



What is the Value of Sport?

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Questions about value are essentially questions about priorities: what is important and what matters. When we decide that it is better to be kind rather than honest (in the case of telling a white lie to avoid hurting someone's feelings), or better to prioritise equality over freedom (in order to give opportunities to those that are disadvantaged at birth), we are making a value judgement. Although Graham McFee¹ asserted that the only genuine philosophical questions in sport are ones of ethics, he may have only been half correct. The branch of philosophy that studies value (also called axiology) includes ethical questions but it also encompasses questions of aesthetics; what is beautiful or how things affect our senses. So the study of value is concerned with what we believe to be good and right, and how we determine worth or priority.

Are values subjective or objective?

Value can be seen as either as subjective or objective. Those who argue it is subjective see value as a matter of personal taste that is beyond the scope for disagreement. This view holds that if I value playing sport over going to my grandmother's funeral, it is as inarguable as my preference for vanilla over chocolate ice-cream. You might prefer chocolate but this is something that we just have to agree to disagree about. Subjective value then is merely a matter of preference. The contrary position is that value can be objectively determined by reference to an external authority such as God, or by recourse to biological or evolutionary facts, or even by the concept of rationality in that we must be consistent with the way we hold and order our values. An objective view of value maintains that value is not just individual personal preference such as whether we prefer the colour blue to green, but rather can be determined by external criteria. This seems a much more plausible way of understanding value as it reflects the way we generally discuss and debate issues of value, ethics and aesthetics; we are rarely content to simply agree to disagree as in the case of our preferences of ice-cream. However, the fact that an objective standard of value has never been agreed upon indicates that there is still space for some element of personal, subjective or non-rational value.

Is the value of sport external or internal?

In assessing the value of sport, there are again two contrasting views. An *externalist* will argue that the value of sport is found merely in the way that sport reflects the values that we hold in society and culture as a whole. There is nothing therefore special about sport itself, it is just a prism in the way that it allows us to see and measure our priorities more clearly. The same approach could be taken for other cultural activities such as theatre, music and art. An externalist would argue that all of these things are of value because they are ways of expressing other

¹ McFee, G. (1998) Are there Philosophical Issues with Respect to Sport (Other than Ethical Ones)? In M. J. McNamee and S. J. Parry (Eds.) *Ethics in Sport* (pp3-18). London: Routledge.



values, such as friendship, co-operation, health and well-being. An *internalist* however, maintains that there are inherent values particular to sport as a practice. This view maintains that the value of sport is found within sport itself rather than as a vehicle to view or attain other values.

This highlights a key debate in the philosophy of sport: whether sport is of value in itself, or whether it is merely a means to achieving other things we believe to be important. Those things that we value as being good in themselves are said to hold *intrinsic* or *inherent* value. Those things that we value because they are means to other ends are said to have *extrinsic* or *instrumental* value. It seems reasonable to say that instrumental activities are not as valuable as intrinsically valuable activities, since we are only valuing them because they enable us to reach another higher value; they are only valuable because they act as stepping stones that enable us to get somewhere else.

What are the moral and non-moral values of sport?

Value can be further divided into moral and non-moral value. Moral values relate to moral qualities, such as; courage, honesty, fairness, freedom and respect. These are the types of values that are alluded to when people talk about sport being character building or teaching fair play. Non-moral values are things such as; wealth, happiness, security, health and commitment. Kretchmar² argues that there are four primary non-moral values to sport and physical activity: health, knowledge, skill and fun.

- *Health*: Doctors, Governments and public health organisations often cite good evidence that links physical activity to a longer and richer life. The more able you are in terms of aerobic and anaerobic fitness, strength and flexibility, the more likely you will be able to do other things that you value, such as play with your children and grandchildren, contribute to groups and activities, and lead the type of life that you enjoy.
- *Knowledge*: Humans are problem solvers. We value understanding causal relationships as it enables us to develop and progress. As competitive creatures, knowledge also allows us to develop effective and winning strategies. Knowledge of how to acquire and develop skill, how it has bearing on health and other values provides us with tools that enable us to go beyond what we have already achieved.
- *Skill*: A particular type of practical knowledge or wisdom is manifested in skill; it is the ability to do or show rather than to know or understand (indeed many of the best athletes find it difficult to explain in words how they are able to execute skilful actions). We value performance and excellence in sport and physical activity because it is the demonstration of human achievement and possibility. Whilst knowledge and understanding can help in skill acquisition, ultimately it can only be developed through practice and commitment.
- *Fun*: It is commonly accepted that there is a link between enjoyment and motivation and therefore this value is emphasised in most teaching of sport and physical activity. Without it, it is difficult to acquire the other values, but it is also of value in itself since it provides us with satisfaction and a meaningful life.

² Kretchmar, R. S. (2005) *Practical Philosophy of Sport and Physical Activity*. 2nd Edition. Leeds: Human Kinetics.



As can be seen, all of these values are inter-related since each provides a rationale for another. We value fun because it is a motivating factor in helping us achieve skill, knowledge and health. We value health because without it we would be unable to acquire or demonstrate skill or have fun. We value knowledge because it helps in the acquisition of skill, health and perhaps even fun (if we know what others and ourselves enjoy), and we value skill because it exemplifies human achievement and is the manifestation of health, fun and knowledge.

How can value be assessed and prioritised?

As has been indicated, we can hold a multitude of different values. Yet this raises the question as to how to prioritise our values, especially when they might come into conflict. I might value both having fun and skill in sport but to achieve the latter might mean I have to sacrifice the former to some extent. Equally, if I am to achieve a personal best in a race, I might have to push my body through pain in order to do so.

The hierarchical view of value ranks value according to worth: the higher up the hierarchy, the more worth a value holds. This is the model that Thomas Hurka used in his paper 'Games and the Good' when he attempted to explain the value that modern society places upon sport and game-playing³. This model consists of differing levels of connecting values.

[Insert Figure 13.1]

Hurka measures value through the Aristotelian concept of excellence or *aretē*. Each node in this hierarchy represents a different degree of excellence. Attaining a value on a particular level presupposes that one already has attained the degree of excellence that is necessary for the values contained in the hierarchy below. We can imagine, for instance, that a higher value represents the achievement of swimming half a mile. Being able to swim half a mile presupposes that one is able to both keep oneself afloat without drowning (a lower value) and swim 30 meters (a mid-value). The ability to swim half a mile however, is required to attain an even higher value of competing in a standard distance triathlon.

Here we can see that excellence manifests itself in difficulty and mastery of skill. The model of hierarchy is one of means-ends. The higher up you go, the greater the skill required. It also explains why the greater the skill acquisition, the more challenging the game has to become for it to be of any value. Hurka argued that complex games and sports are more valuable than those that require brute strength, e.g. weightlifting. Good games therefore are those that require a variety of skill and embody both practical and theoretical knowledge. This conception reflects Aristotle's belief that it is better to have a mastery of a variety of skills and knowledge which can be applied to other areas of life rather than to develop a narrow range of skill and ability.

Conceptualising value as a model of hierarchy provides us with one way of assessing or measuring value and it can be useful in understanding skill acquisition for example. However, it doesn't provide us with an answer as to what

³ Hurka, T., & Tasioulas, J. (2006) Games and the Good. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volumes*. pp217-264.



value sport itself holds, if any. The hierarchy model appears useful in the example of swimming because it demonstrates how achievement, skill and excellence related to a particular activity could be measured and assessed. But its use becomes less clear the longer one looks at it since it seems to suffer from infinite regress and misrepresent some of the way in which we understand the notion of value. If we continue our hierarchy further, we then need to answer the question, 'Why is the ability to complete a triathlon of value?' One answer could be, 'In order to complete a double-triathlon' but now it appears as if we've missed the point. It may be the case that there are people that are never satisfied with their achievements and every accomplishment is merely a stepping stone on to the next, yet this seems to be a disappointing and demoralising way of recognising meaning and value in our lives.

In answer to this problem, Baier advocated three criteria that enable us to assess value: intrinsic value, satisfaction and coherence.⁴

Criterion of Intrinsic Value: Activities that have intrinsic value are considered superior to those that have instrumental value; for logic suggests that if we could bypass the 'middle value' we would. For example, if we take part in weekly physical exercise classes merely because we want to maintain our weight, then if there was an easier way to do this (such as a 'magic pill'), we would take it. Some things only appear to have value because they enable us to attain other values. As such, things that have value in themselves are considered more valuable than things that lead on to the attainment of other values.

Criterion of Satisfaction: The ethical theory of utilitarianism holds that the highest value in life is pleasure or happiness. According to this theory, we should therefore do those things that maximise the most amount of pleasure or happiness and this will lead to a good life. However, one of the problems with utilitarian theory is that happiness or pleasure seems too narrow a value. This was exemplified by the American philosopher, Robert Nozick⁵, in his 'experience machine'; a thought experiment that demonstrated why pleasure is not of ultimate value. Nozick hypothesised that if there existed a machine that gave us on-going pleasure, few of us would want to live in it. We can apply an example of this thought experiment to sport. Imagine a machine which meant that sport was a constantly pleasurable experience and one which we always won. Every time we set foot on a golf course or on a football pitch we would feel an on-going euphoria that culminated at the last hole or final whistle. What would our experience of sport be like? Arguably, it would be hollow and ultimately devoid of pleasure. The pleasure we get from sport is not from winning, but rather from overcoming the possibility of losing and the risk of failing. As such, satisfaction seems to be a better value than just happiness or pleasure.

Kretchmar breaks down the criterion of satisfaction into two further corollaries (consequences), the corollary of purity and the corollary of durability.

⁴ Baier, K. (1958) *Moral Point of View: A Rational Basis of Ethics*. New York: Cornell University Press.

⁵ Nozick, Robert (1974). *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*. New York: Basic Books.



- *The Corollary of Purity*: The less harm that is caused in producing satisfying experiences, the better. This means that the satisfaction that one gets from playing and winning against an opponent on a similar level is preferable to the satisfaction that one gets from playing and winning against an inferior opponent. Kretchmar argues that whilst we may enjoy soundly and easily beating our opponent, it is not as valuable as the satisfaction of a hard fought win.
- *The Corollary of Durability*: Long-lasting satisfaction is preferable to that which is temporary or erratic. Great sports teams and individuals are those that have a history of success whereas short term success is quickly forgotten. It is this type of satisfaction that comes from other values that we hold such as dedication, commitment, determination, and the development of talent and potential.

Kretchmar defends the inclusion of these corollaries because they clarify the concept of satisfaction. The first corollary indicates that it isn't simply pleasure, since satisfying experiences come from also knowing that we have had to overcome challenge. The second corollary highlights that we prefer long lasting satisfaction that is tied to other values than a short term pleasure that might be associated with a quick 'high'.

Criterion of Coherence: A meaningful life is one that makes sense on a wider scale and contains a narrative whereby who we are can be explained by what has gone on in our life before. One of the unique aspects of being human is the way we are able view our self from a perspective outside the one we immediately find ourselves in. We create stories that explain how we have reached our current situation, and imagine ourselves at various points in the future. This ability to create a coherent narrative about our lives is a valuable tool as it allows us to create the life that we wish to live. The fact that we are aware of our own existence and have the ability to project a vision of ourselves that is different to the self that currently exists, gives us the freedom to be able to define ourselves in a multitude of ways. This means that humans can create goals and visions of the future that we can aspire to achieve. We can imagine ourselves standing on top of an Olympic podium collecting a gold medal, or raising the Champions League trophy at Wembley. Equally, we can remember the time when we were beaten on penalties in the county championship, or the time when we suffered injury during an important trial game. It is those memories and these goals that inspire many athletes to success and help them form a narrative to their lives. You only have to look at the enormous wealth of sporting biographies for evidence that supports this view. The criterion of coherence allows us to put together individual moments of satisfaction that are shared amongst a range of activities and events into a meaningful whole. It allows us to rank and evaluate our achievements as part of a bigger life narrative and ultimately is what makes life both meaningful and interesting.

How flexible should we be in our values?

One of the ways to provide a rational justification of our values is to provide a cost-benefit analysis according the evidence we currently hold. For instance, current evidence suggests that physical activity is good for health in terms of lowering blood pressure, reducing osteoporosis, reducing the likelihood of heart attack and stroke, improving mental well-being, amongst other benefits. Therefore, physical activity is of value because it provides a means for good health which is of value in itself. However, scientific or empirical evidence is insufficient on its own to provide justification for our values. We also need a normative element which provides a coherent and rational account of



why the evidence is important. Consider for example, someone who has smoked for many years. We might point to compelling evidence that suggests that they are significantly more likely to suffer lung and throat cancer, premature aging, yellowing teeth and skin and ultimately an early death. Their response however might be to argue that despite all these risks, smoking is a meaningful part of their life; they enjoy it, it forms part of their social activities and friendship group, and they're prepared to take the gamble of suffering some of the side effects. For the smoker, the benefits of smoking outweigh the drawbacks from not smoking and despite the scientific evidence they have produced a rational and coherent argument.

Kretchmar warns against excessive sporting values which he terms: excessive survivalism, runaway individualism and oppressive rationalism.⁶ Excessive survivalism is an extreme focus upon health, addictive behaviour towards workouts and exercise, and the possession of an over-competitive attitude towards winning. Runaway individualism is the sole focus upon the self rather than community, with a strong avocation of individual rather than team based activities, and an individualistic and egocentric morality. Oppressive rationalism is an obsessive fascination with breaking sports records and pushing the boundaries of higher, faster and stronger; and an over-reliance on the scientific method, at the expense of the spirit of playfulness.

As was noted earlier in this chapter, recognising and prioritising our values is not simply a matter of whim or personal preference. It is normative in that it shows what we think should be important for others too. At the same time we need to recognise that there is flexibility and room for disagreement. We need to strike a balance between being over-prescriptive in our values and being too tolerant of the values that are held by others. We ought to have a rational basis for the values we ascribe to but need to avoid being dogmatic. We need to be sensitive to culture and context. For example, it is often only when we have been immersed in a particular sport that we 'get it' and are able to appreciate its value. For Americans this might be the 'slow and tedious' game of cricket whilst for Europeans this might be the 'restrictive and autocratic' game of American Football. Values may also change according to need and situation. Three core values that are often cited (for instance, in Maslow's hierarchy of needs) are food, shelter and warmth. But in modern society, when these are often taken for granted or provided by others such as the State, the values of leisure and freedom become more pronounced.

Understanding value is one of the most difficult tasks in philosophy, since it is an abstract concept that is axiomatic (self-evident). Values direct our priorities in life which influence our actions. Recognising what is important allows us to set goals, provide us with meaningful experiences and work towards a fulfilled life. Moreover, it provides us with a foundation upon which we can make sound ethical judgements and encourage others to act in particular ways. Sport undoubtedly holds some value and can be a significant part of a good life. However, it is more difficult to assess whether the value of sport is intrinsic or instrumental. This question is explored further in the next few chapters which consider the seriousness of sport and the part that risk and danger plays.

⁶ Kretchmar, R. S. (1994) *Practical Philosophy of Sport and Physical Activity*. Leeds: Human Kinetics.