

A Hermeneutical Analysis of the Internalist Approach in the Philosophy of Sport

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we make a hermeneutical analysis of internalism, the dominant tradition in the philosophy of sports. In order to accomplish this, we identify the prejudices that guide the internalist view of sports, namely the Platonic-Analytic prejudice introduced by Suits, one of the forefathers of internalism.

Then, we critically analyze four consequences of following such a prejudice: a) its reductive nature, b) the production of an unrealistic view of sports, c) the vagueness of the idea of excellence; and d) the leap from the descriptive analysis of the sporting phenomenon to the setting of normative requirements for the practice of sports.

hermeneutics, philosophy of sports, internalism, Heidegger, excellency, prejudice

KEYWORDS

1. The main tenets of sports hermeneutics

The discipline of the philosophy of sports was created by Anglo-American philosophers like Warren P. Fraleigh, Paul Weiss, and Bernard Suits. It emerged in a philosophical context in which linguistic-analytic methodology and goals were predominant (McNamee, 2007; Kretchmar, 2014; McNamee, & Morgan, 2015). More recently, however, the contribution of Continental philosophers has begun to influence the linguistic-analytic methodology and the philosophical nature of the discipline (Isidori, Maulini, Frías, & Javier, 2013; Kosiewicz, 2009; Martínková, & Parry, 2013). In this way, the initially Anglo-American philosophical tradition of sports has recently been complemented with typically Continental descriptive-narrative methodologies (Moe, 2014; Aggerholm, 2015).

One such methodology is philosophical hermeneutics, which is one of the most prominent philosophical approaches that emerged in the 20th century. The main task of philosophical hermeneutics, according to Shaun Gallagher (1992, p. 5), consists of identifying “the different factors, including the epistemological, sociological, cultural, and linguistic factors” that influence our understanding of reality. This is key to philosophical hermeneutics. This philosophical approach is based on the idea that human beings are ontologically interpretive beings who constantly create interpretations of reality. In this vein,

Heidegger uses the term “lifeworlds” to refer to our interpretations of reality, while Nietzsche, who depicts the human being as a fantastic being, uses the term “perspective”.

Given the nature of the factors that influence our interpretations of reality, interpretations are not subjective, but are rather inherited from and largely shaped by the traditions and the context of which we are part. This provides us with an intersubjective philosophical perspective. In the field of the philosophy of sports, several scholars emphasize the intersubjective nature of our conceptions of sports. William J. Morgan (2010), Cesar R. Torres, and Douglas W. McLaughlin (2014) are among those scholars. However, none of them analyze sports from a purely hermeneutical perspective. In fact, pure philosophical hermeneutical approaches to sports are unusual in the literature of the philosophy of sports.

The main goal of our work is to mend this gap in the literature of the philosophy of sports. Thus, this paper aims to create a hermeneutics of sports. In light of the main tenets of philosophical hermeneutics explained above, the hermeneutics of sports should take as its point of departure the fact that we are always embedded in traditions that provide different interpretations of sports. Examples of such traditions are amateurism and professionalism.

Regarding the philosophical theories of sports, the internalist tradition is currently the most predominant one. This tradition has produced different internalist theories of sports throughout history. In the historical context of theorizing about sports, “broad internalism” or “interpretivism” have been the most prevalent internalist theories. This is mostly due to the work of scholars like Robert L. Simon (2014), Torres (2012), and John S. Russell (2004), who are generally regarded as the main internalist philosophers of sports (López Frías, 2014a). Along with its understanding of sports and the sporting world, the internalist tradition provides prejudices, or assumptions, and commonly shared hidden understandings that influence our interpretation of the sporting world.

If the main goal of hermeneutics is to grasp the prejudices and hidden shared understandings that influence our interpretation of reality, then the main task of the hermeneutics of sports should be to grasp the main prejudices and commonly shared hidden understandings that influence our theories of sports. In doing so, we do not attempt to provide a more accurate internalist approach to sports. Rather, our main goal is to analyze the key factors of the internalist interpretation of sports in general, and of the prevalent philosophical tradition of sports, that is, broad internalism, in particular. Moreover, our main motivation is a critical one. Thus, from a critical-hermeneutical perspective, we attempt to unveil the hidden shared internalist understandings of sports, as well as to uncover the internalist prejudices that influence the internalist interpretation of sports. On the whole, in this paper, we sketch the theoretical and practical limits of the prevalent interpretive paradigm in the philosophy of sports by critically analyzing the commonly shared hidden understandings and prejudices influencing its interpretation of sports.

2. The Platonic genesis of the internalist approach in the philosophy of sports

If Bernard Suits is widely regarded as the intellectual father of the internalist approach of the philosophy of sports. Suits’ approach of internalist formalism is the first attempt, against Wittgenstein’s anti-definitionalism of the term “game”, to define the concepts “game” and “sport”. The fact that the work of Suits is conceived as a response to the Wittgenstenian anti-definitional standpoint is a clear example of the Platonic nature of Suits’ proposal. Plato’s and Socrates’ main goal is to respond to the Sophists’ anti-definitional approach. For example, according to Plato, Protagoras argues that “man is the measure of all things”. Understood in a relativistic sense, this means that we cannot provide a universal definition of anything because definitions are dependent upon the particular nature of individuals and upon their context. There are no fixed, universal essences; rather, everything depends on the contingent situation of the person who is experiencing something.

Going back to Suits' proposal, he claims that:

"The orientation of the book is philosophical in one traditional sense of that word. It is the attempt to discover and formulate a definition, and to follow the implications of that discovery even when they lead in surprising, and sometimes disconcerting, directions" (Suits, 2005, p. ix).

Along with the Platonic goal of his proposal, Suits' famous book in which he formulates a definition of the term "game", "The Grasshopper", is developed through a Platonic dialectical method. In the book, the Grasshopper and his two pupils, Skepticus and Prudence, engage in a dialogue to attempt to define the term "game". Through the dialogue, Grasshopper formulates hypothetical definitions of the term. The pupils make caveats to the tentative definitions offered by Grasshopper in order to find the complete definition of the concept. In doing so, the main characters in Suits' story create a process of rational deduction that aims to find the defining features of the concept at stake:

"First he presented a definition of games or, to be more, precise, a definition of game playing. Then he invited me to subject that definition to a series of tests. I was to advance against the definition the most compelling objections I could devise, and he was to answer those objections" (Suits, 2005, p. 17).

Suits' deductive rational process for reaching definitions is essentially Platonic, as is clearly illustrated in Plato's allegory of the cave found in Book VII of *The Republic*. In this allegory, the future philosopher has to take the path up out of the cave in order to learn about the world outside the cave. At the end of his journey, the philosopher is able to grasp the Ideas or Forms of things, which are symbolized by the Sun.

As Suits is the father of the internalist tradition of the philosophy of sports, we argue that any internalist theory of sports inherits the Platonic elements of the Suitsian philosophical method and goals. This being true, the most widely accepted philosophical theories of sports are largely influenced by, in hermeneutic terms, a *Platonic prejudice*. From a methodological standpoint, the Platonic prejudice turns the goal of providing a definition of sports into the main goal of the philosophical theory of sports. Concerning the influence of the Platonic prejudice in the content of internalism, it is worth noting that internalist philosophers of sports generally regard sports as being a perfect practice. Thus, for them, the struggle for excellence should be the key defining feature of every definition of sports. In line with this, John S. Russell argues that "rules should be interpreted in a manner that the excellences embodied in achieving the lusory goal of the game are not undermined but are maintained and fostered" (Russell, p. 35). Simon defines the concept of sports as:

"a mutual quest for excellence, an activity that is significantly cooperative in that all the participants consent to be tested in the crucible of competition for both the intrinsic value of meeting interesting challenges and for what we learn about ourselves and others through the attempt to meet the competitive test" (Simon, 2014, p. 47).

The philosophy of sports in general and the internalist approach in particular have long since overcome the classical Platonic mistake of distinguishing between mind and body categorically, as if the two of them were irreconcilable (Kretchmar, 2007). Nonetheless, the pivotal role played by the idea of the struggle for (physical) excellence in the internalist definition of sports is also a clear sign of the Platonism of the internalist approach. This links the essentially embodied character of sports to the idealized and sublime side of our corporal nature: physical excellence (Platón, 2014). The Platonically-inspired link between sports and the sublime side of our embodied nature results in what we call "the imperialism of excellence", which dominates the content of all the internalist philosophical theories of sports.

3. A further exploration of the Platonic prejudice in the internalist approach

The main methodological goal of internalism, owing to its Platonic character, is to provide a definition of sports by identifying the main features of the Idea, Form, or Essence of sports. The idea of the Platonic character of the philosophical method and purposes of internalism is not novel. Rather, the link between Platonism and internalism is noted by Fred D'Agostino in his criticism of formalism, which was the first

internalist approach in the history of the philosophy of sports: “Formalists are driven to a kind of Platonism about games. For them, games are ideal types; they are only very imperfectly realized in their alleged instances” (D’Agostino, 1981, p. 9).

Thus, D’Agostino argues that internalism is based upon a Platonic-analytical method aimed at grasping the Idea or Form of sports. Such an analytic process reduces the sporting phenomenon to an ideal that does not correspond with its specifics in reality. The lack of a correlation between the ideal definition and the reality of sports is, for D’Agostino, an endemic problem of Platonism, and thus also of formalism. For instance, a fundamental rule in soccer forbids kicking, tripping, or striking opponents; this rule allows the game to keep its normal pace. From a formalist standpoint that conceives rules as the defining feature of sports, a game ceases to be a game if one of its fundamental rules is broken.

According to D’Agostino, if this were the case, no actual match of soccer would meet the requirements for being regarded as soccer, especially in an elite competition where the violation of rules is a common strategy. The undermining of the formalist claim that sports should essentially be defined in terms of rules shows that the formalist definition of sports is too demanding and idealistic. By drawing on D’Agostino’s criticism of formalism, we argue that the idealistic and excessively demanding character of the formalist definition of sports is common in other types of internalist approaches as well.

All of the internalist philosophical theories of sports share this weakness, which is the consequence of both:

- a) being influenced by Suits’ account of sports and
- b) the influence of the Platonic prejudice in the internalist tradition, which creates an imperialism of excellence that, consciously or unconsciously, reduces the nature of the sporting phenomenon by analyzing it from a Platonic-analytical perspective.

3.1. The Platonic method is reductive

As we highlighted in the previous section, the pivotal feature of the Platonic methodology used by internalism is its reductive nature. This can be criticized from two different perspectives: one related to methodological implications, and the other related to the particular content derived from the reductive interpretation of internalism. In this section, we will address the former perspective, while the latter perspective will be addressed in the next two sections.

Definitions, from a hermeneutical standpoint, are key to how we experience reality. They provide us with assumptions that allow us to make sense of what we experience. The reality of a given phenomenon is thus disclosed according to the constitutive elements of its definition. As the Platonic-analytical methodology is based on the search for definitions, it reduces our experience of the sporting phenomenon, as does any other theory of sports that aims to provide a definition of the concept.

In fact, the history of the philosophy of sports shows that every new proposal in the philosophy of sports is formulated with the aim of supplementing a previous one (Lopez Frias, 2014). Every philosophical theory of sports regards the extension of the limits of the prevalent definition of sports as one of its main goals. This is why it can be argued that the philosophy of sports has progressed through history, especially because each new philosophical proposal has provided a broader, more accurate view of the sporting phenomenon. Despite having a legitimate and useful practical purpose, the act of pointing out the reductive character of previous definitions of sports is not without problems.

We argue that it is problematic to criticize the reductive character of a definition by providing a new, broader one. No definition will ever fully capture the reality of a phenomenon. The task of defining something is essentially reductive. By providing a definition of a phenomenon, we overlook some features of the phenomenon to be defined. This is pivotal, because we need to focus on those features that we regard as being more essential and overlook the superficial ones. Criticizing a philosophical proposal for being reductive disregards the reductive nature of the process of definition. No internalist proposal seems to be

aware of this, as they all aim to complement a previous theory of sports. This unawareness is a result of the Platonic prejudice prevalent in the internalist tradition.

From the perspective of the hermeneutics of sports, the unawareness of the prejudice underlying internalism and its consequences, not the reductive nature of definitions, is misleading, methodologically speaking. Definitions are reductive, but they are necessary as well. The problem arises when we are not aware of the detrimental consequences of defining something and, as a result, we think that all that can be said about a phenomenon is what fits the definition of it. When this happens, definitions hinder us from seeing more aspects of the phenomenon at stake.

This does not mean that prejudices and assumptions, or the disclosing of reality in a reductive way, are necessarily problematic. For instance, according to philosophical hermeneutics, not only are prejudices necessary, but they are constitutive of our reality as interpretive beings. This being the case, what is problematic from a hermeneutical standpoint is not being aware of the existence of prejudices and their consequences (Gadamer, 1997). Only by being aware of the influence of such prejudices and assumptions will we be able to critically assess their nature and validity. But we cannot perform this task without knowing that they are always there, influencing our experience of sports. This is why the point of departure of the hermeneutics of sports is to bring to light the underlying elements in our experience of reality in order to critically analyze them. No internalist proposal in the philosophy of sports has performed the task of critically analyzing the elements behind its Platonic-analytical methodology.

3.2. The unrealistic internalist definition of sports

A consequence of internalism's search for a definition of sports is the reduction of the nature of the sporting phenomenon. From a methodological standpoint, the reduction of our experience of sports is not necessarily problematic in itself. Rather, the actual methodological problem is the unconscious and uncritical acceptance of the Platonic-analytical method. As members of the internalist tradition, internalist theories of sports are biased by the influence of prejudices. We argue that that content resulting from the influence of internalist prejudice leads to an interpretation of sports that might be problematic, depending on the features of sports that are overlooked.

In the case of internalism in the philosophy of sports, the influence of prejudice and the internalist definition have determined our understanding of sports as a struggle for physical excellence. The supremacy of excellence is such that every feature of the sporting phenomenon is accommodated to it, obstructing and overshadowing any other components of the phenomenon that are at odds with the view of sports as a perfect practice. Everything in sports must be interpreted as a vehicle or means to excellence. Features that do not match this requirement are regarded as extrinsic to sports and corruptive of its intrinsic nature. Rational deduction in sports should aim to show how every element of sports coheres with a certain definition of it.

In fact, in one of the appendixes of *The Grasshopper*, Suits worries that his Platonic-analytical method might lead him to make the mistake of using rational deduction to prove his own presupposed definition of sports. Should this be the case, rational deduction is not aimed at fully grasping the sporting phenomenon, but at verifying a presupposed view of sports. This criticism of the internalist approach resembles Karl Popper's criticism of the inductive methodology used by the so-called "philosophies of suspicion", namely psychoanalysis, Marxism, and Nietzsche's philosophy.

By drawing on Popper's ideas, we argue that the main purpose of internalist philosophers of sports is the verification of their view of sports as a struggle for physical excellence, a view which stems from their philosophical tradition. By verifying this view, they provide an unrealistic, or softened, interpretation of the nature of sports. This is a problematic result of the internalist use of the Platonic-analytical method. Examples of how some realities of sports are unrealistic to make them suitable for the definition of sports as a perfect practice are the prevalent understanding of competition as a physical struggle, and the notion of the opponent.

In the two cases above, we find an element that is intrinsically opposed to the idea of excellence. In the first case, if athletes regard sports as a physical struggle that aims to destroy others, sports can hardly be linked to excellence. This is the reason why sports philosophers speak of the “sweet tension of competition” to provide a softened interpretation of the struggle that is inherent to sports (Kretchmar, 1975; McLaughlin, & Torres, 2011; Standal, & Moe, 2011). Likewise, in the case of the second concept, the concept of the opponent, sports philosophers insist on substituting the term “opponent” for the term “facilitator”. From an internalist perspective, opponents should not be regarded as obstacles to overcome at any cost, but rather as facilitators in our common search for excellence. Warren P. Fraleigh (1984), who is widely regarded as one of the fathers of the discipline, introduced this idea of the opponent as a facilitator.

The identification of the sugar-coating process of the reality of sports is the result of the philosophical method used by sports hermeneutics. By being aware of the prejudices and assumptions that lead our experience and understanding of the sporting phenomenon, the methodology allows us to “go behind” the internalist definition of sports and critically analyze it. In doing so, a hermeneutical philosophy of sports does not aim to accommodate all of the features of our experience of sports to a presupposed definition. Rather, the methodology provides us with an open attitude towards sports which enables us to grasp more of its constitutive elements. In line with Heidegger, we claim that philosophy should not aim to reduce experience by means of definition, but rather it should be understood as a process of unveiling reality by embracing our experience of it (Heidegger, 2002).

3.3. The third man argument applied to the idea of excellence

In this section, we further develop our criticism of the Platonic-analytical methodology of internalism. In particular, we focus on the problems related to the content derived from the unconscious acceptance of the Platonic method as a prejudice inherited from the internalist tradition. To do so, we use one of the main criticisms of the Platonic theory of forms, namely, the argument of the third man. In light of this criticism, we further explore the consequences of turning the idea of excellence into the cornerstone of the Idea or Form of sports.

The first man argument was offered by Plato in his dialogue *Parmenides*. The argument posits that any particular thing X is called “X” because it exists as “Form X”. However, there should be a third Form that includes “Form X” as part of a greater idea. Let’s consider the following example. Sports is generally referred to as a perfect practice because it is regarded as a struggle for physical excellence. Thus, sports exist as the “Form physical excellence”. However, the “Form physical excellence” exists as the “Form sporting excellence”, which at the same time relates to the “Form moral excellence”, and this to the “Form human excellence”, and so on, *ad infinitum*. In this example, we see how the idea of excellence can always be linked to a greater one in order to explain its nature and the reason for its existence. This process of relating one idea to a higher one can be extended *ad infinitum*.

In practice, athletes are asked to improve constantly. They will never reach perfection because there is always a higher degree of excellence to embody. Athletes are asked to be an example to their peers, and then to their opponents, to the young members of society, to the society in general, and so on. There does not seem to be a limit to the excellence expected of athletes. New expectations can always be created regarding the excellence embodied by athletes. There is always a greater idea of excellence to be realized.

In theory, philosophers of sports move easily from the view of sports as a struggle for physical excellence to higher notions of excellence. For instance, some argue that achieving physical excellence requires other human excellences, like dedication, effort, knowing oneself, respecting a rival, etc. This takes the idea of excellence, to which sports is linked, beyond the perfection of certain physical skills. The physical challenge raised by the sporting competition is essential to our conception of sports. Nonetheless, sports cannot be reduced to their physical aspects. Sports include many more elements, as other excellences are embodied in trying to overcome their physical challenges. Moral qualities are especially relevant in this sense. This relates to the last criticism of the methodology used by internalism.

This criticism concerns the extremely normative aspect of the internalist definition of sports, which is clearly a consequence of Platonism, underlying the internalist tradition. As it is linked to physical excellence, the definition of sports provided by internalist philosophers suggests higher notions of excellence. This being so, the Form of sports is linked to the most ideal features of sports. One of these features is moral excellence. Not only does this create an ideal notion of sports that can never be realized, but it also produces a leap from the descriptive goal of finding the defining characters of what sports are to the normative purpose of knowing what sports ought to be. This leap from the descriptive to the normative is problematic and is a consequence of Suits being the father of internalism. In Suits' formalist approach to sports, there is no clear-cut divide between the nature of sports and how participants ought to behave when they engage in sports. This is shown, for example, in Suits' formulation of the incompatibility thesis between rules and cheating.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have taken the first step in building the hermeneutics of sports. In other words, we have made a hermeneutical analysis of internalism, the prevalent tradition in the philosophy of sports. In order to accomplish this, we identified the prejudices that guide the internalist conception of sports, namely the Platonic-Analytic prejudice introduced by Suits, who is one of the forefathers of the internalist approach. Then, we critically analyzed four consequences of following such a prejudice:

1. The Platonic-Analytic methodology unknowingly reduces reality.
2. The reduction of the reality of sports generates an unrealistic view of sports through the use of the idea of physical excellence.
3. The intent to define sports based on the idea of physical excellence is, at the very least, problematic because the idea of excellence can always lead to higher ideas of excellence; and
4. The use of the idea of excellence is misguided because it generally leads to an unjustified and problematic leap from the descriptive analysis of the sporting phenomenon to the setting of normative requirements about how to practice sports.

In criticizing the main consequences of following the internalist prejudice, we do not want to go against internalism. Rather, we want to show the weaknesses of this philosophical tradition in order to make its main philosophical weaknesses clear.

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