems with including an *evaluative* dimension in the definition of sport: it ceases to be about *describing* a certain sort of activity and becomes *interested*; it becomes a matter of stretching the definition to

include one's favoured activity, regardless of how this injures the clarity of our understanding of sport as a particular kind of endeavour.

If we remove the evaluative dimension from the definition of sport, we're freed to focus our evaluations on the qualities of particular activities. Rather than asking if eSports is a sport—with the assumption that if the answer is 'yes', then eSports must be worthwhile—we can ask directly whether eSport (and even particular games or leagues) is worthwhile. We don't need the category of 'sports' to mediate our evaluation. Then, if eSports are a valuable activity, we can now explain precisely *why*, focusing on the qualities unique to that practice, without getting distracted with larger definitional issues, or lazily ascribing that value to the *mere fact* that it's a sport. Jonasson and Thiborg make precisely this point, where they note that if a higher status 'should be possible without becoming a sport, the "sport incitement" would disappear' (2010, 293). In other words, if there's another path to legitimacy and worth, the rationale for trying to stretch the definition of 'sport' to include eSports disappears. I think the same kind of logic applies to other marginal activities, such as chess, bridge, darts, fishing, shooting, and so on.

We can say something similar about the real-world benefits of being considered a sport. Parry rightly asks 'Football and chess are both games—why should one receive funding, and not the other?' (2018, 5). Well, we need to ask whether governments *should* extend visas to professional chess players, or to eSports players? *Should* governments invest in infrastructure for these activities, or provide funding to their leagues? The answer to that question ought not come down to whether chess or eSports are *sport*, but rather whether chess or eSports are—on their own merits—activities worth supporting.

Of course, practically speaking it may be simpler, given existing institutional structures, to try to get marginal activities like eSports included within the category of sport. For instance, it would obviously be much simpler to extend athlete's visas to include eSports players, rather than trying to set up a new category entirely. But these kinds of practical considerations are merely strategic: they shouldn't ultimately mean much in terms of how we go about *defining* sport as an activity.

Conversely, excising the evaluative dimension of sport allows us to examine sports themselves more closely. If we aren't granting *automatic* legitimacy to an activity, simply by virtue of it being a sport, we can ask whether that activity—on its own merits—is valuable and worthy of our support. Should we support football, soccer, baseball, and so on? If so, why? Are there certain sports that are more worthy of support than others? These kinds of questions are sometimes raised in public discourse—see, for instance, discussions about (American) football after revelations about long-term brain injuries (Ryan 2023)—but being explicit about disconnecting sport from value or legitimacy frees us up to consider each activity's qualities and value in a focused way.

8. Conclusion

Though common-sense understandings of sport do take the term to be legitimacy-conferring and as containing an evaluative dimension—and though this idea has often been taken up by philosophers of sports, either explicitly or implicitly—from a philosophical perspective this is a mistake. When defining sport, if we want to gain a clear-eyed understanding of it as an activity, we ought to be concerned with its internal, non-evaluative characteristics, rather than the external, evaluative ones. If we confuse the two, we only

create confusion, and cannot attend to the specific characteristics sport and sport-adjacent activities. Doing so also commits us to some strange positions, including the counter-intuitive conclusion that the term 'bad sport' is oxymoronic or that instances of sport that fail to promote certain values or virtues are not even sport in the first place.

Notes

1. Realising that you made a definitional mistake like this is *not* the same as extending a chain of family resemblances. Whereas extending a chain of family resemblances continues to take the original feature as definitionally central to *some* instances of sport—s_1, say, even if we now realise that it doesn't apply to s_2, s_3, etc., – realising that you've made a definitional mistake is a matter of appreciating that you should never have taken that element to be definitionally important in the first place.
2. Again putting aside the question of physicality, which is important to Schieman's definition, but somewhat tangential to our discussion here.

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Disclosure statement

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