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Purposive/Aesthetic Sport: A Note on Boxing.

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Abstract

Common sense, Bernard Suits, and David Best would agree that boxing is a purposive (i.e., non-aesthetic) sport. We argue, on the contrary, that boxing is in fact purposive only in some contexts (i.e., knockout) and an aesthetic sport in others (i.e., decision by judges). This is because boxing judges are empowered to give more points to a fighter not just for the quantity but the quality of strikes and of their performance in the ring in general. In other words, in bouts whose outcomes are decided by judges, a boxer's purpose is not just to land punches, as the manner in which blows are struck (cleanly, with better ring control, etc.)—that is, *how* a boxer performs—figures into the awarding of points and consequent determination of outcome. This is the very hallmark of aesthetic sports. Boxing should therefore be classified instead as a “purposive/aesthetic” sport: a hybrid category that undermines a pure dichotomy between purposive and aesthetic sports.

Resumen

Bernard Suits, y David Mejer estarían de acuerdo en que el boxeo es un deporte finalista (es decir, no estético). Sostenemos, por el contrario, que el boxeo es de hecho intencional sólo en algunos contextos (es decir, por knockout y un deporte estético en otros (es decir, la decisión de los jueces). Esto se debe a que los jueces de boxeo están facultados para dar más puntos a un luchador no sólo por la cantidad, sino por la calidad de los golpes y de su desempeño en el ring en general. En otras palabras, en combates cuyos resultados son decididos por los jueces, el propósito de un boxeador no es sólo por los golpes, como la manera en que son golpes (limpiamente, con un mejor control del *ring*, etc.). Es decir, cómo se realiza un boxeador -la adjudicación de puntos y la consecuente determinación del resultado. Este es el sello distintivo de los deportes estéticos. Por lo tanto, el boxeo debe ser clasificado como un deporte "intencional

/ estético": una categoría híbrida que socava una dicotomía pura entre el deporte intencionales y estéticos.

The distinction between aesthetic and purposive sports is a familiar one. Aesthetic sports are those in which the aesthetic properties of an athlete's performance figure into the determination of the outcome of athletic competition. Purposive sports, by contrast, are those in which aesthetic properties and judgments play no part in the determination of competitive outcomes. Aesthetic sports include such examples as gymnastics, diving, and figure skating, where purposive sports may be exemplified by such events as long distance running, ice hockey, and golf. Most sports will fall into the purposive category, while the rest will fall into the aesthetic category (Best, 1978). In these latter cases an athlete may well, but need not, perform with style or grace. An awkward gait may prove fastest, two garbage goals will always beat one beautiful goal, and the ugliest swing may prevail (as any Jim Furyk PGA win shows). Such outcomes in aesthetic sports simply are not possible. One need only imagine the absurdity of an ungainly dive, a clumsy gymnastics routine, or a poorly executed skating program proving a winner (except, as with novice competitions, where the other competitors, from an aesthetic point of view, do even worse).

Typically sports are relatively easy to categorize into either the purposive or aesthetic class; however, some are more controversial or less obvious to place than others. For instance, a superficial glance at ski jumping might make it appear to be a purposive sport, on the assumption that how well an athlete performs is determined simply by how far they jump. This assumption is false, however. An athlete's score in ski jumping is determined both by how far they jump and *also* by their in-flight form and quality of landing. Whether we should call such a sport aesthetic because of the outcome-determining role of the aesthetic (as in Best [1978]) or rather partially aesthetic because of the purposive component of distance (as in Arnold [1990]) is more of a terminological than substantive concern here.

It is evident that many professional and elite amateur boxers can have a beautiful punch, an elegant defense, or a graceful presence in the ring. One thinks more of the Alis than the

Tyson's here. It is also clear that, apart from the beauty of individual boxers' performances, a bout can pack a real aesthetic wallop. Witness how boxing perhaps supremely among sports lends itself to cinematic storytelling, the Rocky franchise for instance. This does not mean that boxing is an aesthetic sport in the relevant sense, since the purpose of the sport can be accomplished—e.g., winning by knockout—without means that are in any way aesthetic, even to aficionados.

Indeed, boxing seems to be almost a paradigm case of *non-aesthetic* sports. Just consider Bernard Suits' (1989) distinction between game (purposive) and performance (aesthetic) sports, where the latter, in Suits' mature reflection, fail to count as games. Whether or not performance/aesthetic sports ultimately do count as games (à la Klaus V. Meier's critique [1988]), consider Suits' (2005) distinction against his firm commitment to boxing being a game: "[A]n extremely effective way to achieve the prelusory goal in a boxing match—viz., the state of affairs consisting in your opponent being 'down' for the count of []ten—is to shoot him through the head, but this is obviously not a means for winning the match" (p. 51).¹ Note that Suits here is using the sport of boxing to illustrate, as he does with footraces, golf, and other sports, some of what he takes to be the essential properties of games, implying that sports like footraces, golf, and boxing lie at the very heart of Suitsian gamedom, and so well outside the class of performance/aesthetic sports as conceived in his mature view.

Despite the intuitive appeal of Suits' view, we would like to propose that boxing is by turns, perhaps surprisingly, both a purposive and an aesthetic sport, and furthermore that correctly appreciating this status motivates a hybrid categorization, undermining a simplistic dichotomy between purposive and aesthetic sports. We will argue, in fact, that boxing belongs to a relatively small category of what we call purposive/aesthetic sports. More precisely, boxing is contextually purposive (in the case of a knockout for instance), where the aesthetics do not figure into the determination of the outcome, yet it is also contextually aesthetic (in the case of a decision), where the aesthetics do so figure. This perspective might be counterintuitive, as we tend to think of judges' scoring in boxing as purely quantitative, a matter of the number of blows that land. However, we shall argue that judges' scoring, whether consciously or subconsciously,

is also influenced by qualitative considerations, by not just *what* a boxer does but *how* they do it. Since this, where how one performs is essential to how well one performs, is the very hallmark of aesthetic sports, boxing turns out, surprisingly, to be a kind of aesthetic sport.

Firstly, it should be noted that boxing is undeniably a sport, whether one's perspective on the definition of sport is institutional (e.g., Loy, 1968; Suits, 1973), anti-institutional (e.g., Meier, 1988; Holt & Holt, 2010), or anti-essentialist (e.g., Wertz, 1995). Since professional and elite amateur boxing is highly institutionalized and is a game that requires great physical skill, it is indeed a sport at least in those contexts, however stringent an institutional requirement one embraces (and assuming that such requirements are appropriate at all, which they might not be).

The distinction between purposive and aesthetic sports is given canonically by David Best (Best, 1978). Best describes a purposive sporting activity as one in which aesthetics are relatively unimportant (Best). A purposive sport may contain aesthetic elements, but these elements are independent of the sport itself. In other words, the sport will remain the sport, whether an aesthetic element is present or not (Best). For example, a volleyball player can have a smooth and graceful hit, however as long as their hit is effective and follows the rules that govern the game, the aesthetics of it are ultimately unimportant to scoring points and winning games. Aesthetic sports on the other hand are similar to the arts. The ways in which the movements of these sports are performed are essential aspects of performances in the sport, and cannot be isolated from the aim of the sport. For example, an Olympic diver's aim in executing a specific dive is to perform all of the necessary components while being efficient and graceful. It is for this reason and in this sense that the ways movements are carried out are fundamental to both aesthetic sports in a general sense and the movements that constitute aesthetic sport performances (Best).

Without question, boxing is a game of speed, endurance, coordination, and power. Boxers compete one-on-one in a ring with a goal of scoring the most points by making blows to their opponent's trunk and head. Usually professional boxing consists of 12 rounds per match, and each round lasts 3 minutes. Points are added up throughout rounds to determine the winner of the match in the event that there is no knockout (Zazryn, Cameron & McCrory, 2006). Since

the main goal of a boxer is to knock out the opponent, Best, along with Suits and common sense, would describe boxing as a purposive sport. Ideally a bout is won when a boxer is knocked down for the referee's count of 10. If a knockout occurs, the aesthetic component of boxing is relatively unimportant to the event, and totally irrelevant to the determination of outcome.² However, since each round is only 3 minutes long, it is common that neither boxer will achieve a knockout. In this case, judges will award points to the boxers and ultimately decide the winner of the bout based on performance. Professional boxing usually has three judges present during the match, as well as a referee (Thomson, 1995).

It is commonly believed that the judges of a boxing match are present simply to count the boxer's successful punches. Although they do award points based on scoring punches and fouls, they also make important decisions about each boxer's performance. The scoring system of professional boxing allows judges to give boxers points if they feel as though the boxer had cleaner punches, higher aggression, better defense, and more control of the ring relative to their opponent (Thomson, 1995). Therefore, even if a fighter lands more punches than their opponent, their opponent could still win based on the aesthetics of their athletic performance. This judging system has caused great controversy in the past, as it seems to open the door to subjectivity in determining outcomes. An example would be the 1999 heavyweight world championship bout, which ended in a draw. This fight was between Lennox Lewis and Evander Holyfield. The clear winner as far as the audience was concerned was Lewis, though the judges felt otherwise and called the fight a draw (Balmer, Nevill & Lane, 2005). Although we should note that spectators often lack the specialized knowledge and perceptiveness of expert judges, especially in real time, such controversy is common enough throughout the world of boxing, and evokes the kind of debacles associated with such obviously aesthetic sports as figure skating (e.g., Dixon, 2003). If knockouts are not always present, draws and split decisions between judges are possible. The apparent subjectivity of such scoring, together with more or less objective quality assessment as affecting quantitative results (i.e., points), confirms that aesthetics is a significant factor in the determination of outcomes in boxing.

Other philosophers, such as Peter J. Arnold, use supplementary categories to sort sports according to the relative importance of aesthetics. These categories include non-aesthetic sports, partially aesthetic sports, and artistic activities (Arnold, 1990). In this regard, it would be assumed that boxing would fall into the partially aesthetic category, as it contains both purposive and aesthetic elements. Sports are described as partially aesthetic when how the movements are performed is part of the purpose of the sport (Arnold). If a knockout is achieved, the manner in which it occurs is unimportant, as long as the rules of boxing are followed. However, the quality of a boxer's performance remains essential throughout a match in that if a knockout does not occur, the winner of any given round, and of the bout itself, will go into the judges' hands. These judges then base their decisions on each boxer's performance, as previously mentioned. Therefore, despite intuitions to the contrary, the ways in which movements are performed in a boxing match are necessary features of the sport. This is the very hallmark of aesthetic sports. It should be noted that this apparent subjectivity is common in amateur boxing as well. Since there are very few knockouts in amateur boxing, the majority of decisions are made by officials (Balmer et al., 2005).

In addition to purposive and aesthetic sports, then, it would behoove us to consider boxing as belonging to a hybrid category: purposive/aesthetic sports, in that a boxer, failing to achieve the presumptive lusory goal of knockout, may still win by achieving the "sublusory" goal of amassing the most points. Such a hybrid sport is different from those which contain purposive and aesthetic means in one and the same context, that is, typical aesthetic or partially aesthetic sports, which tend to have dual scoring systems including both technical and artistic elements. However, in purposive/aesthetic sports like boxing the outcomes are not *jointly* determined, but rather *severally* determined, by elements that are, respectively, purely purposive or aesthetically informed. Note that one of the criteria by which Suits distinguishes performance (aesthetic) sports from game (purposive) sports is that the former have *judges* where the latter have *referees* (Suits, 1989). Boxing, again, has both. Though we should beware the nominalist trap here, this fits nicely with our proposal. Nor is boxing the only such sport, as certain other combat sports seem to have similar profiles, and there are also certain rodeo events, such as bull-riding, where failing to achieve a purely purposive win (i.e., more than one rider stays on the full

time), the outcome is determined by an awarding of style points. If riding longest doesn't win, riding best does.

In conclusion, the sport of boxing cannot be separated into one single category based on the importance of the aesthetic. There are times in which the sport is entirely purposive, like when a knockout occurs, but there are also times in which aesthetics figures into the determination of the outcome. When a knockout does not occur, the judges' awarding of points, based on their assessment of the quality of a boxer's performance, and not purely the quantity of blows landed, is essential and thus confirms, in those though not all contexts, the aesthetic status of the sport. Although these aesthetic and purposive components can be described using Arnold's concept of partially aesthetic sports, we have proposed a new category, specifically that of purposive/aesthetic sports, that provides greater clarity. Although boxing can be looked at from a purely technical point of view, it is also judged from a partly aesthetic point of view. In an appropriate sense, then, boxing, despite appearances, is an aesthetic sport—sometimes.

Notes

¹ That one can win a bout either by knockout, TKO, or decision, recalls technical objections raised to Suits' theory of games, e.g., in connection with chess (Schneider & Butcher, 1997). The prelusory goal of a game, says Suits, is "*a specific achievable state of affairs*" (Suits, 1973, p. 50), and yet this seems challenged by the fact that a win in a game like boxing or chess may be variously realized by a disjunction of different states of affairs.

² Except perhaps in that feints and other elements of fighting style might be effective *because* of their aesthetic characteristics, but this is a different sense—a *trompe l’oeil* sense—of the term “aesthetic.” The aesthetic appeal of a deke in hockey, for instance, depends on its effectiveness rather than the other way around.

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