

Flourishing as the Standard for Evaluating the Social Practice of Competitive Sport*

El florecimiento como criterio para evaluar la práctica social del deporte competitivo

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ABSTRACT: Competitive sport in its many specific forms is an important aspect of many cultures. Particular sports may be considered as what MacIntyre calls “social practices.” We argue that the appropriateness of a competitive sport should be evaluated as a social practice, according to its contribution to the human flourishing of those who engage in the practice. We critique mutualism, a popular putatively virtue-based approach to sport, as a valuable but incomplete position that is inconsistent with its Aristotelian roots. We analyze Aristotelian and neo-Aristotelian understandings of flourishing as consisting in the development, exercise, and enjoyment of the full complement of human powers. We propose normative criteria for evaluating a sport as a social practice, according to its contribution to human flourishing. Our social practice-based critique of sport has ramifications for a larger cultural critique as well.

RESUMEN: El deporte competitivo, en sus múltiples formas, es un elemento importante en muchas culturas. Cada deporte específico puede concebirse como, en términos de MacIntyre, una “práctica social”. En este artículo se defiende que la adecuación del deporte competitivo, en tanto que práctica social, debe ser analizada en función de su contribución al florecimiento humano de aquellos que participan en ella. Se critica al mutualismo, una posición filosófica del deporte fundada en la virtud y ampliamente aceptada, porque resulta valiosa pero, a su vez, es incompleta e inconsistente con sus raíces aristotélicas. Se analizan las interpretaciones aristotélicas y neo-aristotélicas del florecimiento entendido en función del desarrollo, ejercicio y disfrute del total de los poderes humanos. Se proponen criterios normativos para evaluar un deporte como una práctica social, dependiendo de su contribución al florecimiento humano. Nuestra crítica al deporte basada en el concepto de práctica social puede ser extendida para llevar a cabo una crítica cultural más amplia.

KEYWORDS: excellence; sport; flourishing; development; cooperation

PALABRAS CLAVE: excelencia; deporte; florecimiento; desarrollo; cooperación

1. Introduction: Sport as a social practice

Most human activities are part of social practices. One of the most influential definitions of “social practice” is from Alasdair MacIntyre (1984), for whom a social practice is “any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity” (187). MacIntyre says that soccer, chess, music, and architecture are practices in this sense, and they are situated within a social institution (e.g., soccer club, architecture organization), itself located within an overarching social context (which he refers to as “tradition”).

Adela Cortina (2008) argues that social practices can play an important role in enacting social change. Consistent with her argument, we argue that in an ideal stable community the hierarchical relationship among human activities, social practices, institutions, and the social context is congruent. The different social practices would contribute to an overall sense of coherence in that community. When social practices are incongruent with their social context, in order to make them more congruent, either the practice or the context must change.

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In this paper, we center on the social practice of competitive sport. As Morgan notes (2006, 208), this practice is an important component of popular culture: people, by engaging in discussion about moral issues in sport (e.g. competitive fairness, role modeling, and patriotism), argue for and evaluate moral principles and notions that play a crucial role in their lives and culture. In particular, we critique current virtue-based approaches to excellence and cooperation in sport; specifically, we center on mutualism and its notions of “excellence” and “cooperation.” Subsequently, we analyze Aristotelian and neo-Aristotelian understandings of flourishing as consisting in the development of the full complement of human powers through engagement in social practices. By drawing on these analyses, we propose normative criteria for critiquing and evaluating sport practices, exploring how they can help to promote human flourishing.

2. Sport as a cooperative practice that leads to excellence development and flourishing

Simon *et al.* (2014) refer to competitive sport as “sport contests with the intent or major goal of defeating the opponent.” (32) They further explain that “[c]ompetition in sports can range from professional athletic contests to interscholastic competition to backyard contests among friends” (34). Sport philosophers tend to discuss issues in sport and illustrate their discussions through the most competitive events or contests (e.g., 1998 Soccer World Cup, 2007 SuperBowl) (see Morgan, 2020; Simon *et al.*, 2014). Yet the practice of competitive sport goes beyond such events. It encompasses many specific sport practices (e.g., soccer, basketball, gymnastics, swimming), multiple practice levels (e.g., professional, intercollegiate, amateur), and elements such as practice in preparation for events and discursive activity (i.e., thinking and talking about the practice).

As Holowchak and Reid (2013) expound, competitive sport is dominated by a “martial/commercial” view of sport as an instrumental activity to achieve goods such as fame, wealth, celebrity, and national pride. Within this tradition, success is measured in terms of victory. Players seek to develop their physical skills to achieve higher standards of performance in order to win. Sport philosophers, drawing on Aristotle and neo-Aristotelian philosophers such as Alasdair MacIntyre and Charles Taylor, criticize this conception of sport for overemphasizing victory and the pursuit of egotistic goals. Instead, they advocate for understanding sport as connected to intrinsically valuable elements and experiences such as the development of excellence through the exercise of physical skills.

Arguably the most widely accepted excellence-based philosophical approach to sport is mutualism, which Simon *et al.* (2014) present as the interpretation of sport that captures the practice in “its best light” (29). Mutualism identifies sport as a game of physical skill, specifically a game in which players search for and display excellence through the use of physical skills. In their words, competitive sport is “a mutually acceptable quest for excellence through challenge” (Simon *et al.* 2014, 55). The excellence players pursue is not only physical; when practiced in the right way, mutualists argue, competitive sport can become a site for morally virtuous action and moral development (Austin, 2013).¹

For MacIntyre (1984), an excellently practiced social practice is one where participants focus on the intrinsic goods and standards of excellence of the practice and minimize the intrusion of extrinsic goods; for mutualists, good sport practices provide participants with an occasion

for developing and exercising excellence, and in sports this excellence is typically understood as related to developing their physical excellence. For Simon *et al.* (2014), “[a] well-designed sport is one where the challenges require complex skills for success [...] A major goal of participating [...] is to achieve excellence in meeting challenge.” (91) For example, a mutualist account would be that soccer players engage in the sport so that they can develop and enjoy the exercise of kicking abilities.

Those non-mutualist sport philosophers drawing on putative Aristotelian virtue and excellence concepts tend to see athletic excellence as an outcome achieved through the development of physical capacities that “lead to winning” (Howe, 2018, 183). However, from a mutualist standpoint, victory is not the end-goal but an indicator of having performed excellently. The source of value of competition, from a mutualist standpoint, is the experience or process of testing one’s physical powers through competition: “the principal value of athletic competition lies not in winning but in overcoming the challenge a worthy opponent presents” (Simon *et al.*, 2014, 37). Moreover, Simon (2000) connects sport to flourishing. He sees competitive sport, at its best, as striving to flourish through the exercise of physical skills:

part of the explanation of why sports have the features they do, as well as a justification of why they should have such features, is a conception of the good life for human beings. According to this conception the good life [...] consists of meeting challenges for their own sake and develop our capacities in order to do so. (11) Flourishing through challenge, mutualists argue, is not individualistic but cooperative. To participate in sport players must obey the rules, that is, they must first agree to accept the limit the rules impose and make their moves within the boundaries of the game. This, according to Simon *et al.* (2014), can be considered a form of cooperation. Sport competition is impossible without participants’ cooperation in this non-controversial way. From a mutualist perspective, cooperation in competitive sport goes well beyond the acceptance of a common set of rules; it requires that participants fulfill other obligations, specifically the obligation to realize the view of sport that shows sport in its “best light.” Participants must act to become the best type of competitor for their opponent. The opponent is not an enemy to be reduced or an obstacle to be overcome, but rather a collaborator in a quest for excellence. Competitors can facilitate their opponents’ quest for excellence in two ways. One is to present challenges that are worthwhile to overcome, pushing opponents to perform better. The other is to collaborate with other participants on how to improve. This type of facilitation occurs more often in practice activities or pre-competition events. For instance, senior competitors, especially in the context of sport teams, mentor junior ones to help them improve their skills and better respond to challenges. Mutualism is a highly demanding view of sport; it not only requires that participants cooperate to engage in the same activity, but that they do so in a specific way, namely because they value the experience of being opposed to one another and seek to display and mutually develop their physical excellence.

3. Critical analysis of mutualism

We argue that the conception of flourishing at the core of mutualism is limited and insufficient, and one that misses the essence of the point of Aristotelian and neo-Aristotelian ethics. First, it is unclear whether sport as currently practiced *contributes* to the flourishing of the participants by leading to *development* and *exercise* of excellence, at least in the Aristotelian virtue-ethical senses of the terms “excellence” and “flourish.” Second, it is difficult to argue that many sport practices are cooperative activities that enable competitors to pursue and develop excellence of character and to flourish as human beings.

3.1. Excellence and flourishing in Aristotle's and neo-Aristotelians' works

Although some philosophers of sport claim to draw on Aristotle's and neo-Aristotelians' treatment of virtue and excellence, the term "excellence" in such accounts of sport means something different from what it means in the philosophical tradition of virtue ethics. In *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle presents an ethical plan (what ought to be) based on his understanding of human function (what is). The core notion in such a plan is *eudaimonia*, a Greek word with no exact modern English equivalent that some translate as "happiness" (Annas, 1993, 43), "blessedness" (MacIntyre, 2016, 54), or "felicity" (Barker, 1962, lxxv). The idea of *flourishing*, or well-being (Kraut, 2007, 140), closely relates to happiness, as it pertains to a human person whose powers are developing toward a maturity that is the fullest expression of the human powers (i.e., human nature).

For Aristotle, *eudaimonia*² is not a subjective state but an activity consisting of the exercise of unique human capacities (*NE*, I 1098b).³ The Stagirite connects these capacities to his view of natural human function (*ergon*). He famously asserts that man is a social animal (*NE*, I 1097b), giving great weight to the capacities gained through *logos*, which translates as "language" or "reason." Given humans' social nature, Aristotle highly regards the political institution of the Athenian polis as it existed in ancient Greece. In *Politics*, he makes the strong claim that "the polis is prior in the order of nature to the [...] individual" (1253a9-12). Individuals have an inborn potential to develop under the guiding influence of the polis. This capacity for the development of natural powers is exceptionally strong in humans —distinguishing them from other animals. Development, in Aristotle's view, leads to *eudaimonia* only if the developing individual were subject to the discipline of family and society, so as to develop virtuous habits of behavior.

Arete, which philosophers translate alternatively as "virtue" or "excellence," describes the development of dispositional characteristics that are functional with respect to the prospect of *eudaimonia*. Aristotle claims that the development of dispositional virtue requires habituated virtuous practice. Although virtue as a static disposition is an achievement (jointly between the habituated and the habituees), it is only manifest through virtuous action. Its manifestation is more than a state; rather it is the active exercise of a virtuous disposition.⁴ Virtuous character has meaning only as virtuous activity. Through character development understood in this way, society is "prior to" the individual, because the individual can only develop properly in the guiding context of a proper society or social environment. The Aristotelian thought that the "polis is prior to the individual" can mean the social environment conditions its citizens, whose virtue and maturity come to sustain a flourishing society over time. This virtuous cycle will be best sustained when social practices contribute to human flourishing of citizens by their developing, exercising, and enjoying the full complement of the natural human powers.

Richard Kraut emphasizes flourishing in *What is Good and Why?*⁵ He first notes, "flourishing requires the development not merely of physical powers, but of psychological powers as well" (2007, 137). Then he expands this statement saying, "a flourishing human being is one who possesses, develops, and enjoys the exercise of cognitive, affective, sensory, and social powers (no less than physical powers)" (Kraut, 2007, 137). Kraut tends to focus on the experience of the individual, emphasizing the elements of psychological flourishing (consistent with his de-emphasis of the physical powers in his definitions). Just a few pages after his initial definitions of

flourishing Kraut (2007) defines flourishing slightly differently as “the maturation and exercise of certain cognitive, social, affective, and physical skills.” (141). This definition refers to the social, and it elides the *enjoyment* of the exercise of the human powers (it also refers to skills rather than powers). Nevertheless, his treatment of the flourishing of social powers is brief.

In contrast, MacIntyre’s approach to flourishing in *After Virtue* (1984) and *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity* (2016) puts much more emphasis on social flourishing than Kraut’s approach. MacIntyre’s list of human powers, which he attributes to Aristotle, are “physical, perceptual, emotional, rational, political, moral, and aesthetic” (2016, 28). Although MacIntyre does not include social powers in the list above, he nevertheless emphasizes development of social aspects of excellence in his analyses. For him, humans achieve excellence only in the context of *social* practices (embedded within the larger social framework of tradition), and he makes a point of how it is in this way that virtue is manifest.

The practices discussed by MacIntyre are all social practices, even as he emphasizes the good for the individuals within them. Although he fails to fully explain whether social practices in general naturally lead to the development of excellence and virtue or whether the particular practices he describes are especially conducive to positive development, what is clear in his argument is that practices can provide a venue for the manifestation of virtue and excellence, and that their exercise leads to achieving “goods internal to a practice.” Thus, MacIntyre agrees with Aristotle that virtue is not an end, but rather a family of dispositions conducive to *eudaimonia*.

It is unclear how various excellence-based conceptions of sport and the cooperative search for athletic excellence relate to the ancient Greek *arete* and to Aristotelian or neo-Aristotelian understandings of excellence. For Aristotle, the ultimate goal of human action is not *arete*, but *eudaimonia*.⁶ Not athletic or other competition, but the polis was the context for *eudaimonia*. The excellence that Aristotle writes of in *Nicomachean Ethics* is the excellence of the “serious man” (*spoudaios*, sometimes translated as the “excellent man”), that is, the excellence of the mature human being, one who contributes to the well-being of the polis. This excellence goes beyond physical prowess and has to do with practical wisdom and good judgment (*phronesis*), pertaining primarily to the realms of the moral, ethical, social, and political.

Certainly ancient Greek culture placed a high value on physical prowess and on agonistic competition to determine the most excellent athletes (as well as dramatists, musicians, and rhetoricians). Excellence was not limited to a power (e.g., physical). Although, in *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle makes reference to narrow forms of excellence, as for example in harp playing, we contend that his intent was not to valorize excellence of some technique, but to use those examples to give some insight into the idea of the broader and more important excellence of the serious man in the polis. For Aristotle, excellence or virtue had to do with the development and exercise of multiple natural human capacities to function excellently in society.

Similarly, Kraut and MacIntyre place the pursuit of excellence within broader normative frameworks. In Kraut’s self-proclaimed “developmentalist” view, excellence in flourishing is a process of maturation by developing a person’s powers. For MacIntyre, excellence in the social practices of which he or she is part contributes to a life with a “narrative unity,” that is, a vital framework whereby the person’s goals and values are consistent with the tradition (MacIntyre, 1984, 198). The connections between engagement in sport and these larger so-

cial frameworks, as well as the development of multiple human powers, are overlooked in sport philosophical accounts of excellence, especially when the emphasis is on winning and developing the physical powers needed to win.

3.2. *Sport as a cooperative activity*

Although the notion of “cooperation” plays a crucial role in mutualism, sport philosophers have devoted little attention to careful exploration of the concept. Some, such as Gaffney (2015) and Hyland (1978), have examined it in the context of team sport and, in particular, team performance. However, mutualists have not fully thematized what it means for an individual competitor to engage in a cooperative activity with opponents. Indeed, Nguyen (2017) argues that Simon *et al.*'s understanding of cooperation is inadequate and “too simplistic [as] it cannot capture the [...] complexity of game-play, nor [...] the difficulty of achieving cooperation through game-play” (124).

Works in political philosophy and philosophy of action can help shed light on the view of sport as a cooperative enterprise. Rawls (2001, 6; 2005, 16), for instance, distinguishes between *social cooperation* and *coordinated social activity* in his writing about political justice. He says, “Social cooperation is always for mutual benefit,” based on “fair terms of cooperation,” the ideas of “reciprocity and mutuality,” and “consideration of each person’s rational advantage” (Rawls, 2005, 300). Each citizen participant in a political system must look to the idea of what is “reasonable.” This means that, in a group with differing perspectives, individuals must subordinate some personal self-interest to achieve a cooperative goal in the interest of the group, a goal that requires collective effort.

Rawls (2005) speaks of *coordinated social activity* as a “coordinated social activity efficiently organized and guided by publicly recognized rules to achieve some overall end” (300). A coordinated social activity describes situations where the members of an association are interested in achieving an instrumental goal. Social cooperation is something more than a coordinated social activity. Because the latter focuses on achieving an immediate goal to be accomplished efficiently and quickly, this kind of activity loses sight of the collective nature of the process toward achieving the goal.

A cooperative enterprise sustained through coordinated social activity would be a mere *modus vivendi*, that is, a strategic agreement that individuals enter only for utilitarian purposes. Rawls illustrates the notion *modus vivendi* with a treaty between two states whose national aims and interests put them at odds. Each state would adhere to it so long as doing so is in their interest (2005, 147). *Modus vivendi* cooperative enterprises are unstable. Their existence over time depends on whether the individuals who engage in cooperation can pursue their individualistic goals. If something undermines this possibility, cooperation suffers. Participants in a *modus vivendi* achieve the cooperative goal of maintaining the cooperative enterprise but only as a result of pursuing individual goals.

Regarding cooperation, Pettit and Schweikard (2006) draw a similar distinction by differentiating *aggregative action* from *joint action*. The former is socially epiphenomenal, that is, the result of individual actions without anybody intending to bring about such an action. In contrast, a joint action requires that different people produce the effect *together*. This action, thus, is something that individuals do jointly apart from their individual actions; they come

together explicitly to perform the action. To do so, “each must combine with others to enact that performance” by intending the action *and* seeing themselves as equally valuable members, that is, as engaged in cooperation on an equal footing (Pettit & Schweikard 2006, 21). This is the sense in which mutualists think athletes must cooperate to strive for excellence.

Sport in which competition is at the level of the team offers greater opportunities to engage in joint action and/or social cooperation. Take the example of a basketball team. By declaring their intention to join the team, the players express their will to make a *joint commitment* (Gilbert, 2015) to teammates and the coach to engage in a *joint activity* (Bratman, 1992). Gilbert argues that the joint commitment is a collective intention that creates a mutual obligation, in this case among players, and including the coach, to work toward both individual and collective goals (e.g., excellence, victory). All (players and the coach) are subject to the collective discipline of others toward this goal. The joint commitment and collective intention establish the individuals as a “group as one” (Ritchie, 2013) in the important respect that they have a collective intention that establishes mutual obligation. They become a structural organization with important relationships among the individual players (Ritchie, 2013). Their collective action is in the strong sense of more than simply the contributions of isolated individuals: it is highly cooperative.

Individual sport offers opportunities for joint action (Holt, 2016), but these opportunities are more limited. Because players do not engage in competition collectively as a team but aggregatively as individuals (e.g., swimming, track and field), the prospect of group agency concerning the competition is difficult to envision. This is especially the case in highly competitive settings and competitive events—which are at the center of mutualists’ analysis of sport—and more so when the goal of their joint action is the pursuit of physical excellence. In most competitive settings, competitors are strangers to one another. Thus, developing joint commitment and collective intention is challenging because participants cannot know their opponents’ intentions. Nor can they assume that their opponents would pursue cooperative excellence because this goal is unusual in the setting of competitive sport.

Furthermore, as Nguyen (2017) posits, the emphasis on joint action could be antithetical to many competitive sports: “If winning is merely the *measure* of excellence, and the activity of competing is solely the mutual pursuit of excellence, then much of what we do in games [especially an emphasis on winning] is nonsensical” (130). For instance, if a team is so superior to another (e.i., a hockey team has a 10-goal difference over another) that the players in the worse team lose all interest in the game, a perspective of joint action might suggest that the better team should make an effort to level the playing field and help the players in the opposing side regain interest in the game—so that they can keep pursuing excellence. This kind of leveling action is common in pick-up, friendly events; participants adjust the rules and team composition to keep everybody engaged and avoid undue competitive advantage. However, sport governing bodies do not take similar measures to level the playing field in competitive events, especially in those where there are goods external to the practice at stake. It is unimaginable that the National Football League would request football players to switch to the opposing team during the Super Bowl because the team these players are part of is vastly superior to their opponent.

Given the limitations above in individual sport and in highly-competitive team sport, cooperation to pursue athletic excellence can be, at most, the result of aggregative action. That is

to say, in trying to achieve their individual goals, competitors shape the competitive environment, turning it into a site for testing and developing their physical powers. This form of interaction would be a *modus vivendi* or aggregative action. Players pursuing their self-interest create a collective result, namely: a site for developing physical powers through challenge. Competitors' individual actions would result in a sort of invisible hand that would ensure that those who enter the practice have opportunities to develop their physical powers by attempting to overcome challenges. This is a plausible mutualist-like interpretation of competitive sport, but one that falls short from Simon *et al.*'s fuller notion of cooperation.

4. Promoting flourishing through practicing

Two important elements in sport practice are: (1) the activities involved in preparation for an upcoming competition, what is commonly described as "practice," and (2) the activities involved in contesting the competitive event(s). As Nguyen (2017) posits,

A genuine mutual quest for excellence would look something like this: we would take turns setting up very difficult situations for each other, that were just hard enough to be challenging and developmentally useful, but within reach, for the sake of displaying excellence. And such things sound familiar: they're called 'training'. The problem with Simon's view is that it doesn't distinguish adequately between playing and training. (130)

Training contexts, according to Nguyen, offer better avenues than competitive events for promoting the development of people's natural powers. Similarly, Bäck (2009) argues, "the way to acquire virtues claimed to result from playing sports is not to play sport at all. Instead: practice a martial art" (232). That is to say, martial arts, not competitive sports, are the way to virtue because they emphasize practicing as development over practicing as preparation for a competitive event.

An old adage applied to sport says, "You play as you practice." Another says, "Practice does not make perfect; perfect practice makes perfect." Both adages appear to refer to the distinction between preparing for play and the playing itself, and both may be interpreted in an Aristotelian way. The first adage speaks to the importance of proper preparation, of preparing well during a period of habituation. The onus seems to be on the habituated (i.e., the player). The second adage is explicitly perfectionist: if perfect practice is understood as excellent or virtuous practice, then the onus seems to be on those imposing the proper discipline on others in need of practice, the habituators (e.g., coaches).

Both adages point to the importance of players learning to be disciplined through habituation toward excellence as a standard of a practice. Engagement in sport practice involves a joint commitment (per Gilbert) to cooperate in order to flourish individually and collectively through habituation and discipline. Viewed in this way, sport is, using Sloterdijk's (2014) term, an *ascetical* practice as "the players are themselves inescapably affected by what they play and how they play it (and how it has been drilled into them to play it)" (145; see also Aggerholm, 2016; Lopez Frias & Gimeno Monfort, 2018; Welters, 2016).

Competitors can evaluate the success of practicing in terms of competitive goals reached throughout the season, that is, in terms of how well practicing has prepared them to win.

Alternatively, they can view success from practicing as it contributes to the larger goal of engendering a fuller flourishing, as the development of their natural human powers, irrespective of winning and losing games. Of course, these two ways of thinking about success are not mutually exclusive, and participants should see them as parts of a continuum. Although striving for success in winning games is important in order to stay within the nominal framework of the competitive practice of the sport, the full sense of player *flourishing* within the social practice must consider activities prior to a competitive event, during the event, and over a series of such events (e.g., season). If the goal is to promote human powers through sport, this full sense should be prioritized as the proper standard for success in sport.

Understood in this full sense, the opportunities for human flourishing through engagement in competitive sport are profound. Cognitive, affective, social, sensory, and physical powers are all important, as is the integration of these powers. The claim that competitors develop their human powers, especially those related to moral character, is controversial. Bäck (2009) argues that competitive sport, with its emphasis on aggressiveness and confrontation, may promote vice more than virtue. Other sport philosophers, as Austin (2013) notes, argue that sport-related moral powers do not translate into other spheres of life. Rosenblum (2000, 48) asserts that even if it were true that participants develop moral-like excellences in the context of a practice (e.g., such as courage, self-control, and justice), these excellences neither transfer to other practices nor affect the participants' moral character.

Yet experts in positive youth development such as Holt *et al.* (2011) demonstrate that sport provides a context in which people can learn life skills and positive attributes such as connection to others and other positive character attributes. As sport sociologist Coackley (2011) posits, sport participation *per se* does not necessarily lead to development. The relationship between development and sport is contingent and dependent on multiple contextual factors such as type of sport played, orientation and actions of peers, and meanings given to the practice. In practice settings, contextual factors can be configured to favor the development of human powers and promote flourishing. The role of coaches and organizers is important in configuring sport practices.

Flourishing through engagement in sport can be understood in multiple senses. One is the sense of *developing* the natural human powers through collective "practices," as individuals and as a group unit. For instance, by practicing, individuals develop and exercise human social powers by working together towards common goals (e.g., create chemistry, develop strategies). Holt (2008) claims that, in many cases, learning the specific skills required to play the sport teaches them little of enduring value; by contrast, participants learn life skills from their experiences of the social interactions they experience in the sport. Thus, the pedagogical value of sport lies not so much on its emphasis on physical excellence, but rather on its capacity to bring people together by providing an arena for them to interact and pursue common goals. A specific power arising from these experiences, Holt *et al.* (2008) argue, is the social ability to work with other people (167). In alignment with this idea, Rotolo *et al.* (2020) suggest connections between engagement in high school sport and civic engagement.

Flourishing can also be understood in the sense of *enjoying the exercise* of powers and skills (Kraut, 2007), both individually and as a group during practice and competitive events. For example, participation in or observation of a game provides a heightened opportunity to exercise developed cognitive aspects of the practice, while participating in sport. Players can come to

understand how the game situation dictates changes in strategy, and they can enjoy working to learn special plays for specific situations. In some sport, there is a premium on not dwelling on a past mistake because new opportunities to do well are almost immediate, and overcoming a mistake to engage these opportunities can be an important source of enjoyment.

Lastly, we argue, in addition, that flourishing can be viewed in the sense of enjoying *not only* the exercise of the increasingly developed powers, *but also the disciplined exercise of developing them*, both as individuals and as a group, either in preparation for formal competition or in the competition itself. Learning how to deal with one's own public mistakes is a social skill to be emphasized. The opportunities for learning from mistakes in sport are usually ready-to-hand, and to some extent, an appropriate attitude toward reacting to mistakes can be both practiced and habituated.

The habituated development of and the experiencing of the social powers of human beings connect to Aristotle's dictum "the polis is prior in the order of nature to the [...] individual" (*Politics* 1253a9-12). This provides a basis for exploring how individuals' experience of sport relates to broader social frameworks. If humans are social animals, as Aristotle claims, the development of their social powers is the essential aspect of their flourishing. Thus, for flourishing sport should be configured to promote these social powers. The larger social and political context strongly influences social practices in general, and sports in specific. We argue that it is important that the social structure of a society and of its constituent institutions and practices allow the development and exercise of human powers to achieve flourishing. The promotion of these powers might come at the expense of undue emphasis on physical powers and the physical excellence that many putative virtue-based sport philosophers take to be the primary excellence of competitive sport.

Simon *et al.* (2014) rightly argue that the ideal of sport is always distinct from the actual practice of it. However, because mutualists' main goal is to morally evaluate actual practices in sport (42), they do not fully explore larger social implications of the incongruence between sport practices and the culture. We argue that when providing a normative analysis of a social practice, one should ask how well, or to what extent, the ideal view of the practice survives in its actual social context. Disparities between the ideal and the actual would highlight what aspects of the sport or the culture need to be modified. For example, if the social practice of sport, as tightly connected to human flourishing, is incongruent with an individualistic culture, in which the pursuit of self-egoistic goals often takes preference over that of collective goods, then one of them should be modified. Mutualists focus primarily on reforming sport practices toward a narrow sense of excellence.⁷ Alternatively, if convinced of the importance of a fuller sense of human flourishing through social practices, one might draw on the ideals of those practices to promote the ideal of flourishing in the broader culture. A developmental emphasis on human flourishing in society would call for less attention to the most highly competitive events and phenomena related to them (e.g., early specialization, commodification), and more attention to sport as a venue for the development of human powers in this fuller sense.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, we have argued for a notion of competitive sport as a social practice that should not unduly prioritize the competitive event, but rather views sport competition as inherently connected to the events that occur before and after the competition. This notion of sport calls for the different sport practices to focus more on flourishing than in current excellence-based views —such as mutualism, which focuses on competitive events— because it provides more opportunities for engaging in cooperative action to develop excellences (of human powers), both physical and social, and thus to flourishing. Many sport philosophers would claim that development of physical powers is primary. Without downgrading their importance, we argue that although some minimal level of play skill must be developed in order to properly “play” a sport, the value of the sport is most fully understood in terms of the more complete idea of human flourishing. This approach does less to valorize the achievement of the highest level of physical excellence for the very few and the organization of the most competitive events, and more to valorize the development of the natural human powers for all the participants and the promotion of training (developmental) practices. Our argument pertains not only to a critique of sport but also to social practices more broadly, as well as to the larger social and cultural context of those social practices.

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Notes

1. For instance, Simon *et al.* (2014) conclude: "Through sport we can develop and express moral virtues and demonstrate the importance of dedication, integrity, fairness, and courage. Consequently, sport presupposes the importance of standards, including standards of excellent play and standards of appropriate conduct." (164)
2. For this and other Greek terms, see the treatments of them in Oswald (1983) and Pakaluk (2005).

3. When *eudaimonia* is understood as happiness, there is great potential for confusion, as the modern sense of happiness is not what Aristotle had in mind. In the modern sense happiness might be some affective state resulting from the satisfaction of individual desires or preferences, often with respect to possession of material goods. It tends to be a strongly individual notion.
4. This emphasis on activity relative to a disposition and not on the disposition as a static state reflects the argument by Kosman in *The Activity of Being* (2013). In a review of Kosman's book, Long (2015) says that "the entire essay depends on the rejection of the traditional translations of *energeia* and *dunamis* as actuality and potentiality. ... Rather than actuality and potentiality, Kosman rightly insists upon activity as the translation for *energeia*, and ability or capacity for *dunamis*." Synthesizing a wide range of Aristotle's work, Kosman argues that according to Aristotle motion and activity are two modes of activity, motion being an incomplete form of activity. He says, "the relationship between ability and activity [is] a relationship between first- and second-level realization, that is between an ability (which is the realization of a prior potency) and the exercise of such an ability." (176) (In our argument, we refer to this potency as natural human powers.) Applied to the concept of virtue, the first-level realization is the coming into being of the capacity or disposition. Kosman considers this a change that results from motion; for the capability to be manifest and complete, activity in the complete sense is required, the active exercise of the capability or disposition. Thus, per Kosman, and we agree, virtue as a static disposition does not describe the fullest sense of virtue. Rather than a disposition that is an achievement of that as an end (a first-level realization), virtue is the exercise of that capability in a way that has no other end (a second-level realization), but is done for its own sake, according to the being that was first changed by the virtuous disposition being achieved.
5. In *What is Good and Why?*, Kraut does not make explicit that "flourishing" is a translation for *eudaimonia*. However, he does specify it in "Two Conceptions of Happiness".
6. As one of the anonymous reviewers pointed out, in a non-technical sense the terms *arete* and *eudaimonia* can be synonyms.
7. According to Simon *et al.* (2004), mutualism as a theory of sport serves two functions: (a) to help differentiate sport activities from other related practices and (b) to provide normative criteria to evaluate and critique sport and sport-related ethical issues such as doping, cheating, and sportsmanship (23).