



A SILENT LEAP: SPORT BEYOND ETHICS

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Abstract: It is safe to say that the conjuncture of sport and religion has received scant attention in the mainstream of sports philosophy. In the recent voluminous and authoritative *Routledge Handbook of Sports Philosophy* (2017), for instance, the conjunct of religion and sport is only briefly mentioned in an article by Kenneth Aggerholm that sets out to describe a “secular reading of Kierkegaard.” While his chief purpose is to describe how meaning may appear as revelation in sport, Aggerholm’s Kierkegaard also holds the potential to reveal a transcendental reality – a sphere of the infinite – through the secular rituals of sport, and thus to bring the infinite in touch with our finite reality, enabling us to overcome our existential dread, our “sickness unto death,” as Kierkegaard termed it. To Kierkegaard faith could never simply be pronounced as an attribute, it had to be experienced and lived-through, and this event of religion was characterised by his image of the “leap of faith,” the moment when we suspend our ethical constraints and make a decision to, simply, believe. Cindy White (2004) has suggested that the grip with which sports capture our imagination is such that it can allow us to “forget what is good.” Diego Maradona’s infamous handball against England

in the quarter-finals of the 1986 World Cup comes to mind, a goal that Maradona himself characterised as scored by the “hand of God”: condemned on account of its unethical breach of the rules of the game, the goal nonetheless revealed a domain of truth and “poetic” justice to those who cheered for Maradona’s side.

Keywords: Kierkegaard; leap of faith; silence; inoperativity.

I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.

1 Corinthians 9:26-27 (ESV)

WHAT IS THE VALUE OF SPORT?

When we first meet the character Jesus Quintana in the film *The Big Lebowski* he cuts an impressive figure: not only does he wear an “all-in-one dacron-polyester stretch, violet bowling outfit with a racing stripe down each side”,¹ and not only does he, against custom, lick the bowling ball before swinging it; Jesus Quintana proves to be a highly competent bowler. In his first attempt, all the pins are knocked over; it is a strike. Quintana’s celebration, a “bravado dance and a strut”, leads us to believe that this is a bowler in complete control of his movements; an athlete so confident of his ability that he is willing to risk the potential loss of face embedded in taunting his competitors.

1 Joel and Ethan Coen, 1998. All quotes are from the script at <https://thescriptlab.com/wp-content/uploads/scripts/The-Big-Lebowski.pdf>.

John Turturro as Jesus Quintana in *The Big Lebowski* (1998).



We quickly learn that this is a hard-won front on Quintana's side. In a previous life he served six months in prison for "exposing himself to an eight-year-old", and, on his release, had to go house to house to tell his new neighbours that he was a convicted sex offender. The ritual humiliation involved in his reintegration had the side-effect of Jesus Quintana reinventing himself as a bowler beyond compare. When he later in the film comes to hold the voice of morality this social conversion is grounded in an act of self-discipline. For Jesus to be heard, he had to first be recognised as someone who had gained bodily mastery.

And yet, when we study the sub-discipline known as sports ethics, we get the impression that the main lesson from sports is to teach us what is pompously called "the value of competition", that is to embrace competition as the way of the world. Often, some would say *too* often, we hear that the primary purpose of sports in society is to teach the value of competition, of being a happy loser, i.e. of accepting defeat.² While this may or may not be true, this kind of shopkeeper's mentality serves to align sports with the machine-like logic of our economic-administrative forces: sports are there to soothe workers and consumers, we who are predestined to lose in the global capitalist competition. Sports can help us cope, accept defeat, and champion competition as a viable way

2 A relevant position here is Mike McNamee's canonical texts on virtue in sport; in his view "those who display the vice of hubris [in sport] are predisposed to weak humiliation" (2002, 38) when they lose, and thus learn to correct their attitude and behaviour.

forward, even in the face of the obvious realisation that economic competition, *any* competition, produces mostly losers while perpetuating the myth that it is possible to somehow defeat this inescapable logic. Play fair, be honest, and don't get back after you lose; these are "values" we learn from contemporary mass-mediated sports. Fortunately or not, playing by these values works to confirm and uphold the larger economic system as we know it.

What we want to suggest here is a path beyond and outside this dominant interpretation of sports' role in society, a trajectory that may be more convoluted, but potentially far more rewarding than the one charted by the bookkeepers and custodians of domesticated ethics. In our reading sports are not simply there to teach us to accept and cope with our predicament, but to undermine and explode our situation; in our view sport has the potential to demonstrate that a radically different world is possible. We turn to the tortured thought of the 19th-century Danish theologian, philosopher and poet Søren Kierkegaard, and specifically to his working-through and working over and over the Biblical story of the *Akedah*, the binding of Isaac by Abraham in *Fear and Trembling* (Kierkegaard, 1843).

RELIGION AGAINST ETHICS

In this story, Abraham receives a command from God to sacrifice his son. To comply with the order Abraham takes Isaac to Mount Moriah and prepares the sacrifice by binding him to an altar. However, as Abraham draws the knife to murder his son an angel and a ram appear, and the ram is slaughtered in Isaac's stead. In the end, God commends Abraham on his pious obedience (Genesis 22: 1–18). Much commentary in many religious and secular traditions has been made on this story. For instance, psychoanalysts have suggested that the story reveals God as a cruel sadist, whose main intent is to torture Abraham by ordering him to sacrifice his most cherished child, only to revert the command at the last moment, exposing Abraham as more dedicated to his inner voice than his earthly dependants.³ In *Fear and Trembling* Kierkegaard sets up a contrast between the pseudonymous author of

3 Slavoj Žižek has suggested an interpretation along these lines, see e.g. *The Fragile Absolute* (2009), ch. 1; cf. the recent *Christian Atheism: How to Be a Real Materialist* (2024), where he makes the claim that "the true formula of atheism is not 'god doesn't exist' but 'god not only doesn't exist, he is also stupid, indifferent, and maybe outright evil'."

the book, Johannes de Silentio, and Abraham, the “father of faith.” The contrast is expressed as one of incomprehension: Johannes cannot understand how Abraham can act the way he does and yet call himself a Christian. How can it be an act of faith to go against our most profound ethical regulations to sacrifice his son?

Kierkegaard’s point is of course that there is a contrast, an opposition, even, between these two domains: while our laws and ethical prescriptions regulate our social life, and while these socially codified rules may take their legitimation in some divine order, there nevertheless remains an insurmountable distinction between these types of injunctions and an order issued directly by divine authority, and it is this distinction Kierkegaard brings out in *Fear and Trembling*. To him, we disregard the contrast between ethics and faith at the expense of a sincere and truthful belief: the one who merely obeys the commandments and follows the ethical injunctions without heeding the words of God is not truly faithful in Kierkegaard’s sense.⁴ To move beyond the domain of ethics and into true belief is what Kierkegaard referred to as a leap of faith, the moment when we abandon all our attachments to our secular order to fully embrace our most profound purpose and, we should add, to transition into a notion of truth that is no longer administrative-scientific, but entirely revelatory.

While it is certainly true that sports can teach us good, ethical behaviour, to value competition, and to be a good loser, it can also show us the limits of these kinds of accountings. Kenneth Aggerholm, for instance, suggests that it is precisely the ritualistic, repetitive characteristics of sport that open up for what he calls a “transcendental reality,” or what we with Kierkegaard may see as a revelatory or divine domain (Aggerholm, 2017, 152). While Jim Parry traces the roots of sport as a civic religion to Pierre de Coubertin’s late 19th century secular revival of the Olympic gods (Parry, 2007), Aggerholm notes that for Kierkegaard such a secular religion cannot answer to our most pressing concerns: “Kierkegaard’s ultimate aim was to reveal how it is only through the relation to God that human beings can find relief from despair, or the ‘sickness unto death.’” This relation can be established through a “movement between the infinite and the finite and consists in coming away from oneself in relation to the infinite and returning to oneself” as concrete and finite (Aggerholm, *op. cit.*).

4 See particularly the discussion on religiousness A and B in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 188-189.

Embedded in this stepping away from oneself is a movement *beyond* our conventional, secular ethics. As Cindy White has suggested, the grip with which sports captures our imagination is such that it can allow us to “forget what is good” (White, 2004). Diego Maradona’s infamous handball against England in the quarter-finals of the 1986 Football World Cup in Mexico comes to mind. Only four years previously had the British army defeated and humiliated an Argentine expeditionary force to the Malvinas/Falkland islands in the South Atlantic. When Argentina met England in the quarter-finals it was a game charged with imperial and colonial connotations. Argentina took the lead after 51 minutes when Maradona jumped for a ball with his left arm outstretched, knocking it into the net behind an outflanked Peter Shilton. As the handball was hidden from the referee’s view it was allowed, and Argentina took the lead, later going on to win the game 2-1.

After the game, Maradona declared that the goal had been scored “a little with the head of Maradona, and a little with the hand of God.” While we can certainly condemn his action on account of its unethical breach of the rules of the game – and on the English side there has been no end to the legal, moral and philosophical arguments seeking to “prove” the illegality of this goal – Maradona’s defensive speech nonetheless referenced a domain of truth and “poetic” justice to those who supported his side. A set of unusual circumstances came together on June 22 1986: England fumbled in their defence, the referee did not have a clear view of the box, Maradona was an exceptionally fit and competent player, and the ball just happened to be within his reach at the exact right time. The imperial adventure from four years before had received its symbolic response, even though it was achieved through means that did not comply with ethical standards.

Here we have the quintessentially a moment in which the ethical demands of the sport were transcended to reveal its faith-based potential, and faith-based not in the sense of a secular “overworld,” as de Coubertin indicated, but a truly revelatory domain of truth and meaning.

When we return it to the secular-ethical we quickly realise that Maradona’s handball cannot be justified, but is not precisely this apparent requirement in itself proof that the act took place on a level beyond ethics? In our everyday, secular world truly faith-based acts fit uncomfortably, and, *strictu sensu* cannot be accepted. Is it not precisely *because of* their inadmissibility that we *can* recognise these acts as faith-based?

THE OBSCURE MEANING OF THE LEAP

What we propose is that in so far as there can be a faith-based experience in sports – an experience characterized by a non-ethical or post-ethical “leap of faith” – this is an event whose meaning can never fully be pronounced, as such a pronouncement would inevitably run up against our ethical prescriptions and become inadmissible. This connection between faith and silence in sports was a key concern for Pierre Bourdieu. In his “Program for a sociology of sport,” Bourdieu noted that mimetic instruction of students by a master is a form of silent body-to-body relation which facilitates an “awakening of the body”: the body understands, “outside conscious awareness, without being able to put our understanding into words,” as Bourdieu put it.⁵ What we have is a constitutive silence that takes place already at the inauguration of an athlete into the sport, and it is *this* silence, we surmise, that prepares the ground for any faith-based experience.

In the case of Maradona’s handball, we can say that the body was trained to observe and act on the possibility – *any* possibility – of pushing the ball into the opponent’s goal. While Maradona of course was aware of the regulations prohibiting handballs, for as long as the incident was obscured and inarticulate there remained the possibility of some kind of poetic intervention into the dour realities of political and athletic realism. However, when Maradona was pressed to explain what had happened he reached for the phrase that has become immortalised: it was “a little” Maradona’s head, and “a little” the hand – of God. In the end, modern television technology put an end even to these speculative, poetic recursions, establishing beyond doubt that the goal was made by unlawful means. In short, for as long as the silence was operative, the possibility of a poetic or faith-based intervention remained; when silence was forced out, ethical reality overtook the field.

Let us finally consider whether such silence is indeed a prerequisite for a poetic or faith-based experience. Indeed, when we pray or meditate we are silent, and Giorgio Agamben’s “community to come” is characterised by inactivity, sabbatism, and rest (Agamben, 2011, 248). This community holds the promise of a ground that is prior to both

5 Bourdieu, 1988, 161; cf. his view that the ineffable component of cultural and artistic practices ‘communicate, so to speak, from body to body, i.e. on the hither side of words and concepts, and [...] pleases (or displeases) without concepts’ (Bourdieu, 1977, 2).

truth and good or, to put it in our terms, it goes beyond the ethical and scientific-administrative level. However, as this is precisely a community of the future it is a place – a *topoi* – that cannot be uttered, or that cannot *yet* be articulated. The sense in which this is a domain that is particularly relevant for sports as mediated events have been pointed to by Slavoj Žižek and Robert Pfaller: We arrive home tired from a day at the office, turn on the television and sink down in our chair to watch sports. The athletes on the screen perform their sports, and both their acts and the spectators' rousing applause tell us that sports and enjoyment *of* sports are now taking place. This kind of objective activity allows us to remain passive – to rest – and thus releases us from the incessant cultural admonition to be ceaselessly active in our enjoyment: the television enjoys for us (Žižek, 2003; cf. Pfaller, 2003). Sports, then, can provide us with precisely the necessary precondition for silence, a space in which we are finally allowed to rest and silently praise beyond conscious awareness.

What can stand as a better example of this troubled relationship between silence, ethics, and rest than the subsequent dialogue in the bowling film *The Big Lebowski*? Coming right after the revelation that Jesus Quintana, the master bowler, has a prehistory as a sex offender, we get to witness his reaction to the news that the league game against Lebowski – the “Dude” – and his team has been postponed after the “Dude’s” teammate Walter has pulled a gun during a previous game. Quintana propels himself into an eloquent combination of praise and warning that leaves a silence that is only ruptured by Walter’s returning us to the ethics. Let’s listen again to Jesus Quintana’s final exchange:

QUINTANA	I see you rolled your way into the semis. Dios mio, man. Liam and me, we're gonna fuck you up.
DUDE	Yeah well, ya know, that's just, like uh, your opinion, man.
QUINTANA (looking at Walter)	Let me tell you something, pendejo. You pull any your crazy shit with us, you flash a piece out on the lanes, I'll take it away from you and stick it up your ass and pull the fucking trigger till it goes "click".
DUDE	Jesus.
QUINTANA	You said it, man. Nobody fucks with the Jesus.
Jesus walks away. Walter turns his head toward the Dude.	
WALTER	Eight-year-olds, Dude.

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