

Klein, Shawn E. (ed.), *Defining Sport: Conceptions and Borderlines*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2017.

Arriving at definitions in philosophy is as time-honored as it is controversial. In the fourth century B.C.E., for instance, in a dialogue entitled *Meno*, Plato has the character of Socrates attempt to define excellence or virtue (*aretê*) universally or across all categories, regardless of whether the virtue in question is specific to age cohort, gender, or free person status.<sup>1</sup> Writing a generation later, Aristotle rejects the goal that Socrates seeks. Instead, Aristotle claims that the excellence of a woman is different from the excellence of a man. He holds that it is more correct to enumerate for different classes of individuals different definitions of virtue rather than arriving at one single definition across all classes.<sup>2</sup> As students of twentieth-century philosophers Bertrand Russell and Ludwig Wittgenstein can attest, such fundamental disagreements about the nature and value of definition within philosophy have hardly been resolved in the millennia since Plato's time.

Although learned reflection in the West about sport goes back at least to the time of ancient Greece, the sub-discipline of the philosophy of sport emerged in the world of Anglophone analytic philosophy in the 1970s. Cultural scholars such as Johan Huizinga and Roger Caillois had analyzed the human phenomenon of play<sup>3</sup> in the first half of the twentieth century and university researchers within the departments of physical education and kinesiology had examined topics such as sportsmanship. However, philosophy of sport as such can be traced to Paul Weiss's 1969 *Sport: A Philosophical Inquiry*, the first volume of its kind.<sup>4</sup> For the most part, Weiss wrote about

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<sup>1</sup> Plato, *Meno*, 73a-c.

<sup>2</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, 1.13.1260a20-29.

<sup>3</sup> Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1949); Roger Caillois, *Man, Play, and Games*, trans. Meyer Barash (New York: The Free Press, 1961).

<sup>4</sup> Paul Weiss, *Sport: A Philosophical Inquiry* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1969).

metaphysics in the grand tradition of Immanuel Kant or Alfred North Whitehead and apparently lacked either experience playing sports or academic training in physical education. As a philosopher interested in the lived experience of humanity, though, he turned to the philosophical analysis of the phenomenon of sport. He even chastised other philosophers for neglecting such inquiry, neglect which he suspected stemmed from academic disdain for an activity of the body, one prone to the popularity of the crowd. In 1971, the peer-reviewed academic *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* was established; in 1972, the Philosophic Society for the Study of Sport (renamed in 1999 as the International Association for the Philosophy of Sport) was created. A half-century later, additional journals, academic societies, book series, anthologies, and even academic handbooks or companions devoted to the philosophy of sport have emerged, proof of a growing sub-field within philosophy.

Shawn Klein's edited volume, *Defining Sport: Conceptions and Borderlines*, is both the fruit of and a valuable contribution to such an emerging field. Indeed, it is the first book-length study of its topic within philosophy of sport. Although Huizinga had sought to define the phenomenon of play very broadly,<sup>5</sup> investigation of the overlapping questions "What is sport?" "What is a game?" and "What is play?" were central to the sub-discipline at its inception. Foundational was the work of Bernard Suits, whose *The Grasshopper: Games, Life, and Utopia*<sup>6</sup> sought to refute Wittgenstein's claim that the notion of game was undefinable. In order to refute Wittgenstein, Suits sought to establish the necessary and sufficient conditions for the concepts "game" and "sport."

Klein organizes his edited volume in two parts. Part One's six chapters explore whether necessary and sufficient conditions exist to define sport and, if so, what they might be. Part Two's seven chapters take up the problem of borderline cases. If, for instance, one claims that a necessary condition of sport is that it includes physical exertion, then does one subsequently deny that, for example, E-sports (e.g., first-person shooter computer games *Call of Duty* or *Halo* [pp. 210 and 216-17]), are instances of sport, even though they are supported by international contests and followed by sports media?

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<sup>5</sup> Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*.

<sup>6</sup> Bernard Suits, *The Grasshopper: Games, Life, and Utopia* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978).

In Chapter 1, Chad Carlson, in his “A Three-Pointer: Revisiting Three Crucial Issues in the ‘Tricky Triad’ of Play, Games, and Sport,” ably reviews Suits’s attempt to identify the defining properties of sport and to distinguish it from game and play. However, as Francisco Javier López Frías’s Chapter 2 (“Broad Internalism and Interpretation: A Plurality of Interpretivist Approaches”) shows, philosophers like Suits who sought to define sport often presupposed a hermeneutical stance—subsequently called “formalism”—which somewhat naively assumed that one could identify a concept solely by reference to its formal structure. In the case of a sport such as professional basketball, its formal structure is usually its explicit rules, that is, whatever is contained (and only what is contained) in the Official Rules of the National Basketball Association. Alongside such formalism, though, there emerged two additional interpretive positions in the philosophy of sport. Some philosophers of sport embraced a position—subsequently called “conventionalism”—which included in the definition of a sport those informal rules which emerge over time through conventions between players, referees, and spectators, even if those rules are not incorporated into the formal rules of the game. Other philosophers of sport embraced a position—subsequently called “internalism”—which characterizes a sport not only by means of its explicit rules and implicit conventions, but also (and more importantly) on the basis of internal or implicit principles of the sport.

To flesh out these various positions, consider the case of strategic fouling in basketball, that is, when one team member tries to stop the clock or force a turn-over (after missed foul shots) by making physical contact with an opponent that violates the explicit rules of the game. Is strategic fouling “part” of the sport of basketball? To the formalist, such an act violates the formal rules of basketball and thus is not a part of the sport of basketball. To the conventionalist, though, strategic fouling has emerged over time as a part of the sport of basketball, even if it violates the formal rules of the game. By contrast, the proponent of internalism asks the question whether strategic fouling is consistent with the underlying (but not necessarily explicit) principles which are internal to basketball as a sport.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Readers familiar with the late-twentieth-century debate between Ronald Dworkin and H. L. A. Hart about the definition of law in jurisprudence, which took place at roughly the same time as the debates in philosophy of sport about the definition of sport, are correct to hear echoes here; see, e.g., H. L. A. Hart, *The Concept of Law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961), and Ronald Dworkin, “The Model of Rules,” *University of Chicago Law Review*

The remaining four chapters of Part One of the volume work around the edges of the problems raised in the first two chapters. Kevin Schieman's "Hopscotch Dreams: Coming to Terms with the Cultural Significance of Sport" and Heather Reid's "Defining Olympic Sport" explore the intersections between defining sport more generally and the nature of ethical norms. Schieman, for instance, criticizes Suits's definition of sport by arguing instead for a functional definition of sport, namely, one which is oriented by not just any game, but rather what is a good (or well-functioning) game. Reid shows how ideas of human excellence, justice, and peace define a subcategory of sport, namely, Olympic sport. By contrast, John McClelland (in "Early Modern Athletic Contests: Sport and Not Sport?") and Keith Strudler (in "The Impact of Mass Media on the Definition of Sport") take up the historicity of the concept of sport. McClelland argues against the claim that the characteristics of sport in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries are fundamentally different from those of the early modern period. Strudler, I think unpersuasively, argues that modern media constitutes how we define sport today. Although modern media and modern sports are clearly intertwined in many important ways, I found myself unconvinced of his claim, for example, that ESPN's broadcast of the Scripps Spelling Bee might lead us, perhaps, to think of spellers as athletes and spelling as a competitive sport (pp. 106-7). Although clearly spelling bees are competitive events that aim at an "athlon" or prize, they lack any of the physical exertions, endurance, or skills which are usually taken to be necessary characteristics of those games that we call "sports." Media coverage may help create the public following and regulatory institutions which some philosophers think are necessary conditions of a sport; however, unless one has an especially broad notion of "sport," it seems difficult to see how media coverage can transform a non-physical activity into a sport.

Part Two of *Defining Sport* is composed of case studies that, more or less persuasively, provide detail-rich accounts of important contemporary "sport-like" activities and then adjudicate whether those activities are accurately categorized as sports. In many cases, one is looking at emerging institutions currently undergoing growth in popularity or institutional support, the results of which could lead one to characterize that activity as a sport. Pam Sailors, Sarah Teetzal, and

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35, no. 1 (1967), pp. 14-46. I think that Frías mistakenly attributes those echoes primarily to the hermeneutical philosophies of Hans-Georg Gadamer and Alasdair MacIntyre (pp. 27-33) rather than to those of Hart and Dworkin.

Charlene Weaving (in “Borderline Cases: CrossFit, Tough Mudder, and Spartan Race”); Chrysostomos Giannoulakis and Lindsay Krol Pursglove (in “Evolution of the Action Sports Setting”); Brody Ruihley, Andrew Billings, and Coral Rae (in “The Mainstreaming of Fantasy Sports: Redefining Sport”); and Joey Gawrysiak (“E-sport: Video Games as Sport”) each make their case for whether the activities they examine should be thought of as sports. According to my score card, these scholars argue that: Tough Mudder is a fitness activity, not a sport; Spartan Race and CrossFit are not yet, but are perhaps becoming, sports; with the exception of BMX racing and snowboarding, most “action sports” (e.g., surfing and skateboarding) are insufficiently regulated to be considered sports; fantasy sports (i.e., games in which participants establish and put to the test their “fantasy football” teams) are not sports; and video gaming, with further governance, is becoming a sport. The chapter by Sailors et al. on the fitness activities is especially detailed and persuasive. The chapters by Ruihley et al. and Gawrysiak seem especially dependent upon the claim (as noted above in the case of Strudler’s chapter) that “if x has a broad media following, then x should be considered a sport.” As anyone who has covered Title IX proceedings for gender equity in intercollegiate athletics knows, the institutional or sociological aspects of an activity (Does it have a league with competitive championships? Does it have a governing body? Does it have a standardized rule-book?), are very important in determining whether that activity is a sport. However, I doubt that strong media following is either a necessary or sufficient condition of an activity being characterized as a sport.

The remaining three chapters are more concerned with boundary-lines than boundary-cases. Brian Glenney (in “Skateboarding, Sport, and Spontaneity: Toward a Subversive Definition of Sport”) argues that we should think of skateboarding as a sport precisely because the activity’s spontaneity and “subversive moments” transcend rule-grounded domains and capture an essential moment of sport as a human activity (p. 151). Such an argument seems to me like moving the goal-posts. No doubt, spontaneity is an important part of sports, but I think Glenney is wrong to make it a sufficient condition of sport. Teresa González Aja (in “Bullfighting: The Mirror and Reflection of Spanish Society”) and Joan Grassbaugh Forry (in “Why Some Animal Sports are Not Sports”) import ethical norms about the treatment of non-human animals into their conceptions of what constitutes a sport. Although I share their sympathies about the

inhumane treatment of non-human animals, once again, this seems like goal-post moving. Rather than defining sport, their chapters (like Reid's) raise questions about presumably a sub-category of sport, namely, sports which are ethically permissible. Gladiator competitions in Rome were barbaric and inhumane, but I do not see that the fact that those competitions involved lethal force against human animals invalidates the claim that those competitions are sport (even if blood sport). Rather, gladiator competitions are best thought of as an example of an inhumane or ethically wrong sport. Whether gladiator competitions (or, that favorite of dystopian science-fiction, the "hunger games") should be thought of as "good games" (as per Schieman's chapter), alas, is a question which none of the contributors seems to consider. In fairness to Schieman, though, he does characterize professional football as a bad game with a major following, in light of the emerging evidence about chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE) among professional football players (pp. 59-60).

On the whole, I think this volume will be useful especially to faculty teaching philosophy of sport to undergraduates. It does not seem to me that any of the chapters breaks fundamentally new ground or profoundly challenges or reshapes the debates within the field. Indeed, there seems to me some significance in Carlson's observation that "questions related to the definitions and definability of sport have not been asked in the *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* since Wertz's 1995 article" (p. 14).<sup>8</sup> Although Suits's investigation of the definition of sport was present at the inception of the discipline, it seems unclear to Carlson (and me) whether the question of defining sport remains an open or even central question within the discipline at present. Perhaps this new edited volume as a whole will challenge scholars within the field to reengage the subject of defining sport, but I don't think any of the individual chapters in Part One will accomplish that. However, I think that some of the chapters in Part Two of the volume, the ones devoted to boundary cases, would serve as excellent case studies to challenge undergraduates to think through both the adequacy of their definitions of sport and the applicability of those definitions to the changing world of sport.

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<sup>8</sup> Spencer K. Wertz, "Is Sport Unique? A Question of Definability," *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* 22 (1995), pp. 83-93.

