A Fine Forehand

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"As long as a branch of science offers an abundance of problems, so long is it alive: a lack of problems foreshadows extinction or the cessation of independent development."¹ On this occasion here and on his birthday and whenever one is doing philosophy these words of David Hilbert seem particularly appropriate.² The aesthetics of sport is supposedly the subject. It is not a serious subject if it has no significant problems. There are no significant problems that can sensibly be characterized as problems in the aesthetics of sport.

Metatheoretic discussions of what is or is not in the province of aesthetics are largely exercises in futility tiresome and fruitless. But conceivably here and now this dismal generalization should be disregarded. Certain research should be encouraged, other discouraged. Research devoted to the aesthetics of sport can accomplish nothing. There is nothing there to be accomplished. Worse, it would not only contribute to the vaunted dreariness of aesthetics: it could serve to delay and even impede other possibly significant research. There are philosophically interesting and perplexing features of athletic behavior. There are deep philosophic questions about physical activity that are worth answering. When there are important paths to explore, why muddle about in the vacuity of an aesthetics of sport?

In philosophizing about sport one could, but need not, begin by worrying about what is and what is not a sport. One could attempt to fix limits, draw boundaries. I shall not. That’s a dull matter best left to linguists and lexicographers. It’s not as though this were a novel problem of analysis. Drawing boundaries and fixing conceptual limits are generally difficult in nonformal or nonrigorous domains and are almost invariably unproductive. Anyway, examples of sports are easy enough to come by. Archery is a sport, so are auto racing, badminton, baseball, basketball, bicycling, bobsledding, bowling, boxing. So are bull fighting and canoeing. Cave exploration is sometimes accounted a sport. So are curling, fencing, field hockey, fishing, football, gliding, golf, gymnastics and handball. There’s no problem about examples: there are all kinds of examples. Judo, karate, lacrosse are all sports. So are pigeon racing and polo, so are shooting and tiddlywinks.

If one is concerned with the aesthetics of a certain class of things then the members of that class must characteristically have certain aesthetic aspects. The aesthetics of that class would then concern itself with the aesthetic aspects of the members of the class. If it should prove to be the case that the members did not characteristically have aesthetic aspects, there would be nothing for the aesthetics of the class to be concerned with. The aesthetics of sport is in almost but not quite that position. Some sports happen to have aesthetic aspects. Most sports do not. And no novel and significant problem is posed by those sports
that do happen to have aesthetic aspects.

Anything has an aesthetic aspect, so one might think, but is that true? I think not. “The record number of clay birds shot in an hour is 1,308 by Joseph Nother (formerly Wheater) (born 1918) of Kingston-upon-Hull, Yorkshire, England, at Bedford on September 21, 1957. Using 5 guns and 7 loaders, he shot 1,000 in 42 minutes 22.5 seconds.”

Is there an aesthetic aspect to clay pigeon shooting?

Suppose we suppose ourselves present on that historic occasion to witness Joseph Nother’s (formerly Wheater’s) achievement. The occasion would not have been an occasion for any form of auditory satisfaction. On the contrary, we should have taken care to block our ears to prevent damage. Visually the scene must have been tedious: an hour of seeing clay bird after clay bird after clay bird being hurled into the air by a device, immediately to be blasted by the attentive Nother. Even so, it could have been (given the appropriate interests) an exciting event to witness, particularly if we kept count of the number of clay birds blasted and if we had realized that a record-breaking was possibly in the offing. The tension would have or could have mounted, as clay birds and minutes moved.

So there is an aesthetic aspect even to clay pigeon shooting. Is there? Doesn’t even clay pigeon shooting have its dramatic moment? Does it? And does that matter? The breaking of a record is perhaps a dramatic matter but that doesn’t mean that clay pigeon shooting is a dramatic matter even if the record in question is a record of clay pigeon shooting.

Perhaps another example will serve us better. Live birds may be livelier than clay pigeons. “The greatest recorded lifetime bag is 556,000 birds, including 241,000 pheasants, by the 2nd Marquess of Ripon (1867-1923) of England. He himself dropped dead on a grouse moor after his 52nd bird on the morning of September 22, 1923.” Suppose we suppose that we are with the 2nd Marquess of Ripon on some occasion of this slaughter. An alarmed pheasant breaks cover only to be zapped by the ready Ripon. That could be an exciting moment. And still another example perhaps choicer. Biggest bag: “The largest animal ever shot by any big game hunter was a bull African elephant (Loxodonta africana) shot by J. J. Fenykovi (Hungary), 48 miles north-northwest of Macusso, Angola, on November 13, 1955. It required 16 heavy caliber bullets from a 0.416 Rigby and weighed an estimated 24,000 lbs., standing 13 feet 2 inches at the shoulder.” Wasn’t that an exciting moment?

Was that an aesthetic event? Those present must have been stirred, aroused, perhaps infuriated, perhaps nauseated by the mindless sportsman intent on his prey. That the event could excite does not establish the existence of an aesthetic aspect. Not everything exciting is aesthetic. The murder of such a massive creature would be likely to occasion some sort of strong reaction on the part of the spectators. Possibly nausea. I am not objecting to nausea as an aesthetic reaction. But their nausea, if that is what it was, would have been occasioned by what is not an aesthetic matter.

What if per impossible in fact, the elephant was not shot, was unharmed, that all was a sham and a show: would the event so understood and witnessed...
still be exciting; I think not. Would it evoke nausea? Not to the same extent if at all and if so for other reasons. For reality matters in sports in a way that it does not matter in art. To blast a clay pigeon out of the air may be minimally exciting but only if in fact one actually blasts it, only if in fact there really is a clay pigeon and one really does aim, fire, and accomplish one's and its end. If such an affair were rigged, if say the whole event were subject to the control of a computer and one simply was to go through the motions, who would do it? Who would engage in such a practice? But that is not the way it is in matters pertaining to art. To be told that the man acting Lear on the stage is not in fact shedding genuine tears, not in fact the least bit unhappy, is in fact having the time of his life giving a great performance, all that is irrelevant. The excitement one feels in witnessing the play and the sympathy one feels for Lear remain the same.

What I am saying here has been said before. "Now, where the question is whether something is beautiful, we do not want to know, whether we, or any one else, are, or even could be, concerned in the real existence of the thing, but rather what estimate we form of it on mere contemplation (intuition or reflection)." And there is no need to feel mystified by Kant's correct though unoriginal claim. For aesthetic reactions occur in the course of specific acts performed in connection with entities of an appropriate sort. One such familiar act is that of contemplation: the performance of that act in connection with some event does not require that the event be real rather than simulated, acted, a matter of pretense. There is nothing new here.

Clay pigeon shooting has no aesthetic aspect. The sport is of no aesthetic interest. This is not to deny that one can be interested in clay pigeon shooting. But not every interest is an aesthetic interest. (Perhaps the most interesting thing about clay pigeon shooting is that like all too many sports it is evidently a manifestation of aggression. When one looks at sports in general, aggressive not aesthetic aspects are what loom large. Archery, boxing, bull fighting, fencing, football, judo, karate, lacrosse, shooting, wrestling: all offer unmistakable examples of aggressive behavior. As anthropologists and sociologists are beginning to tell us, aggressive behavior is most likely learned, the result of cultural indoctrination. Our society would be better off without such sports. However, there doesn't seem to be any way of putting an end to them: not yet anyway.) The sport of clay pigeon shooting has no aesthetic aspect. The same is true of tiddlywinks, of shuffleboard, of archery, baseball, basketball, bicycling, bowling, canoeing, curling, golf, fishing.

Doesn't fishing have an aesthetic aspect? Think of casting in a trout stream, crystal water, aromatic pines surrounding mountains and so forth. All very nice, all irrelevant. Does brushing one's teeth have an aesthetic aspect? One could do it in a stream of crystal water in a piney forest and so forth. And one could also fish or brush one's teeth surrounded by garbage, smelling smog. Something is not an aspect of an activity unless it serves to individuate that activity. Being in deep waters is an aspect of deep-sea fishing: one wouldn't be deep-sea fishing if one weren't in deep waters. But standing in a stream of crystal water in a piney forest is not an aspect of fishing or even of trout fishing, for
one could be fishing or trout fishing even if one were not there but were surrounded by garbage and knee-deep in sludge.

Unlike tiddlywinks, shooting, shuffleboard, or archery, baseball, basketball, bicycling, bowling, canoeing, curling, fishing, golf, some sports have distinct aesthetic aspects. This is true of gymnastics, ski-jumping, figure skating, high-diving, and even bull fighting. The relevant difference between the first and second group is this: form is a grading factor only for the second. How one does it counts in the second group of sports but not in the first. Sink the ball, hit the target: that’s what counts in the first group. Form doesn’t. Hold the club any way one likes, look like a duffer: if one manages somehow to sink the ball expeditiously enough, one may end up a champion.

But even though gymnastics has an aesthetic aspect, aesthetic factors have at best an inconsequential ancillary role to play in the sport. It is sometimes supposed that there is a difficulty in drawing a sharp line between a performance of a ballet and a gymnastic event. There are similarities between the two. The differences remain obvious unmistakable. Various aesthetically relevant and significant aspects of ballet have no counterpart in gymnastics. A ballet is often a drama: the story is then an integral part of the event. Even when a ballet is without a story it calls for costumes, props, stage scenery, decor that is in accord with the music: there is an intimate relation between auditory and supplementary visual features. None of this is true of gymnastics. Brute strength is an aspect of gymnastics but not of ballet. Suppose a ballet were designed to simulate a gymnastics performance. The dancer might be called on to do an L cross on the rings. Most likely he would have to fake it, which wouldn’t be difficult: thin wires invisible to the audience would serve. Would the fact that he faked the cross make any difference to the aesthetic quality of the performance? Not if it didn’t look like a fake (and perhaps not even if it did). And what if a real gymnast at an actual meet faked it? If it were discovered, he’d be disqualified, excommunicated. The L cross on the rings is an impressive gymnastic stunt. It is not aesthetically impressive. It calls for extraordinary strength or an extraordinary physique. It is no problem for any ordinary chimpanzee or any human who approximates a chimpanzee in appearance. A long-armed large-chested legless freak could do an Olympic cross with ease.

Gymnastics does have an aesthetic aspect. Though considerable strength is required for certain stunts, the L cross on the rings front and back levers, not strength but balance, smoothness, ease, timing are essential ingredients of various routines. A muscular but inept novice could manage a kip on the high bar by converting it essentially to a muscle-up. Rightly done, however, a kip on the bar doesn’t require much strength. (Which is why the stunt is best practiced with an under-grip which virtually precludes the possibility of converting it to a muscle-up.) A giant on the high bar calls for strength but timing and balance are also required. Properly executed the giant has an aesthetic appeal. And without a doubt a Hecht dismount is a spectacularly beautiful stunt.

The aesthetic appeal of a gymnastic stunt such as the Hecht dismount from the high bar or for that matter of any properly executed gymnastic stunt, is a byproduct of other factors. Considerations of mechanical efficiency and strength
are fundamental in gymnastics. To execute a reverse giant correctly, it is necessary to keep one’s arms straight throughout the swing. Why? Because a giant performed with arms bent is less beautiful? That’s far from clear. If a gymnast were performing a routine with a sequence of giants, to execute one with bent arms might lend some variety to the event, an aesthetically desirable variety. But such a performance would be unacceptable to a gymnastics judge. A giant executed with bent arms is not mechanically perfect: it is inefficient and it calls for much greater strength to cope with the centrifugal force at the bottom of the swing.

Although form does not figure in its scoring, tennis has at least on occasion considerable aesthetic appeal. A flat forehand drive executed with perfect form from the baseline is a graceful stroke. Even so aesthetic factors have no role to play in tennis: its aesthetic appeal is simply an epiphenomenon. Anyone who plays the game seriously knows this but it is easy to misunderstand the matter.

Any tournament player is familiar with players who rally beautifully, hitting the ball with grace and ease, but who play badly. And any tournament player is familiar with players who have awkward looking strokes and graceless movements but who by dint of agility and effort manage over and over again to return seeming put-aways, and hence are extremely difficult to beat. It is not looks but points that win a tennis match.

Nonetheless, generally speaking it is a fact that improving one’s appearance, making one’s movements smoother, more graceful, is likely to upgrade one’s performance. Making sure that the forehand is hit with a long fluid follow-through will not only add grace to one’s stroke but it will increase one’s control while adding considerable pace to the ball. (It also means that one has less time to prepare for the next stroke. It would be no consolation to know that one would look graceful while the ball was being returned for a winner by an opponent who cared less about looks than about points.) Not all good tennis strokes, however, are particularly graceful. Laver’s midcourt topspin forehand is a wristy, flicking sort of stroke having none of the aesthetic appeal of his great backhand baseline topspin drive. Yet Laver uses that wristy, flicking, topspin forehand with great success. The beauty of tennis is simply owing to the by-now-familiar fact that beauty is often a byproduct of mechanical efficiency. (Possibly at times mechanical efficiency is itself taken as a standard of beauty.) That beauty is a sometime byproduct of mechanical efficiency has been known at least since the time that people began treating airplane propellers as objects of art.

The aesthetics of sport is a subject without any significant problems. Aesthetic questions posed by a study of gymnastics or tennis have already been posed and are better posed either in connection with traditional art forms such as the classical ballet or in connection with various forms of modern art such as l’art trouvè. There are significant philosophical problems to be considered in connection with sports but they are not problems of aesthetics: they are epistemological, linguistic and logical in character.

Consider a flat forehand drive hit from the baseline in tennis. To hit such a drive properly there are various things one should do. Move forward to the ball.
A FINE FOREHAND

Bend one’s knees. Hit the ball as far in front of the body as is feasible. Hit it on the rise before it reaches the top of the bounce but not so early as to convert the stroke into a half-volley. And so on. To supply such specifications, one describes as accurately and as carefully as one can what a fine player actually does in executing the stroke in question. The task of supplying such specifications is primarily descriptive and analytic. (That there is likely in fact to be some sort of idealization involved is no doubt true but not germane to my purposes here and now.) A trained observer, a tennis coach, attempts to perform this sort of descriptive analytic task.

Suppose a player is told by the coach that he does not bend his knees enough in hitting the forehand. Presumably the player wishing to improve his stroke will attend to what he was told. How does he do that? Since he was told to bend his knees when he hits the ball he does just that. That means he will move his legs in such a way as to make them conform to the description supplied by the coach. How does he know whether or not he has done that? The coach knows by looking at the player. But how does the player himself know?

In recent years some philosophers have toyed with what they call “knowledge without observation,” it supposedly being the kind of knowledge one has on one’s bodily position, of the position of one’s limbs and so forth. One reason why sports provide a fertile epistemological field is that one finds that often athletes (or would-be athletes) do not in fact know the position of their own limbs. Many players think they bend a great deal in stroking a ball whereas in fact they hardly bend at all. This is a particularly common illusion with respect to the service motion in tennis.

Suppose a conscientious player uses a mirror to check whether he is bending enough. Then having rehearsed the stroke before the mirror he attempts to execute it on a court. Evidently he must somehow remember what it felt like when he bent in the appropriate way before the mirror. How does he do that? I am not asking how he manages to remember advice. I take it for granted for the time being that people can remember words and symbolic matters. I do not know how they do that but that is not in question here. What I am asking is how one manages to remember positions of the body. And the form of the answer must be, or so it seems at present, that something in one’s mind constitutes a representation of the body position in question. Is that right? I really don’t know, but it certainly seems so to me. And if that is right, then that suggests that his mental representation of his bodily position plays a role similar to that played by the explicit linguistic description to the effect that his knees are bent in the desired way. Are there significant similarities here?

Assuming that the player does have a mental representation of his bodily position, what is the correct, or a correct, or at least a reasonable characterization of that representation? The term one encounters in psychological discussions of related matters is “image”. But that that is a plausible characterization is not clear to me. If that is an image, then that sort of image seems radically different from what are spoken of as visual images. Is it an image?

Coaches generally do not restrict themselves to descriptive analytic comments.
If a player is having problems keeping the ball on the racquet, the coach may suggest that he think of it in a certain way: ‘Imagine that you are to hit not just one ball but seven of them all in a row’. Such advice is apt to be helpful. How it manages to be that is remarkably difficult to say. Possibly the player forms the appropriate image in his mind. He then somehow adjusts his movements in accordance with this image. How is that done?

I do not have adequate answers to the questions I have been raising. If I did I should not have raised them here. And there are other related questions that want asking and answering. What is actually accomplished by practicing a stroke? Are effective short-cuts possible? If not, why not? Many tasks can be learned in a very short time: why can’t one learn a fine forehand in a short time? Does understanding how an act is performed facilitate the performance of the act? If it does, why does it, and if it doesn’t, why doesn’t it? These are just a few of the difficult problems that stare back at a thinking being when he turns his eyes on sports. Such problems as these and not aesthetic trivialities are deserving of a philosopher’s careful attention.

FOOTNOTES

2Hilbert was born on January 23, 1862.
4Ibid.
5Ibid.
6Immanuel Kant, Critique of Aesthetic Judgement. Bk. 1. 2.