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Abstract

This paper applies resources from social epistemology to the case of sporting activities involving teams. Using Hardwig's work on epistemic trust, I argue that organized team sport is an epistemic achievement where team members exhibit trust in each other's abilities as skilled athletes. Team sporting activity and success is shown to rely on participant's knowledge of each other's skilled abilities where this further requires moral trust in those abilities.

Keywords: epistemic trust; ethics; Hardwig; knowledge; team sports

1. Introduction

In his paper 'A Fine Forehand' (1974) Paul Ziff concluded that there are significant epistemological questions that should be examined within the philosophical study of sport. But despite this challenge, there has been little sustained interest in developing the epistemology of sport.¹ One reason for this may be the exclusive focus on examples drawn from individual sporting activities and achievements. Here, the emphasis has been on how athletes acquire the sort of knowledge relevant for individual performances and achievements. For example, in addressing the question of what kind of knowledge is needed to engage in a game or sport, Margaret Steel focuses on the learning of the needed physical skills arguing that they are acquired through demonstration (1977, 102). She then further extends her account to the learning of rules, tactics and strategy required for participating in sport. Another instance of this perspective is seen with S. K. Wertz's attempt to show that the learning of such skills (the knowing in playing as he calls it) is tied to sensation and feeling

¹ Important exceptions include the discussions found in Breivik 2014, 2016; Hopsicker 2009; and Kretchmar 1982.

(1978, 45). Here, the focus is on articulating the types of know-how individual athletes need for participation, performance and achievement where this involves the learning of physical skills, and other rules and strategies.

My interest is not in questioning these fruitful suggestions, but to begin by simply noting their limits once we turn our attention to team sports. Here, achievement, performance and the effective use of strategy and tactics, does not simply consist of the learning of individual skills. Nor does it involve the execution of one's knowledge of such skills but doing so in collaboration, or perhaps better stated, in coordination with others (who are also using their respective skills).² It is through reliance on other's skills and know-how that members of a team achieve their joint successes or failures. Viewing such interaction in epistemic terms and as crucial to the fulfillment of the aims and purposes of athletic participation does, I think, require that we go beyond epistemological accounts of individual skill and rule learning.

This paper then explores the possibility of developing a more social epistemology that can be applied to sporting activities involving teams. I will continue to take Steel's question as my leading concern, namely, what sort of knowledge is needed for engaging in sport, but apply it to the type of social interaction found in team sports. Moreover, I take for granted the idea that the structure and organization of sporting activities can be thought of as an epistemic practice that is build out of our more basic non-epistemic contact with our environment (Dewey 1925). From this starting point, I turn to John Hardwig's work on epistemic trust in order to argue that organized team sport is an epistemic achievement maintained through its participants exhibiting trust in each other's abilities as skilled athletes. Team sporting activity is then depicted as relying on participant's knowledge of each other's abilities where this further requires a type of moral trustworthiness in those abilities (Hardwig 1991). Athletic performance and achievement is, in part, dependent on ethical considerations involving the conduct of athletes in relation to the common aims of the team of which they are a part. As we will further see, this moral dimension of epistemic trust has an impact on the procedural knowledge required for success in sporting activities when athletes must depend on the actions of others.

² Important contributions to this issue are found in work on group sport psychology, such as Bourbousson et al 2010, 2011; Carron et al 2002; Eccles and Tenenbaum 2004; Eccles 2010 and Silva et al 2013.

2. Hardwig on Epistemic Trust

My point of departure is Hardwig's view that knowledge requires as he calls it "a climate of trust" (1991, 693).³ More specifically, he argues that through trust we gain access to empirical data and arguments needed to sustain novel results that we would otherwise lack. The trustworthiness of the members of an epistemic community is what then enables its members to acquire knowledge (694). In arguing for this view, Hardwig focuses on the social structure of modern scientific communities but he suggests that his argument can be extended more widely than this specific case. Here I am interested in examining how far it can be applied to the type of communities or teams found in sporting activities.

What, then, is it about modern science that indicates the need for epistemic trust? Most scientific research is carried out by teams and that this is done for two main reasons:

1. The process of accumulating evidence and organizing data takes too long to be done by any single individual.
2. No one person knows enough to be able to do the scientific work needed in order to add to our growing body of knowledge. As a result, many researchers of varying specializations and expertise are required for conducting the experiments that produce novel scientific results.

It is this second point concerning what is known as the 'division of cognitive labor' that is especially important for my concerns here. Hardwig notes that this does not simply involve the issue of scientific discovery but also concerns the question of how new scientific results acquire adequate support and justification. This highlights why research teams are needed: no one person has sufficient access to evidence required to justify new scientific conclusions. Hardwig is then asking us to take seriously the possibility that knowing is not always a privileged psychological state, but often a privileged social state (697).

To further argue for this claim, he offers an analysis of the social structure of science that indicates why some members of such communities are knowers while others are not. Here, as we will now see, Hardwig finds a crucial role for testimony in further establishing the need for epistemic trust. It is through the verbal testimony of other members of the scientific

³ For further discussion of the connection between scientific knowledge and trust see Elgin 2011.

community that the elements of evidence found by different researchers can be interconnected to provide “a unified whole that can justify a conclusion” (697). This results in a research team having enough evidence to justify their conclusion, something that no one member of that team has by themselves.

In order to accomplish this an appeal to testimony must involve the straightforward point that someone knows something that you don't. Moreover, the utility of the testimony as evidence stems precisely from it providing reasons you lack access to. This further depends on character traits of the testifier since the reasons offered in support of a conclusion rest on the truthfulness, or honesty of the informant. Moreover, they must exhibit competence in their respective field, and be knowledgeable about what counts as a good reason in their area of expertise. They also need to be conscientious and not be deceived about the extent of their knowledge further demonstrating what Hardwig calls ‘adequate epistemic self-assessment’ (700). The reliability of a belief that is supported through testimony then relies on the character of the testifier, where truthfulness and honesty form part of their moral character, while other traits of competence, conscientiousness and critical self-assessment comprise their epistemic character. Individuals must then trust each other or their testimony will not serve as good reasons in support of a conclusion. But Hardwig further emphasizes that individuals must be also worthy of trust or their testimony will not provide reasons either.

The collaborative nature of modern scientific research then requires trust, and trust in the character of the members of the scientific community, where this includes both moral and epistemic traits (706). Epistemic cooperation relies on the testimony of other scientists, something that can only be secured through trust. Hardwig's analysis suggests an intimate connection between ethics and epistemology.⁴ If knowledge claims rest on the moral character of informants, then knowledge itself needs ethics, in the more specific sense that such claims need to pass certain ethical standards before they can be properly deemed ‘knowledge’ (708).

3. Epistemic Trust and Team Sports

The challenge now concerns applying this analysis to the case of sporting activities. We

⁴ For a related account of the connections between ethics and epistemology see Fricker 2007.

can begin with the obvious observation that many such activities involve participation in groups, communities and teams. Much of what passes as ‘sport’ requires teams and teamwork in accomplishing its aims and goals. I take these goals to involve things like winning, successful performance of abilities and strategies, and overall athletic achievement. There is then a close analogy between sporting activities and scientific research since both often require teamwork for their success.

There is a further important similarity regarding Hardwig’s emphasis on the division of cognitive labor. Just as scientists with different backgrounds, training, and specializations are needed for group success, team sports often involve players having distinct and different roles or functions within the group. This further requires noting the different abilities of respective players and then determining who is best suited for playing one role as opposed to some other. The achievements of the team are then importantly tied to this functional organization according to specialized roles and abilities. In order to offer further support for these points I will draw on examples from basketball as it is the team sport I know best. But there are many other good cases and those more familiar with other team sports such as baseball or soccer will I hope, recognize similar connections and conclusions.

The respective positions that make up a basketball team include guards, forwards and centers. Each of these positions requires certain physical attributes and skills that vary across participants. Moreover, the specific task or function of each respective position depends on having the requisite physical features and skills. Centers need to be very tall, usually the tallest members of the team in order to effectively block shots, rebound the ball and score close to the basket. Point guards are much shorter often being the shortest players on the team but are also very quick. This is related to their key role in setting up tactics, controlling the ball and tempo of the game, while also making excellent passes. Importantly, achieving group success in basketball depends on this sporting division of labor as we might call it. The players on a basketball team coordinate their various skills and abilities in order to jointly execute strategies that facilitate good performance.

In the scientific case, we saw that this diversity and specialization among members helps to yield the data and evidence needed to justify a new scientific conclusion. How might this epistemic perspective be extended to the case of team sports? I emphasized that differences in

ability, position and function within the team contribute to its success. What each player then provides by fulfilling their respective role is the bringing of their specific talents and abilities to bear on the aims of the team. This involves knowledge, in the form of the type of know how discussed by Steel and Wertz that I mentioned earlier.⁵ Each player knows how to accomplish specific tasks that further the team's success. This can involve their knowledge of specific physical skills, such as how to dribble a basketball, or how to best position oneself to rebound the ball. And this procedural knowledge is often strongly associated with a specific team role. The same applies to their further understanding and knowledge of various tactics, rules, and strategies. Players then exhibit kinds of knowledge crucial to the team's performance, which is tied to their specific role on the team. This, I suggest, mirrors the type of cognitive division of labor seen in the scientific case, and then further yields a similar epistemic division in the case of team sports.

Similar conclusions can then be drawn about the significance of the 'social' structure of team activities when its achievements are now characterized in epistemological terms. Just as no one member of a research team has enough knowledge to justify a new scientific claim, no single member of a basketball team has sufficient know how to achieve team success. This depends on the specialized roles of team members within the confines of the game, where this further involves specialist procedural knowledge on the part of each player. Just as in the scientific case, the knowledge needed for group success is spread out throughout the team, requiring that these individual specialized contributions be brought together to yield a successful performance. Both science and sport then need teams to succeed, furthermore, they both exhibit a similar social structure with a cognitive division of labor among members where this results in achievement through the joining of their separate specialties.

We saw that Hardwig finds an additional role for trust in the formation of new scientific knowledge. It is because scientific researchers must rely on the abilities and knowledge of others in producing novel results that they need to trust other members of the team. Do we find a similar type of epistemic trust in the case of team sports as well? Recall that specialization in modern scientific communities results in the reasons needed to support a

⁵ Perhaps this skilled knowledge or know-how also requires knowledge of facts (Krakauer and Stanley 2013). What is important for my discussion is that this knowledge is not completely shared by all members of the team. See Breivik 2016 for further discussion of the connections between skill and know-how.

conclusion being spread throughout the research team. It is through the verbal testimony of scientists that this evidence becomes unified enough to serve as adequate justification for a conclusion. Individuals must then trust one another or this testimony will not provide good reasons in support of a claim.

In team sports, successful performance and achievement requires that players know that their teammates (other members of this community) have the requisite abilities for furthering their joint aims. The question then concerns whether this requires epistemic trust. At first glance, it appears that it doesn't simply because players do not need to rely exclusively on verbal testimony (or maybe any at all) to have good reasons to believe this. They can witness for themselves their teammates exhibiting the necessary abilities (for example, when they practice together), and this would, it seems, provide them with the evidence required for their belief in their teammate's capabilities and in the possibility of the team's future success.⁶ But here, following Hardwig's discussion, we are discussing propositional knowledge concerning another team member's know-how. So, for example, I know that Bill has the needed know-how to execute a specific offensive move or a particular defensive strategy.

However, knowledge that something is the case is not knowledge about how to engage in some skilled activity.⁷ Moreover, given the specialized roles assigned to respective positions on a team and the way that such roles are tied to a specific athlete's knowledge concerning their own skills and execution, suggests that such individualized know-how is not something readily available to each member of the team. Returning to the case of basketball, the sort of know-how available to a power forward in executing a post move is not usually shared with his point guard, who may know (in this sense) very little about how to make the needed post moves. Of course, the point guard could have this knowledge. She might have developed such a skill and thus know how to do very well. But given the demands of the team's success and the role differentiation that informs it, this type of know-how is usually found in those who are best capable of carrying it out. In this case, certain types of forwards and centers due to their physical size and strength.

⁶ This is further complicated by the fact that practice conditions are not game conditions and might not then be taken as reliable indications of performance on game day.

⁷ Although as I mentioned above, knowledge of skills may still depend in part on knowledge of facts (see Stanley 2011).

If the point guard then believes that her teammate can execute the abilities required to help the team perform well, this will only be in part based on evidence she has access too, and more importantly, this evidence is insufficient to justify her belief in the team's future achievements. Access to the needed support for this claim will then involve trusting that a fellow teammate possesses the know-how needed, and perhaps more significantly, trusting them to use it in the right way when the time comes. This is perhaps most plainly seen once we consider the execution of various plays and strategies by the team. Here we have an additional type of know-how that goes beyond individual skill possession, but that needs to be shared to be effective. But how is it shared? In part through trusting in my teammates that they know the play, how to execute it, and will proceed to be in the right place at the right time. Practicing various drills, plays, skills and talking about them gives team members some reason to think that they can effectively succeed. However, my suggestion is that due to the cognitive division of labor on display in team sports, epistemic trust of the sort suggested by Hardwig is also needed with respect to individual players trusting in their teammates that they possess the needed know how.

4. Epistemic Trust as Moral

I have argued that the structural similarities between research teams and team sports lend support to the idea that epistemic trust is also required in team sports when performance is taken as, in part, an epistemic achievement. Hardwig further claimed that trusting in other members of epistemic communities involve moral features of their character in terms of their integrity and trustworthiness as informants. On his account, epistemic trust contains a moral component necessary for knowledge. One might argue that this is not the case with team sports and that the trust on offer simply involves prudence.⁸ Here, we might claim that it is indeed prudent if we are to have any chance at performing well that I trust in my teammates with regard to their respective area of expertise (where this involves their individual procedural knowledge concerning their abilities and understanding various rules and strategies). But a further trust in their moral character is not needed for team success. Given our shared commitment to performing well as a team, and the negative consequences of failing to perform as well as possible, trusting each other simply is the prudent strategy for

⁸ Hardwig also examines a form of this objection.

accomplishing our shared ends.

However, there is a lingering worry concerning these shared ends, and whether team members are truly justified in thinking they are shared. Questions may be raised concerning someone's commitment to the team, where this wonders about their willingness to use their specialized skills in an attempt to further the team's goals. Here, an assessment of the character of teammates and their trustworthiness becomes important. They must be worthy of trust or their testimony (actions taken as testimony) will not provide reasons either. The type of trust at work does not then simply involve prudent acknowledgement that I need to accept your claims (or perhaps actions) to further advance our goals and possible success. But my further trusting in your performances as reliable indications of your commitment to their proper use in game conditions, when they impact other members of the team and our collective pursuit of athletic performance. Here, the success of the team is, in part, sustained through its participants exhibiting moral trust in each other's abilities as skilled athletes. This is further based on shared knowledge of other person's abilities, and indicates how that knowledge itself depends on the integrity, and moral trustworthiness of their character as athletes. Sporting achievement is then dependent on ethical considerations involving the conduct of athletes in relation to the common aims of the team of which they are a part.

If I am right in extending Hardwig's social epistemology to the case of team sports, then his emphasis on the interconnections between the epistemic and ethical, adds a moral dimension to our view of athletes not captured by the violation of rules. Success in team sports depends on the moral character and integrity of the athletes involved, where this is not simply a commitment to the ends of the game, involving doing everything you can to win. Rather, it further involves a moral commitment to the team, one that recognizes how your actions affect the other members of the team and further involve a pursuit of excellence in virtue of that moral commitment to others. Ethical issues are not then simply confined to assessing whether one has broken the rules, but they also impact the knowledge needed for success within sporting activities when this depends on the actions of other athletes. Let me conclude with a recent example that I think illustrates these points.

After losing game two of their playoff series against the Dallas Mavericks, L.A. Lakers center Andrew Bynum expressed his frustration that none of his teammates would help him on

defense. Bynum explained “It’s obvious we have trust issues. Unless we come out and discuss it, then nothing is going to really change. We have to come in and have a good session [Thursday], which I believe we will, and correct things. If not, we’ll go home”. This trust issue refers to what he saw as lack of communication between his teammates that resulted in a poor defensive showing during the game. He continues “I think it’s quite obvious for anyone who is watching the games. There’s hesitation on passes, defensively not being there for your teammate because he wasn’t there for you before...”; “With the trust issue, everything broke down. I stopped helping my teammates because my guys kept getting lobs and easy plays, so

I succumbed to not helping my teammates...” (Sweeney 2011). Bynum here describes a situation where a lack of trust in his teammate’s abilities to perform resulted in his failure to help them when they needed it. The knowledge that the Lakers players possessed, in terms of their specialized forms of know-how, was then compromised because of their moral failure to trust in those abilities as contributing to their successful achievement as a team.⁹

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