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Abstract

Henning Eichberg's paper *Do we need an Existential Philosophy of the Railway? Why then a Philosophy of Sport?* containing provocative denial of its title question, has a potential to restart an important discussion concerning the identity and condition of the philosophy of sport. But because Eichberg presented some important theses – as I will try to show – without a proper justification, this potential is at risk to be wasted. The goal of this paper is to critically analyze one of his crucial presuppositions and on the ground of this analysis offer another view on the philosophy of sport. The view is thus in one aspect convergent with Eichbergs' perspective, but in another aspect is opposite to it.

Key Words: Sport, railway, philosophy of, ideology, Eichberg.

Resumen

En su artículo “Do we need an Existential Philosophy of the Railway? Why then a Philosophy of Sport”, Henning Eichberg lleva a cabo una polémica negación de la pregunta en el título. Este artículo tiene el potencial de resucitar una importante discusión relativa a la identidad y condición de la filosofía del deporte. Sin embargo, como Eichberg presenta algunas tesis importantes – como trataré de mostrar – sin justificación adecuada, este potencial queda en riesgo de ser malgastado. El objetivo de este artículo es analizar críticamente uno de sus presupuestos esenciales, y en base a dicho análisis, ofrecer otra visión de la filosofía del deporte. Ésta es en un sentido convergente con la propuesta de Eichberg, y opuesto en otro sentido.

Palabras Clave: deporte, ferrocarril, filosofía, ideología, Eichberg.

To avoid possible misunderstanding, a disclaimer is necessary: I am going to present a view on philosophy of sport inspired by Eichberg's remarks that were published as a part of a polemics concerning a book on phenomenology of sport, but my view is not a part of this polemics and should not be taken as a part of it. The polemical context of Eichberg's remarks explains the determining adjective 'existential', which might be interpreted as an allusion to 'phenomenological'. But since I am not going to participate in this polemics, I am omitting this determining adjective in further discussion and I am focusing exclusively on the apparently exotic comparison between the philosophy of sport and the philosophy of the railway.

1. Introduction

For the philosophy of sport, a relatively young branch of philosophy, the questions of its identity as well as its relations to the other branches of philosophy and its place in culture in general belong to its very core. However, there is no agreement concerning these problems both inside and outside the philosophy of sport. The discipline is far from being perceived as a natural, well-grounded or necessary branch of philosophy. According to Graham McFee, there is no philosophical issues in respect of sport other than ethical ones. Consequently, there is no place for such sub-discipline of philosophy as the philosophy of sport:

"so-called 'issues' in the philosophy of sport are of three kinds: first, and legitimately, they may be ethical problems inherent in sport; second, and legitimate philosophy though not 'philosophy of sport', they may be problems for other areas of philosophy; and third, they may be pseudo-problems. (...)" [McFee, 2002, pp. 16-17].

According to McFee, none of the issues in respect of sport (concerning ethics, aesthetic, physical education) constitute a 'philosophy of sport'. A similar view might be found in Jerzy Kosiewicz who claims that at the current stage of development of this discipline we are facing 'philosophical reflections on sport rather than the philosophy of sport' [Kosiewicz 2006, p. 53]. But the strongest criticism of the philosophy of sport comes from Henning Eichberg, who claims that although there are genuine philosophical questions to sport, 'sport philosophy' or 'philosophy of sport' should not be taken for granted. In contrary, according to his view, philosophy of sport is a too narrow, too particular or accidental to constitute a proper part of philosophy:

"philosophy has its focus on general and fundamental problems not on relatively short-termed phenomena like the car, the airplane, the telephone, or the toilet – but irrespectively, on their importance for human life" [Eichberg 2014, 79].

According to Eichberg whereas there are some genuine philosophical questions to sport (as well as some genuine philosophical questions to the railway) both sport philosophy and railway philosophy sounds strange. Eichberg concludes that

"Sport philosophy should not, as is frequently the case, be taken as natural self-evident" [Eichberg 2014, 79].

Although these voices are in the minority inside the community of the philosophers of sport, they indicate still unsolved problem and Eichberg's diagnosis seems to be the most destructive for the uncritical notion of the philosophy of sport. Now I would like to focus on this diagnosis by means of the analysis of Eichberg's sport-railway analogy.

2. The problem of the importance of the philosophy of the railway

Eichberg's argument is based on the presupposition that there is an equivalence between

the lack of the need of the (existential) philosophy of the railway and the lack of the need of the (phenomenological) philosophy of sport. The acceptance of this assumption puts the defender of the philosophy of sport in a very difficult position. This acceptance leads to the following dilemma: the defender of the philosophy of sport will have either to admit a marginal position of the philosophy of sport (equal to the significance of the exotic philosophy of the railway) or (trying to defend the philosophy of sport as a serious endeavor) have to prove a special importance of the philosophy of the railway. In these circumstances for a defender of the philosophy of sport it is better to look for a different strategy, that is based on undermining of this equivalence. I will follow this path, however, I owe the reader the reservation that the final result of my analysis might be seen as not less damaging for the current form of the philosophy of sport than the Eichberg's view is.

So, do we really need a philosophy of the railway? Eichberg claims we do not. For the sake of the argument, I take it, perhaps in agreement with the common sense, that philosophy of the railway, in our real world Anno Domini 2016, is not a necessary (or even important) part of our intellectual activity. Now, the crucial problem is to determine if this is *a necessary* truth? The problem is if in *any* circumstances, in *any* possible world it is the case that philosophy of the railway is not an important part of human intellectual activity? I believe this stronger claim is false. This now revealed distinction between the two claims concerning importance of the philosophy of the railway enables us to show a gap in Eichberg's argument. To prove this, I am going to present a terminological clarification and a brief description of a possible world in which there is an urgent need for the philosophy of the railway.

3. What is philosophy of X?

To begin with the terminology, there is a narrow (one might say: 'metaphysical' or 'integral') view of philosophy, which defines this discipline as a unified study of the most fundamental features of reality. On the ground of this view, although there might exist different accounts of reality (hence the philosophical polemics) each of these accounts constitute in fact single philosophical system, which divisions, at least on a certain level of speculation, are superficial and artificial. This view excludes all sub-disciplines of philosophy, eliminating (among others) the problem of the philosophy of sport.

In opposition to this narrow view, the broad or 'fragmentary' view allows for far reaching partitions of philosophyⁱ. The 'philosophical reflection upon X', means that certain standards of using of philosophical tools in the course of this reflection is implied as well as some special importance of X. If 'philosophical reflection upon X' would be synonymous to 'philosophy of X', we would obtain the broad view of philosophy, in which philosophy is divided into its sub-disciplines by almost all its topics. Whereas the narrow view eliminates the problem of existence of the philosophy of sport, the broad view makes it trivialⁱⁱ. All above-mentioned authors implicitly deny both the broad and the narrow view.

Perhaps the most popular meta-philosophical account follows the middle path between the narrow and the broad views of philosophy. The crucial question within this moderate view is: *what does it mean to be a philosophy of X?* what means here *being something more than just a philosophical reflection on X*. Which X's counts as a serious candidate to constitute a particular discipline of philosophy? I doubt if it is possible to formulate a non-controversial, complete list of relevant necessary and sufficient conditions. There is a margin of arbitrariness here, certain irregularities are inevitable, as well as an influence of some external factors. Perhaps on the ground of the moderate view a phenomenon X might constitute *philosophy of X*, if the three following criteria are fulfilled:

1. Substantive: X generates some philosophical problems and questions requiring the use of philosophical tools to be answered and the scope of these problems is broad enough to create a set of interrelated issues (field). Perhaps typical for philosophies of X's is their interdisciplinarity: solving X-generated philosophical problems requires also some special competencies in X. Perhaps young, aspiring philosophy of X will be lending some techniques from other fields of philosophy, whilst its mature form should reciprocate (import and export of philosophical tools, terminology etc.).
2. Institutional: the evolution of the philosophical study of these problems has generated a special society of researchers, professional journals, conferences etc. Existence of a well-established institution devoted to supporting growth of the philosophy of X is the most visible evidence of its maturity. However, it cannot be taken for granted, i.e. accepted without careful examination of its basis - substantive, philosophical matter. Institutional aspects might be generated as a part of "celebration" typical to philosophy understood as an "abstract or poetic texts and postulates, which affirm Corporate Identity" [Eichberg, 79].
3. Social: X (and X-generated problems) have a special social importance (this point will be discussed below).

I believe this simple view is sufficient to account the meaning of such expressions as 'philosophy of science', 'philosophy of law' or even 'philosophy of music'ⁱⁱⁱ. In the light of these criteria sport seems to be a not so bad candidate for constituting separate branch of philosophy (perhaps much better candidate than the railway), but all criteria and its application might raise controversies and thus require detailed discussion.

At this stage I will narrow down the discussion only to the point three – social importance. Let us now go back to the point suggested by abovementioned distinction between the two claims concerning the importance of the philosophy of the railway. Social approach to the problem of philosophy of X is based not only on the concept of *theory* of X (theoretical problems generated by X) but also on the concept of *ideology* connected with X. A way of the

emergence of philosophy of X might lead through a critical analysis of an ideology of X (if such an ideology exists). If this critical discussion of X reaches certain standard of philosophical analysis, it might be counted at least as a serious candidate to become a philosophy of X. Perhaps ‘philosophy of religion’ might serve as a typical example here.

The analysis of the net of inter-relations between these three criteria (and especially substantive and social) lies beyond the scope of this paper. My current goal is to test if we can construct a plausible description of the philosophy of the railway understood as a philosophically elaborated critique of an ideology. One might point out that this is only one understanding of *philosophy of X*, however, this is sufficient for my further purposes to indicate at least one form of the philosophy of the railway which is needed in a certain possible world, or rather certain possible society. The passage could be understood as a partial answer to the Eichberg’s important question:

"Why is the existence of a philosophy of sport taken for granted and self-evident while a philosophy of the railway would rather be a weird or even ridiculed project?" [Eichberg, 79].

4. Living in the Railway Obsessed Society

Let us imagine now a world in which ‘international railway society’ has so a strong position, that schools on all levels, universities teaching and research, media coverage and leisure pursuits are essentially concerned with the railway-related issues. Imagine (it's easy if you try) that in this weird society railway-spokespersons have so a strong prestige that they occupy TV shows and has influence on school curricula, fashion, politics or even religion. In almost every country ‘railway observation’ is a national hobby, and it has many long-life devotees. You will not find a pub without a big TV screen covering trains crossing important routes. The pope is praising railway goodness, and notable politicians are trying to improve their images using connections with well-known train drivers. Some train-celebrities are highly estimated authorities in many fields of life. There is a lot of published materials concerning railway-studies, railway-leisure etc. More intellectual part of these vast production is called *the philosophy of the railway* (and a branch of it might be even specified as *existential*), but the label is not important here. What matters is the real function of this literature in this railway obsessed society (ROS). The function of many of these publications is subordinated to the interest of the railway-connected societies, so it might be rather called *the official philosophy of the railway*. Due to this interest, more important than purely theoretical research, it should be rather called *the ideology of the railway*.

Now, this ideology might raise (among critically thinking part of the population) some criticism. This criticism, after reaching certain level of sophistication – in contrast to the *railway ideology* – might be called *the real philosophy of the railway*, not official one, but

genuine one. It has a special place in this culture, perhaps not central, but still important, as a kind of intellectual inquiry that has special practical importance. It raises a lot of serious issues, and one of them is the desired limits of the impact of the railway ideology on the society. A critic claims that selective, biased railway observation might lead to permanent habit of non-objective thinking. Constant watching of very fast trains is also a kind of addiction which consumes a lot of energy that could be devoted to the more valuable and important matters than relatively fiddling transport. Narrow-mindedness of some dedicated steam locomotives is legendary, and it is difficult to have a conversation with them that is not exclusively focused on their mania. Different forms of atavism and tribalism are reported, including barbarian attacks of fans of one company on trains belonging to other companies. It has also been pointed out that a kind of admiration of the fastest train motormans or the most effective ticket inspectors might be fascist-like: the cult of power of railway passengers and the condemnation of weakness of the rest of the population. The biggest railway events are often organized in non-democratic countries that are not respecting human rights what raises especially vivid controversies of moral and political nature. For many critics, hypocrisy is perhaps the most adequate description of this contradiction of the noble railway ideals and sad practice of railway committees. There are even railway haters (brave enough to spread their shocking ideas despite the social taboo) who dare to claim that obligatory railway education lessons and trips should be limited or even eliminated in schools. And this is just the tip of the iceberg. The discussions might be perceived as a kind of self-defense mechanism of the railway obsessed society. Even if it starts with just a commonsensical reflection and journalist's criticism, during the course of the social debate it might constitute a serious opposition to the official, well-funded railway propaganda. It is well known that International Railway Committee did not only need ideological idealization, but went about developing rich financial means to sponsor philosophical engagement [Eichberg, 80]. But there is no reason why philosophers (worth their name) should join, as a volunteers, this corporate "philosophy"; on the contrary, it is more justified to expect that they will elaborate the bottom-up anti-railway protest.

It is obvious that in such a society there is an urgent need for philosophically grounded reflection concerning diverse railway phenomena. Now I believe this is sufficient to show that the critique of the railway ideology could be a vital part of intellectual life of a certain fictitious society (ROS). It should be also clear that the lack of the need of philosophy of the railway in our world is just a contingent truth. But ROS really needs some critical analysis of the railway ideology (due to its ubiquitiveness and influence), what means that it needs qualified philosophical reflection of railway-related issues, what in turn means - as these issues are genuinely philosophical, dealing with values, attitudes, moral and aesthetic judgements - it needs the *philosophy of the railway*. It will not be a 'timeless', fundamental philosophical field equal to metaphysics or epistemology, but it will constitute legitimate in ROS part of applied philosophical reflection.

5. Are we living in SOS?

After these preparations we are in the position to attack the main problem: the need for the philosophy of sport in our society. But by the means of the analogy railway-sport (or rather *transport - sport*) the answer should emerge immediately. Thanks to the substitution railway/sport (although not always one to one) in ROS we get the description of sport obsessed society (SOS) which needs a philosophy of sport defined in analogy to the philosophy of the railway in ROS. Such understood sport philosophy would be a critical response to sport ideology. If this result is relevant to our real world depends on factual question of adequacy of SOS description to our world. Because in this paper I am concerned rather with logical and terminological issues than factual issues, I am not going to make any final empirical claim. At this point I am going only to confine my argument to the following statement: a philosophy of sport (in a sense) is urgently needed in the world that fits the SOS description. I believe it is the case that we are not dwelling ROS, but it is possible that we are actually dwelling SOS, but because we get used to its obsession, it is difficult for us to fully realize and asses it. Obviously, the diagnosis might differ strongly between respective countries.

For those who agree with the logic of the argument and the adequacy of SOS description to our world, I am offering an additional comment. To prove that philosophy of sport is really needed does not mean that we have really fulfilled this need with what is already known as a 'philosophy of sport'. It is possible that a part of it (or even majority of it) falls in fact into the category 'ideology of sport'. I am not going to draw a precise demarcation line between the ideology and the philosophy of sport. But to address Henning Eichberg's analysis: if he is right in suggesting that so and so is a case of ideology rather than the philosophy of sport, it does not challenge the conviction that the real philosophy of sport is needed. Thus I believe his paper might be read as an attack on the ideology of sport under the auspices of the philosophy of sport, but not as an evidence that the philosophy of sport (in the above defined sense) is not an important part of the intellectual life. My defense of the possibility of the need of philosophy of the railway is two-edged: it is meant as an attack on some forms of the 'philosophy of sport', but not on the philosophy of sport as such, on the contrary, some forms of critical philosophy of sport are defended.

6. Closing remarks

After presenting a defense of the possibility of the philosophy of the railway dependent on certain social conditions (and, *ceteris paribus*, the possibility of the philosophy of sport) I left the two following questions open :1) does our society fulfill the criteria of the need of the philosophy of sport and 2) where exactly lies the demarcation line between ideology of sport and philosophy of sport. There are many possible combinations of the relevant answers, and the definite choice of one of them lies beyond the scope of this paper. Henning Eichberg's position might be interpreted as follows: we do not need the philosophy of sport (although we have something that is called 'philosophy of sport'), whereas my argument reveals the

worrisome possibility that is almost directly opposite to his position. If we are living in SOS, due to presented arguments we really need a genuine philosophy of sport, but the existing body of knowledge called 'philosophy of sport' does not fully meet above characterized criterion of critical analysis of the ideology of sport.

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Notes

- i It is interesting to note that whereas the narrow view eliminates sub-disciplines of philosophy, the broad view might eliminate its mother-discipline, claiming that there are only *philosophies of X, Y, Z...* but there is no philosophy *simpliciter*.
- ii Inflation of this kind has already occurred with the term *philosophy* referring to different forms of actions (coach's philosophy of game, boss' philosophy of business; philosophy of cooking etc.).
- iii In *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy* [Honderich 1995] one might find such Philosophies of X as *philosophy of education, history, language, law, life, mathematics, mind, religion, science*. The *Companion* does not include *philosophy of sport*; however, it includes article 'sport' (written by David Best).