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FLOW, SKILLED COPING, AND THE SOVEREIGN SUBJECT:

TOWARD AN ETHICS OF BEING-WITH IN SPORT

According to Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1986), skilled coping in sport occurs when an athlete reaches an expert level and can execute a sport skill on ‘automatic-pilot’, in a state of ‘flow’. In this paper we reframe phenomenological accounts of sport that try to depict flow-states as part of an athlete’s competency framework. We do so from the point of view of post-structural and post-phenomenological scholars such as Jacques Derrida’s deconstructive work on sovereignty and Jean-Luc Nancy’s (2000, 2008) ontological vantage of ‘being-with’. This lens pushes us to challenge phenomenological accounts of sport such as skilled coping and flow that, we argue, portray zombie-like performances as optimal. We suggest that such a phenomenological account of sport is not only impoverished as Breivik (2007, 2009) has argued, but also misses the very promising aspects of sport that can generate the possibility for creative and relational experiences. In making this claim we aim to reorient sport philosophy’s uptake of phenomenology toward a relational ethics.

KEY WORDS flow; skilled coping; ethics; relationality, Jean-Luc Nancy

Introduction

‘Flow’ has permeated the contemporary lexicon (Kotler, 2014). In the sporting context, the term is typically used to describe a state in which an athlete feels fully immersed and ‘in the zone’ in their activity (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Such flow states are said to be experienced when an athlete’s competency level impeccably aligns with the challenges set forth and he or she is able to perform a task ‘without thinking’ (Csikszentmihalyi 1999, p. 5). These accounts of flow-like experiences, also referred to as ‘skilled coping’ (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1986), have come under criticism from scholars such as Gunnar Breivik (2009) who claims that such perspectives tend to characterise athletes as ‘zombie-like’.

Like Breivik, our aim for this paper is to caution against a celebration of flow experiences, particularly as they are assimilated into skilled coping models of sport, without due critical reflection. Drawing on the works of contemporary thinkers such as Jean-Luc Nancy (2000, 2002, 2008), Jacques Derrida (1988, 1999, 2005a, 2005b, 2007, 2009) and Bruno Latour (2005), we provide a post-phenomenological critique of flow through a specific focus on what we call the ‘relational’ nature of sporting experiences. Our philosophical method might best be described as that of deconstruction, which aims to reveal the totalising nature of commonly held concepts that present themselves as closures. Deconstruction is ethical in the sense that it destabilises these concepts and ‘opens out’ concepts to other ways of being. We are specifically interested in how some accounts of skilled coping and flow, and the uptake of these accounts in coaching practices, represent sporting experiences in ways that are absolute, ‘sovereign’, and thereby ‘closed’. We instead aim to open out these concepts to reveal new ways of imagining sporting experiences and ways of being otherwise.

Critiques of Flow

In his article ‘Zombie Like or Super Conscious?’ Breivik (2009) tackles Dreyfus and Dreyfus’s account of skilled coping. He critiques the suggestion that one does not need to consciously engage in sport performance at the elite level. This is an impoverished idea, he suggests, because elite athletes indeed require an extraordinary sense of thematic and self-referential awareness; sporting experiences are never fully automatic. In Heidegger’s terminology, all sporting experiences, even those at the elite or expert level, contain elements of thematic engagement, and all experiences involve elements of self-reference. Drawing on a number of examples, Breivik notes how each moment of sport participation requires the elite

athlete to ‘pay attention’. From his own experience as a canoeist performing an eskimo roll, to the elite runner who claims he or she is constantly ‘checking in’ on his or her hip, knee and foot positioning, the athlete is not only conscious but often ‘super-conscious’. Even in cases whereby athletes allegedly try to shift their focus, such as a golfer who is counting backward to take her mind off the next shot, the athlete is still fully engaged in an entirely conscious experience. The body does not just ‘take over’.

Csikszentmihalyi (1990) similarly notes that a flow state does not attempt to dissociate from consciousness but rather to dissociate from the self in a way that

...the absence of the self from consciousness does not mean that the person in flow has given up the control of his psychic energy, or that she is unaware of what happens in her body or in her mind. In fact the opposite is usually true. When people first learn about the flow experience they sometimes assume that lack of self consciousness has something to do with a passive obliteration of the self, a ‘going-with-the-flow’ Southern California style. But in fact the optimal experience involves a very active role for the self” (p. 64).

Like Breivik’s critique of Dreyfus and Dreyfus, Csikszentmihalyi suggests that in states of flow subjects are not zoned out and unaware of their bodies. A runner, for instance, is very much aware of her muscles, and is very much present in the activity in which she participates: even when she is deemed to be in this optimal state of flow.

We do not necessarily disagree with Breivik. We consider his insight into this topic to be highly fruitful for discussion, and we agree with him that accounts of skilled coping, or portrayals of sport performance in states of flow that lack consciousness, demand re-consideration. However, for Breivik the principal aim for engaging in this discussion is to assert that there is a place for phenomenal consciousness in sport performance (Breivik 2009).

Likewise, his earlier work (Breivik, 2007) focused on the role of the equipment context, arguing that Heidegger's philosophy allows us to comprehend and analyse 'how Dasein deals on a daily basis with the world and encounters entities in it' (2007, p. 118). This earlier element of Breivik's work is more central to our own analysis of flow and skilled coping, though we depart from it significantly.

Importantly, Breivik notes Heidegger's 'three and deep fundamental notions of Being related to human existence': 'the way human beings themselves are' (Dasein) including how they are in relation to other human beings (Mitsein); how human beings are 'when we use equipment (Zeug) in our daily dealings with the world'; and finally 'when we view things as objects independent of context and function (Vorhandenes)' (2007, p. 117). In his critique of Dreyfus and Dreyfus, as well as his suggestion of the applicability of Heidegger to sport, it is the second aspect—the use of equipment—that provides most insight. For Breivik, Heidegger's insights into the human use of equipment is important for us in sport because it helps us comprehend how humans are always engaging with and interacting with the surrounding world. In this way, he considers how Heidegger's notion of equipmentality breaks the subject-object dichotomy by emphasizing how human Dasein is constituted always in relation with the world around him or her.

We do not disagree with this claim, but we do find the tendency to compartmentalise these three elements, which follow from Heidegger's ontology, incomplete. By contrast, we do not conceive of these three elements of Heidegger's ontology as being possible to separate. Moreover, we conceive of the first aspect—that of the relation between Dasein and Mitsein, to be integral to comprehending the other two aspects (using equipment and conceiving of objects), as we will explain below.

Dasein and Mitsen

The very notion that one can view humans as themselves (Dasein) without already being constituted as Mitsen is the fundamental point of contention for us, inspired by the philosophical thinking of Nancy, along with other thinkers such as Derrida and Latour. Nancy's main point of focus is instead to foreground Mitsen, which is the notion that one is thrown into the world with others and one makes meaning on account of being *with* others. In addition, and deviating from Breivik, our relational ontology also brings the use of equipment into the same realm as this Mitsen, such that both persons and things are relationality constituted. This is why Nancy and other scholars like Latour, for instance, will suggest that 'being in the world' is always conditioned by our interactions with others and our environments, as we further explain later. Such a view of Mitsen also pushes us to re-evaluate the very notion of the independent existence of objects from their context and function, whereby the consistent differentiation of context and the playing with an object's function allows us to open up new ways of experiencing the world. Nancy's post-phenomenological approach thus provides rich insight into new ways of conceptualizing our being in the world that pays attention to relationality.

Nancy suggests that philosophical accounts of the body, which we suggest encompasses those sporting phenomenological ones, have historically conveyed the body as *having* meaning. Such accounts conceive of meaning conferred upon the body. Instead, Nancy suggests that one must conceive of the body *as* meaning. The only way we can do this is to situate the body as meaning in the context of community. 'Being in the world', then, can only be conceptualized on the basis that we recognise that any meaning we might ascribe to something is shared, on account of what Nancy calls the singular plurality of coexistence (2000, p. 2-3). He writes:

‘Being cannot *be* anything but being-with-one-another circulating in the *with* and as the *with* of this singularly plural coexistence’ (2000, p. 2-3). Nancy therefore aims to re-order philosophy. For instance, he suggests that Heidegger’s account of being in the world preserves an antiquated discourse because ‘he [Heidegger] does not introduce the co-originary of *Mitsein*’ (2000, 30-31). ‘...It has been a matter of course that the “with” - and the other that goes along with it - always comes second’, writes Nancy (2000, 30).

Whereas flow is typically regarded as a self-referential experience and non thematic experiences, as Breivik critiques, seen from the vantage of Nancy’s ‘being with’ we can also add to this critique to suggest that flow is immanent to the ways in which our relational experiences of being-with shape us, and shape our sporting experiences. An ethical phenomenology of sport would pay attention to the relational experiences forged in and through sport, which is a site, like many others, in which and through which we are put in relation with things and with others. It is a site in which one is given many opportunities to engage relationally, through close proximity. Sport is also a site in which, as bodies in motion, we demonstrate a habituated body that has forged its successes with and through contact with other bodies: not only through birth and genetics passed onto us that relates us, but also through our interactions with those we train with, those who coach us, our friends, our families, our schooling and so on. Embedded within our body are these historical relations that shape us as *Mitsein*. As noted elsewhere, sporting ‘...bodies are forged through touch in intimate space and in relation with other bodies...There is no meaning ... that is not shared between and among other bodies’ (Hogeveen & Hardes, 2014). There is also no sporting environment without the practice community of which these bodies come to forge a part, ‘without a plurality of individuals - near and distant - interlaced together in

a common end' (Hogeveen & Hardes, 2014). We forge ourselves with others, near and distant, in time and space.

It is important to note that speaking of the the 'sharedness of being' and the notion that 'meaning is shared' in a relational sense is not the same as saying that 'meaning is universal'. To clarify this point, we can say that being-with underscores our being in the world as singular unique individuals. As singularities, we are all unique and different. Each being or Dasein has a face, a voice, a life, a death. However, the difference does not separate us from one another but, rather, it relates us. The singularity is not a sovereign or autonomous entity; the singular being is ecstatic, which refers to the condition of being 'beside' or 'outside' of one's self; it refers to the dislocation of the subject.

From Nancy's perspective such an account is useful because it helps us conceive of the openness of singularities, and explains how one cannot speak of a self-enclosed subject. This means that singularities are always open to one another and are vulnerable. It is this singularity and openness that constitutes our relationality. 'One cannot properly say that the singular being is the subject of ecstasy, for ecstasy has no subject—but one must say that ecstasy (community) happens to the singular being' (Nancy, 1991, p. 7). Moreover, Nancy describes consciousness as ecstasy in the sense that consciousness is never mine – but one only has consciousness through community: 'consciousness of self turns out to be outside the self of consciousness' (1991, p. 19). One cannot be in relation without exposed singularities and one cannot be a singularity without being in relation with other singularities. We are only singular and unique because of the sharedness of being that makes such uniqueness possible (Nancy, 2000). To make this point, Nancy draws on the notion of spacing that distances one from the other. Spacing between bodies is what allows us to be both singular and plural—it is this space between us, constituted by the

both of us— that makes it possible for me to say ‘I’, ‘you’, and ‘we’. Quite simply the spacing itself makes being-with possible and also makes being-with a relation and not something that is a proper, fixed entity or a metaphysical account of being (See Nancy, 2000, especially pp. 2, 13-14, 19, 47, 137-138).

By presenting skilled coping as a state that can be identified and reached in each individual athlete, such a conceptualization relies on an account of being that is, we argue, non-relational (or at least an account of being that strives to be, or operates on the pretence that it is, non-relational). For us, an ethics of sport pays attention to the relationality that underpins sporting experiences and makes the singular experience possible. It also pays attention to how the singular experience is always an iteration that is an opening toward the other and new ways of being in the world. Affirmative flow like experience can thus have no normative arrangement other than being both an ontology and ethics of being-with. Flow would be conceived merely and fully as an opening out of the self. An ethics of flow would not be found in the seeking out of repetitive mechanistic experiences that turn us into clones of ourselves or cyborgs; the playfulness of a flow like experience comes from noting the immanence of life and the relatedness of the self to the world and to others.

As Csikszentmihalyi notes, flow is not just ‘...a fancy of the imagination, but is based on a concrete experience of close interaction with some Other’ (1990, p. 64). To illustrate this, he gives the example of the rock climber interacting with and relating to the rocks. For him, flow states are spaces to expand the self and who we are. Flow can ‘lead to self-transcendence, to a feeling that the boundaries of our being have been pushed forward’ (1990, p. 64) Likewise, it seems that Breivik (2009) finds some hopeful aspects of flow states herein whereby participating in sport at the elite level that requires excellence can give us space for optimal relational

experiences in the world. Practices such as sport give us the opportunity not only to experience our bodies in new ways definable to the practice, but also to exceed these bodily experiences in new and different ways. We therefore might think about an ethics of flow in sport that is about ‘overflowing’: it is about excesses, ways of being anew, becoming other, and doing so creatively.

These appeals to excesses and new ways of becoming may illustrate some interesting conceptual thoughts for those interested in flow as well as phenomenological accounts in sport more broadly. However, despite the clarity of the relational element in sports practiced in unison with others such as jiu jitsu, boxing, team sports and so on, whereby we practice activities in which we overtly rely on others to engage in the experience itself (as a *conditio sine qua non*), there are a number of sporting activities, such as rock climbing or gymnastics, where participants allege to ‘go solo’. In such instances one might question the relevance of being-with and relationality in understanding skill and flow-like experiences. While one can argue that there is a socialization process during and after events, such that the *Mitsein* is presupposed as background and context, one might ask more precisely how *Mitsein* is integral to understanding these experiences. That is, while it is clear through an account of flow how the athlete-equipment-environment process of all sporting activities are alleged to be engaged, it might be less clear how these activities are relationally constituted and therefore requiring of a revised notion of *Mitsein*. In response to this challenge our argument is thus: if our body becomes habituated through our general engagement with others throughout our lives, and through our specific engagement in sporting practices with others, then our accomplishments are never solely our own to claim as sovereign, since our bodies that produce these actions within practices are always relationally constituted, social bodies.

Objects, Actants and Equipment Contexts

If we are shaped through being in relation with others we are also shaped through our relations to *Zeug* or equipment. *Mitsein* is not, in our account, confined to human actors, but also non-human ones. Latour says something similar when he talks about the agentic nature of technology. If ‘an actor is what is *made* to act by many others’ (2005, p. 46) then there is a human element to the technology we use in our everyday: technology is an actant in a relational network; it has been created by people and henceforth enacts a specific agency of its own that, while maybe independent of continued human interference, can still agentially fulfil particular social functions. For example, a traffic light that is created by a human can and does, post creation, continue to direct and shape human life and behaviour despite being conceived as a technical artefact. Likewise, a signpost, an inanimate object, performs a function that shapes human engagement with it such that people follow its orders, despite the lack of human ‘presence’. The relevance for an understanding of ‘solo’ sporting performances should be clear: technology constructs and shapes sport performers even as they claim to perform ‘solo’: such skilful climbing is made possible by the agentic nature of the equipment skilfully produced by others who, all but by virtue of a trace, share, then, in the climber’s successes and failures.

One might argue that the ontological characteristics of humans who can respond to actions are quite different from those of non-responding pieces of equipment or from the wider environment. It may be true that there is a different phenomenological experience one has when one shares the flow with a wave than when one shares a pass with a teammate in football or a jab and block with an opponent in boxing. We do not intend to dismiss this different phenomenological experience. Rather, our aim is to focus on the ethics of theorizing relationality. We suggest that foregrounding the very notion that non-human actors such as

equipment have more of an integral role in our experience than often credited helps us decentre the human or Dasein from the world as the primary, sovereign subject, in order to recognise a less ‘human humanity’ or a post-human-ity, so to speak.¹

Nancy, for example, also pushes us to view the ‘other’ not as ‘an Other (the inevitably capitalized other) *than* the world; it is the question of the alterity or alteration *of* the world’ (2000, p. 11). Such a relational approach to technology and equipment also helps us open out how we view ourselves and others as subjects successful in sport and in other realms of life. A relational way of understanding sport engagement thus has wider implications for understanding a variety of pressing issues facing us in sport far beyond the account of flow and skilled coping: whether we participate in a solo rock climb, in a 100-meter sprint, or in a team sport, we are not only successful or unsuccessful as individuals. The ability to successfully score a goal or to navigate a mountain top is constructed and conditioned by the particularities of our lives constituted through our various relations with others, and with the technologies and things that others have touched and given agency to. This means to suggest that relationality is not only relevant to understand the construction of the self with other in a jiu jitsu fight, but moreover it is to suggest that we ought to rethink what we mean by ‘going solo’ in sport. We must also rethink the account of a flow like state, which alleges to be so ‘present’ and ‘in the moment’ that it claims to be an automatic and sovereign performance as such. The very notion that one is ‘alone’ and in ‘solitude’ when one climbs a mountain without others in plain sight, or that one performs a gymnastics routine as an individual, much like the notion that one can be alone in the zone of optimal performance, is impossible on this account.

Sovereignty, Flow and the Proper

Recognizing the centrality of the other in constructing us as subjects- and including the world of non human actors in this conceptualization of the other, as Nancy and Latour's work pushes us to do – has, as we have noted, an ethical focus: it highlights how our successes and our failures, and our phenomenological experiences like those we perceive as 'flow' or 'skilled coping' are shaped by one another and are entirely inter-dependent. We might describe this new ethics we are proposing as an inauthentic ethic, then, as opposed to the idealised authentic being that Dasein aspires to (Nancy, 2000).

Thus far we have attempted to articulate how Mitsein reorients a view of Dasein not as that which is a property of a subject but rather as that which is always constituted relationally through being-with other actants, whether this is through directly human relational experiences such as participating with others, or whether it is in the 'solo' sporting adventures where traces of others are revealed through practices, training, or through the equipment as actants.

The relationality that constitutes these experiences is important to acknowledge for another reason. Articulating 'optimal' or 'authentic' sporting experiences like flow or skilled coping confines embodied accounts of sport performance to a metaphysical idea of an internal point of reference (consciousness and complete absorption), which is embedded in an absolute or all-encompassing way of being. Derrida (2005, 2009) names the manifestation of this all-encompassing way of conceptualizing our accounts of being in the world as 'sovereignty'. Sovereignty both describes an all-encompassing formation of being that presents itself as an absolute and indivisible power, and sovereignty also names the indivisibility of the subject himself or herself as an absolute.

In Dreyfus's (2002) account of skilled coping, when an expert performs a skill he or she typically does so non-thematically and non-self-referentially. That is, she is not aware of the equipment she engages with and for some brief time is no longer aware of herself. Breivik (2007) does not consider these two things to be distinct. If one engages thematically it would be very difficult to suggest that one does not also engage self-referentially. That is, one would be aware of one's self as one is engaging with either failed equipment, failed skill, or something else that makes one aware of the situation and present to hand. For us, however, what is even more intriguing is how this concept of non-self-referentiality presupposes a complete subject. It presupposes that one's self can be lost, which relies on an account of being that is already complete. Instead, we consider this idea of self-reference to be impossible itself. Self-referentiality is always a performance of sorts, as is a loss of self-referentiality.

Derrida (2005b) describes self-reference in the context of what he calls sovereignty or ipseity. As he (2005b) remarks, the Latin word 'ipseity' is equivalent to the Greek term 'autos' that quite literally translates as 'self, same'. The ipseity of sovereignty is performative, which means that at the same time of presupposing a self-referential subject, it creates the very concept of this subject. The notion of sovereignty is therefore an illusion, or a performance. We can think of this account of autos, ipseity, or self-sameness as something that presents itself as indivisible and absolute. It appears to be completely whole: self-referentiality presupposes a complete subject. Sovereignty or ipseity is not reserved for a head of state, but is something each subject is said to 'have' or 'be' when the said subject exclaims 'I', much like Dasein. One of the problems with this account is that it is a performance that presents itself as being entirely separate from an Other's ipseity, or from the world for that matter if we use Nancy's terminology. The idea that we are autonomous individual beings is often presented on the basis that we are independent,

rational subjects. However, as we have articulated through our account of *Mitsein*, no one is fully autonomous outside the influence of someone or something else. We can therefore say that this depiction of sovereignty or ipseity is a ruse, and that such sovereign absoluteness is only a performance as such. Interestingly, we can consider the connection of *autos* to the concept of the automobile, which also portrays an image of something operating in isolation without the human, despite being built by or navigated by humans.

When considering skilled coping as a flow state that endeavors to perform automatically and zombie-like without any conscious reflection or representation, we can see how this concept might confine us to an account of sovereignty or ipseity: one aspires to be ‘self-same’ in sport participation when one aspires for a state of skilled coping and flow. This alleged state of absolute absorption nonthematic non-self-referentiality appears to reach a state of self-sameness in which there is nothing to draw one’s attention away from the self sameness of the ipse or *autos*. Thus, one is self-same when one is fully absorbed and absolutely at oneness with one’s body and mind. This alleged flow state only emerges when one can skillfully cope during sport performance, or when one has achieved ‘mastery’. Moreover, such skilled coping and flow-states emerge through repetition of the same act. One becomes an expert and can enter into a state of flow when one has mastered the skill to the point that it becomes tacit knowledge.

When participating in sport, much like in every other aspect of our daily life, our skills might very well be repeatable and contain traces of past movements, but they are never imitated in exactly the same way. This would obviously be unattainable. We might note, for instance, that when it comes to practicing a skill, various contingencies will influence how this skill is performed. The weather might be different, which might change how the ball slides off the hand when one bowls the ball in cricket, or perhaps it might make the surface of the football more

slippery with a slight drizzle of rain. When climbing, one might note the differences in the wear on the rock that causes one to consistently adjust the positioning of one's body, or in canoeing the water levels might impact the way that one maneuvers down the course. Even in sports considered 'closed skilled', which are allegedly influenced less by outside factors, such as gymnastics, one might note other factors, such as one's mood, one's diet, hydration, clothing, equipment and so on, that will inevitably impact how one approaches a somersault, delivers a backflip, or performs on the beam. All of these aspects ensure that no experience is a replica.

Moreover, Breivik notes that flow experiences are not as common as some writers of skilled coping and flow would have us believe. Instead, the flow like experience is rather extraordinary. 'They are not typical but relatively rare mental states, even among expert performers,' writes Breivik (2007, p. 131-2). Because 'flow' holds potential to block or thwart other ways of explaining the sporting experience our goal is to open up this concept by pushing beyond its contemporary ontological and epistemological limits. Further, an overreliance and religious adherence to flow as the epitome of the sporting experience might constrain how athletes think they ought to experience being in sport. For instance, if an athlete believes that to be a skilled coper she must experience flow, but cannot reach this state because she is always finding herself drawn to the feelings in her body, or finds herself still focusing on the task at hand in relation to the ever-changing environment, she might believe that she is a 'incomplete' athlete, or has not reached the expert level. Depicting such an all encompassing state as 'optimal' – whether or not one notes that it is 'rare' like Breivik (2009) suggests — will inevitably have practical implications for athletes if the skilled coping model is incorporated into routine coaching knowledges and used to measure athletes' successes. Likewise, striving for these 'optimal' states arguably replicates an attempt to be sovereign over one's self or over one's

body—that is, to control oneself, discipline oneself, and ultimately achieve a state of oneness and homogeneity that is no longer open to difference and change. One attempts to perform sovereignty, or perform ipseity.

When Derrida (1977) says of iterability that it ‘alters’ he means that the same thing repeated in a new context will always produce new meanings (and experiences) that are partially the same, but also partially different. Moreover, iterability is ethical: it is what is ‘to come’ whereby the ‘to come’ is always a disruption of representation and ‘entails the necessity of thinking *at once* both the rule and the event, concept and singularity’ (Derrida, 1988, p. 119). In contrast, aspiring to an optimal state of flow or skilled coping might then suggest a certain aspiration for replication, equivalent with self-sameness or sovereign mastery. Consider again, for example, the terms we have used, or might use, to describe flow: automatic, autonomous, authentic, autotelic, autoaffective. As we have noted, the root *autos* itself depicts the notion of ipseity, of sovereignty, or the performance of self-sameness. We might then consider how these terms are utterances of self-hood understood as mastery and sovereignty.

We are not claiming that there is no place for such sovereign performances – as long as they are understood as just that: performances; however, we do want to point out how something like a concept such as flow or skilled coping might be embedded in a metaphysics of sovereignty that becomes problematic when it becomes a ready made truth in phenomenological analyses of sport. We are therefore cautioning against the ways that such phenomenological descriptions of sport contain normative weighting. Describing an expert, optimal performance as flow-like replicates a performance of absoluteness or indivisibility in a way that continues to form closures in both how we theorize and how we coach and practice sport. One must thus consider the ethical implications of such closures alongside the prospects of openings.²

It should be no surprise that Derrida's account of ipseity not only features in his discussion of sovereignty, but also interlaces with his discussions of ethics, specifically in the contexts of friendship, hospitality, and responsibility. It is problematic and unethical to conceive of an ethics of being in the world that is constrained to a notion of 'autos'. Michael Naas (2008) says as much in his reflections on Derrida. He notes that such an account of ethics gets confined to the realm of the One—the sovereign (p. 126). Even 'democracy' has been 'unthinkable', writes Naas, without this reference to ipseity and sovereignty. Such an account of ethics that is limited to self-sameness, traps such discussions within a realm of 'symmetry, homogeneity, the same, the like' and thus closure (Derrida, 2005, p. 14). A metaphysics of sovereignty impedes, by way of its performance of indivisibility or ipseity, an ethics that is opened out to heterogeneity, otherness, and difference. It also impedes an ethics that is grounded in what we have called relationality and 'being with'. such reflections are therefore important if we want to ensure that we do not conceive of experiential accounts of sport—like flow for example—in ways that attempt to fix the experience as something with a 'proper' meaning, which might thereby also thwart the possibility of being (or indeed becoming) in sport, or experiencing sport, otherwise.

Conclusion

Foregrounding relationality as well as deconstructing sovereignty in our accounts of skilled coping and flow allows us to emphasize several key points in relation to ethics. First, in relation to flow and skilled coping, it means that we might have to think carefully about how coaches and athletes value and promote flow like states as optimal. We have argued that accounts of flow are so all-encompassing that they oftentimes block or thwart other ways of

explaining the sporting experience, and can also have a negative and constraining impact on how athletes perceive how they ought to experience being in sport. Breivik has noted that flow-like performances are not commonplace as some writers of flow would have us believe; rather, the flow like experience is rather extraordinary. ‘They are not typical but relatively rare mental states, even among expert performers,’ writes Breivik (2007, p. 131-2). Performances are relationally constituted; nothing is ‘automatic’; nor is any experience or way of being entirely ‘self-same’. Rather, Being is conditioned by a series of relations with others, both other human beings and non human actants within the environment around us. Moreover, we, as singular human beings are not self-same but always in flux and forging new relations with the world and others. In some ways, the illustration of flow seems akin to a kind of authentic experience that is sought after, and depicts excellence, in sport experiences, at the expense of other rich experiential accounts of sport participation. An ethics of sport might instead proliferate, perpetuate and encourage different experiences within and between individuals that accounts for a singularity’s uniqueness and note how this uniqueness is made possible through its relationality to others.

Second, as unique singularities our being-in-the-world is always in flux, and therefore we are not ‘proper,’ fixed or ‘isolated’ subjects who can or ought to strive for experiences that fulfill the experiential criteria of flow that is repeatable, self-same and unchanging. Accounts of flow as an optimal state attempt such a maneuver by attempting to (a) conceptualize a unification of the individual subject as a way of being that is a ‘oneness’ of the mind and body and a oneness of the self and (b) in seeking this unity also seek division from what grounds this as a relational experience. Even when they speak of flow being relational with one’s environment, these accounts continue to constrain sport experience to the individual subject’s relation to their

environment, and rarely challenge more overtly how this relation to the environment (and equipment) is conditioned by a series of relations that constitute the Dasein not as an individual, but as Mitsein, not as sovereign Being but as an inter-relation of being-with. Hence, theorizing, and aspiring for, a state of flow arguably endeavors to close off the self from the ‘outside’ and other ‘distractions’ in order to be completely absorbed in the task that only confronts the ‘self’ as ‘self’. A more ethical account of sporting experience emphasizes the relational underpinnings that frame our being in the world and that constitute us as unique singularities who are always constituted in relation with others, such that we preserve our difference while at the same time noting how it is relationality and being-with that makes such difference and being in the world possible.

Third, we might consider how accounts of flow could lead to potentially unethical coaching practices in sport. We might consider, for instance, how it might be unethical for a coach to push athletes to states of skilled coping with the hopes that they experience a flow-like state that cuts off the possibility of more creative or novel ways of performing in sport. Not only is the perpetuation of the phenomenon of flow as a commonplace experience false, like Breivik (2007) suggests, but moreover it is potentially harmful. If we assume that all athletes once they are skilled enough can reach a flow state, when this state of flow is, like Breivik suggests, exceptionally rare and difficult to experience, it is highly tenuous for coaching ethics. For instance, if a coach is keen for an athlete to strive for ‘flow’ they might become dogmatic in their coaching techniques. Or, perhaps an athlete becomes depressed and discouraged because they are unable to reach a state that is considered optimal and elite, despite this flow-state, as well as exact repetitions of performance, being practically unattainable. We urge scholars and coaches

alike to push the ontological limits of ‘flow’ lest athletes get trapped within an ontological cul-de-sac.

This type of critical engagement with phenomenological accounts of sport has praxis-based implications when considering the types of coaching methods and performance aspects currently endorsed in sport. To avoid this commonplace problem, as this paper has suggested, we might consider reframing our sporting accounts through an ethical lens that takes a critical approach to a widely accepted normative framework. A fruitful lens through which to consider sporting experiences is found in amongst the works of scholars like Jacques Derrida and Bruno Latour who develop critiques of the sovereign subject, and in particular Jean-Luc Nancy, whose work foregrounds rather than backgrounds an ethics of relationality and being-with.

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Notes

¹ It is beyond the scope of this paper to engage here at length with theories of posthumanism; however, it ought to be clear from our references to Latour and our situating of equipment within our conceptualisation of *Mitsein*, that we would also want to deconstruct experiences constructed as natural or unnatural, human, technological and environmental. Further work may therefore focus on deconstructing flow states conceptualised in different sporting environments that are

differentiated on the basis of distinctions between the ‘natural’ sporting environment experiences such as surfing with waves and an ‘escape’ from humanity, and experiences in technical sporting environments such as playing a sport that involves what we might describe as a greater equipment-context such as motorcar racing.

² This approach, we would argue, is not simply replacing one metaphysics for another: it is what Nancy refers to as a fundamental first philosophy that is non-metaphysical. Nancy suggests ‘the most foremost and fundamental requirement [of ontology] is that being cannot even be assumed to be the simple singular that the name seems to indicate’ (2000, p. 56). In short, Nancy’s political philosophy is a critique of Heidegger’s notion of Mitsein as ‘the people’ who draw Dasein into an inauthentic life. Where Heidegger viewed Dasein as authentic being that can emerge from a contemplative critique of the normativities emerging from ‘the people’ Nancy suggests it is the people – Mitsein- that we ought to seek out first and foremost as the basis of a social ontology.

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