



Why a Focus on Sporting Tests Would Reveal an Alternate Story and Raise Ethical Questions about Agon: A Commentary

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ABSTRACT

Loy and Morford focus on “agon” as an important window through which to understand human life and development. Competition in war and sport was culturally significant then, and it is culturally significant today, albeit in modified forms. In this commentary, I attempt to do two things – first, identify implications of some conceptual distinctions, and second, point out normative questions raised by the Loy/Morford analysis. I find it worthwhile to differentiate clearly between tests and contests. If the historical and sociocultural spotlight were turned on sporting “tests” rather than “contests”, that is, on trying to solve physically demanding problems well rather than trying to solve them better than at least one other party, then another story than the agonal account could be told. War would probably no longer serve as the best historical and prehistorical analogue for sport. Rather, it might be hunting. I add, that, on one hand, competitive sport is far less violent and, therefore, far more defensible today than it was previously. On the other hand, joy in playing is often sacrificed on the altar of any number of extrinsic rewards. Success, even gained by questionable means, replaces skill-based and virtue-generated achievement. This threatens the connection endorsed by MacIntyre between practices and virtues.

KEYWORDS

agon, test, contest, play, virtue

It is a pleasure and honor to have an opportunity to react to the Loy/Morford analysis of agon. They have produced an ambitious and rich description of our human fascination with contest, one that extends from the Homeric Greeks to modern times. It is a story of commonalities and differences. The authors hypothesize that one can find threads of similarity across the ages and thus too “vestiges” or “residuals” of early forms of agon in today’s post-agonal sporting world.

These threads, they argue, can be identified by noting common “properties, processes, and products of agonal competition,” as well as “continuities in ... [its] ethos” (Loy & Morford 2019, p. 53). Motif themes of intense rivalry, individualism, personal glory, and risks associated with failure are traced from their most robust appearance in archaic, warrior societies to their lesser instantiations in modern sport.

Among the most important residuals of agonal activity in today's play, according to the authors, are the pursuit of excellence and honor through physical prowess, concerns with character and moral development, and codes of honor related to male identity and bonding. These three themes serve to structure the main body of the essay and inform the authors' chronology of sport.

Loy and Morford trace their interest of agon to a pair of well-known scholars. The first is Johann Huizinga (1938/1950) who identified the contest as one of two principle resources for play.¹ The "festal contest," he argued, is a foundational form of play because it provides "a feeling of tension, joy, and consciousness that is 'different' from 'ordinary' life" (Huizinga, 1950, p. 28).

The second scholar is ethicist Alasdair MacIntyre ([1981]1984) who was interested in Homeric Greece and agon because they provided exemplars for his neo-Aristotelian defense of virtue ethics. Contest and its associated values related to excellence, MacIntyre noted, cannot be separated from the virtues that allow such excellences to flourish. In other words, what is right (virtuous behavior) cannot be determined apart from what is good (excellences displayed by the competitive warrior).

Both resources provide Loy and Morford with sufficient reason to focus on agon as an important window through which to understand human life and development. Competition in war and sport was culturally significant then, and it is culturally significant today, albeit in modified forms.

I will be reacting to this thesis from perspectives generated by my own academic training in philosophy. In the short space allotted to this commentary, I attempt to do two things – first, identify implications of some conceptual distinctions, and second, point out normative questions raised by the Loy/Morford analysis. These comments will be far more suggestive than definitive. However, I trust they will demonstrate the fruits of multidisciplinary discourse – in this case between historian-sociologists, on the one hand, and a philosopher, on the other.

Conceptual distinctions and the alternate stories they generate

Loy and Morford provide definitions at the start of their essay while admitting they are entering a "linguistic quagmire." Different things are called sport. Different definitions of contest can be found in the literature. Because of this, Loy and Morford need to tell readers, by providing operational definitions, what *they* mean by these terms.

Some philosophers would raise a cautionary flag at this point because, on their view, this is not simply a linguistic problem (though it is certainly that too). Rather it is more fundamentally a conceptual problem. When individuals do not perceive important differences, for instance, between A and B, they are inclined to call them the same thing. This happens in the English language when we say, "I love you." Different kinds of love are similar ... but also different. Susan loves ice cream, her dog, her sister, and her significant other but not in the same way. Thus, for the sake of clarity, additional verbs would appear to be needed. Interestingly, some non-English lexicons have them.² In short then, conceptual clarity should help us avoid linguistic quagmires.

Loy and Morford cannot be sidetracked by conceptual analyses. That would involve them in a different project and result in a different paper. For their purposes, they need to identify a cultural phenomenon, define it, and proceed to see how it varies across time and circumstance. This is precisely what they do. A contest, they say, is "a competitive activity characterized by two or more sides, having agreed-upon-rules, criteria for determining the winner, with a zero-sum outcome wherein the winner(s) takes all" (p. 12). They are interested in agonal or

¹ The second form of play is representational in nature, the play of the potlach or religious festival. The participant is carried away from ordinary life by the power of the ceremony, by ecstatic dance, by "wearing the mask."

² The Greek language, for example, has four terms for love: *eros* (romantic love), *storge* (family love), *philia* (brotherly love) and *agape* (unconditional love). It has yet additional terms for liking or appreciating someone or something.

physical forms of competition where the display of physical prowess is at stake. Agonal contests stand, therefore, as one type of sport.

Loy and Morford mention a second type of sport, a self-testing variety, and cite solo rock climbing and bull fighting as examples. Here is where conceptual confusion can raise its problematic head. Are such self-testing activities competitive or not? In a solo rock climb, are there zero-sum winners and losers? Do Loy and Morford want to include such self-testing activities in their analysis of agon or not?

It is difficult to say. They clearly identify self-testing sports as one species of “agonal contests”, along with “agonistic games” (e.g. basketball, football) and “sporting matches” (e.g., boxing, wrestling) (Loy & Morford, 2019, p. 55). Yet they cite agreement with Paul Weiss who argues that contests require displays of relative superiority in such areas as speed, accuracy, and coordination. It is difficult to understand how a mountain (the “opponent” of the climber) can meet these conditions. How could a mountain show superior speed, accuracy, or any physical attribute for that matter? Accordingly, any claims of zero-sum victory by the mountain would seem to be more metaphorical than literal. It would be more accurate to say the climber failed the “test” provided by the mountain. Self-testing may well be a very different thing than competitive striving.

Many years ago, I wrote about the distinction between tests and contests, between problem solving per se, and one of its variations – competitive problem solving (Kretchmar, 1975). Tests and contests, I argued, are analytically distinct and experientially unique. A person can be in a test (golfing alone, trying to solve a Sudoku puzzle) and not be in a contest (golfing to beat at least one other person or entering a Sudoku tournament). However, one cannot be in a contest without also facing a test. Contests, in other words, are logically dependent on tests.

This is so because contesting presupposes the ability to show difference in the direction of superiority. Such differences are dependent on possibilities for variable success. Tests perform that function.

A pseudo-test that is too easy would not work for a contest because everybody would score the same – say, a perfect 100. Without an ability to show difference, a contest could not get off the ground. Likewise, a pseudo-test that is too hard would be useless for agonal purposes because once again, everyone would score the same – a frustrating 0. Thus, it is the challenge that is not too hard and not too easy – that is, a genuine test and the kind typically offered by golf, tennis, baseball – and war – that allows for the display of disparate skills and degrees of success. Test scores vary, thus permitting the declaration of a winner and loser.

The analytic difference between tests and contests can be further clarified by noting that competitors actually get two results at the end of a contest. First, they receive the zero-sum competitive result. They won, lost, or tied. Second, they receive a non-competitive, non-zero-sum test score. They played well, sort of well, about average, poorly, and so on. Playing well, of course, enhances chances for victory, but it does not guarantee it. The opposite can be said for playing poorly. It decreases chances for victory, but it does not require it. In sum, contest results and test scores are two different things.

This all-too-brief metaphysical exercise allows us to raise a couple of questions. What if the historical and sociocultural spotlight were turned on sporting “tests” rather than “contests”, that is, on trying to solve physically demanding problems well rather than trying to solve them better than at least one other party? What story could be told then, and in what ways would it diverge from the agonal or competitive story told by Loy and Morford?

War would probably no longer serve as the best historical and prehistorical analogue for sport. Rather, it might be hunting (Carroll, 2000). Hunting is a physical test that results in variable test results, various levels of passing or failing. One is not, strictly speaking, in a contest with an animal.³ Moreover, many hunting skills and virtues

³ It could be argued that hunting confrontations with animals or climbing confrontations with steep cliffs are contests against these obstacles, interactions that produce winners or losers. However, one cannot literally compete with a bear because the bear is not taking the same test as the hunter. The results of skillful avoidance (for the bear) and skillful tracking

track nicely onto current sporting activities – hitting targets, displaying strength and endurance, exhibiting the virtues of courage, perseverance, and (on group hunts) teamwork.

It is also likely that the values at stake in testing would be shaped differently than those found in agonal activity. Merit would accrue to those who get the right answer or a good answer, not necessarily a better answer than someone else.⁴ Test norms and the experiences of others rather than contest results could be used to determine the meaning of a test score.

Let us imagine that I am a newcomer to bowling and, on my first visit to the alleys, rolled a 120. Understandably, I am not sure what that score means. I consult norms for my age group and discuss my results with others. I discover I bowled much like other neophytes. I discover that anything approaching excellence has eluded me, at least so far. I will need to practice and improve if I am to be honored as an outstanding bowler. Importantly, I learn all this without entering a contest.

Philosopher Bernard Suits (2014) privileged tests over contests. He argued that the human need to act competently is more fundamental to human well-being than any desire for competitively-gained superiority and honor. Suits claimed that human beings flourish most regularly when facing challenges for which the deployment of their skills is required.

When confronted with good problems, he wrote, we are not bored. We have something interesting to do. Suits concluded we love tests so much that, when technological progress removes many natural challenges, we invent artificial difficulties. We call them games. Of course, we can use games competitively, but that is a secondary decision and, on Suits analysis, a location of derivative value. The primary thing is the game, the challenge, the test.⁵

Consistent with Darwin's laws of natural selection, the primary storyline for humans (indeed all plants and animals) is one of adapting to the environment and solving the problems it presents. Some of these survival problems result in battles and contests, but at base level and most regularly they are tests.⁶ Those who are able to pass tests successfully live long enough to pass on their genes. These survivors provide their offspring with phenotypes (physical traits, attitudes, potential virtues) that make for good test taking and good test scores. Human beings then are arguably the best test-takers and problem-solvers on the face of the planet. We are also pretty good competitive problem solvers too, as Loy and Morford have so well documented, but that is a different story – at least in part.

Normative judgments and value implications of the agonal story

Loy and Morford's analysis is replete with descriptive analyses of a variety of values. These include states of affairs or experiences called non-moral values, such things as enjoyment, success, heroism, competence, and the like. The authors also detail moral values or character traits, motives, and virtues such as honesty, fortitude,

and killing (for the hunter) are incommensurate and thus too incomparable. Consequently, it is more accurate to say that the bear provides a variable test for the hunter. For further analysis on the nature of competition, see Kretchmar (2014).

⁴ This distinction is crucial for MacIntyre's analyses of practice excellences. Excellences as parents, teachers, researchers, or soldiers are fundamentally *testing* competencies. Excellence may also be shown via competitive activity, but this is not required.

⁵ Some tests, traditionally called by physical educators "closed games," are not dependent on other players for encountering the testing problem. Golf, bowling, and archery would be included in this category. Other tests, called "open games," include both fixed environmental and variable challenges, the latter provided by "opponents." This is a misnomer, because such individuals serve two functions—testing and, optionally, contesting services. Testing services are provided in scrimmage situations where one side facilitates the other sides' testing activity.

⁶ Darwin's ([1872]1936) theory of natural selection places considerable emphasis on contest or "survival of the fittest." However, he also describes this mechanism more broadly. At bottom, survival is dependent on passing tests provided by evolving external factors. In some cases, scarcity (e.g., gaining access to females) produces fighting and competition. In other cases (e.g., attempting to survive in hostile climatic conditions) one is simply facing a potentially lethal test.

and justice as well as duties such as fair play. Loy and Morford carefully show how both kinds of values – both the non-moral and moral varieties – change from robustly agonal societies in Ancient Greece to what they identify as our current post-agonal world.

Philosophers are interested in this kind of saga because it raises many normative questions. Some of them speak to moral progress. Has this evolution of moral and non-moral value moved in a positive direction? Do we fight in more civilized ways today than we did in yesteryear? What counts as moral progress, and can it be measured? Stephen Pinker (2011), for one, has attempted to answer these questions. He argued that, ethically speaking, we are better now than we were in ages past.

“Believe it or not—and I know that most people do not—violence has declined over long stretches of time, and today we may be living in the most peaceable era in our species’ existence. The decline, to be sure, has not been smooth; it has not brought violence down to zero; and it is not guaranteed to continue. But it is an unmistakable development, visible on scales from millennia to years, from the waging of wars to the spanking of children” (Pinker, 2011, p. xxi).

This question of moral progress is important because competition is thought by some to be morally problematic. (See, e.g., Kohn, 1992). Winners produce losers. Higher rankings generate lower rankings. The honor accorded to those who win most often is not available to those on the lower rungs of the competitive ladder. The prestige enjoyed by elite athletes is unattainable by lesser contestants with more pedestrian skills. Therefore, it might be better to cooperate than compete, collaborate than fight with one another, focus on rising together commensurate with our diverse faculties than promote and celebrate one rising above the other.

Loy and Morford’s analyses provide evidence for both moral degradation and progress. They agree with Huizinga that sport is less playful today than it was in the 18th century, a period believed by Huizinga ([1919] 1999) to best exemplify the interpenetration of culture and play. Crass extrinsic purposes and win-at-all cost attitudes have replaced lighter and more fun-filled intrinsically-valued engagements with sport. On the other hand, Loy and Morford show sport is more symbolic today than it was in Homeric times. As a consequence, it is safer, more fully rule-governed, more genteel, less war-like.

This latter fact would count as moral progress on Pinker’s criteria. Sport, in general, is far less violent today than it was, for instance, in feudal societies. Jousting is not likely to make a comeback in the 21st century.⁷ Research on head injuries in football is causing many to re-evaluate the merits of this activity, especially for children. Thus, Pinker may be right. On some grounds, competitive sport is far more defensible today than it was previously.

However as noted, the erosion of the play spirit in contemporary win-at-all-costs sport could be regarded as moral regress. (See, e.g. Feezell, 2013; Schmitz, 1988.) Joy in playing is sacrificed on the altar of any number of extrinsic rewards. This also threatens the connection endorsed by MacIntyre between practices and virtues. For those pursuing external sporting goods, the “fact” of winning trumps the “quality” of the victory. Finding loopholes in rules is often considered “good strategy” or “smart play” by those who carry such instrumental attitudes onto the sporting pitch. Success, even gained by questionable means, replaces skill-based and virtue-generated achievement.

Final conclusions about the moral status of competitive activities are difficult to draw. This is the case for reasons that are clearly featured in the analysis by Loy and Morford. The cultural and historical context of sport affects how it is conducted, what it means to its participants, what values it promotes, and overall, whether it might elevate or degrade the culture in which it exists. Many philosophers of sport (see, e.g., Simon et al., 2015;

⁷ Gottschall (2015) provides a provocative account of our human (but particularly male) fascination with dangerous forms of combat, specifically in what are now called the Mixed Martial Arts or MMA. Gottschall acknowledges that these fights sometimes “end in tragedy.” However, they still allow individuals to “work out conflicts” while minimizing “carnage and social chaos.”

Kretchmar, 2012; McFee, 2004) argue that competition can be good, mutually edifying, even used to strengthen the moral fiber of its participants.⁸ But they are also quick to admit that such optimistic outcomes depend on a variety of factors, ranging from political and institutional influences to individual creativity and personal initiatives that serve to shape the competitive experience.

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⁸ The classic apologetic for competition was provided by Simon et al. (2015) who described the competitive venture as a "mutual quest for excellence." "Mutuality" and shared benefits are key elements in his defense. Kretchmar (2012) provided an alternate defense that emphasizes the zero-sum quality of competition and thus, provides a different account of mutuality. McFee (2004) has written about the merits (and demerits) of competitive sport as a potentially useful moral laboratory.