

Paul Weiss, *SPORT: A PHILOSOPHIC INQUIRY*
Southern Illinois University Press, \$2.45 paper.

Reviewed By IVAN SOLL

Paul Weiss' *Sport: A Philosophic Inquiry* has drawn considerable attention because of its title and topic alone. The very idea of applying that arcane yet ubiquitous mode of intellectual activity, philosophy, to sport, the object of such varied and widespread human involvement, has the double-barreled appeal of novelty and naturalness. It leads one to ask why this has not been tried before.

The book also seems timely. A re-focusing of interest, including intellectual interest, upon the human body is a salient feature of the *Zeitgeist*. A philosophical examination of sport, in the sense of an examination from the broadest and most basic perspective, seems integral to the current revolt against a long intellectual tradition of neglecting and devaluing the bodily aspect of the human condition.

In addressing himself to the question of the general significance of sport in the broader context of life, in presenting sport as an apt, though long ignored, subject for philosophical analysis, Professor Weiss merits our attention and gratitude. But the actual form of his philosophical method, his analyses and his prose style leave much to be desired.

Despite his self-proclaimed deviation from a prevalent philosophic tradition that awards scant merit or interest to sport, more generally to bodily excellence, Weiss retains the philosopher's traditional bias in favor of the intellectual life. In his analysis of the "attraction of athletics," he says of the young who participate in sports "most passionately and most successfully" that "those who are young cannot do much to maintain or contribute to culture. . . The best that most of them can do is to be good at sport. . . and that is a goal well worth their devotion." *Aut de mieux*. Ironically, after warning against any belief in a universal need for sport that would wrongly imply that all non-participants are "athletes *manqué*," Weiss implicitly suggests that young sports devotees and champions are intellectuals *manqué*. He awards sports and the life of the body a value, but a much smaller value than philosophy and the life of the mind. And lamentably he feels no need to give this traditional bias a basis in argument.

Professor Weiss chillingly pictures those devoted to sport as giving up intellectual pursuits such as mathematics and any "interest in an inquiry into the whole of things." But he neglects to add, and probably to see, that intense devotion to intellectual pursuits involves corresponding renunciations and a corresponding loss of well-roundedness. And when Weiss fantastically adds that the athlete devoted to his body would not "need to live up to ethical prescriptions" and even doubts whether he "could ever exercise his imagination," we should realize that his description does not apply to any dedicated athletes who have ever actually existed. It is rather an abstraction *ad absurdum* of the athlete's involvement with his body, a metaphysical caricature of a super-somatophile, that has about as much to do with the real consequences of intense participation in sport as Lewis Carroll's story of the Cheshire cat has to do with the consequences of being in a good mood. Clearly, the same silly method could be correspondingly used to present Weiss' ideal, the intellectual life, in horrifying aspect.

Professor Weiss' general disapproval to a life that centers around the body adversely affects his discussion of the important topic of professionalism, leading him to draw the distinction between professionals and amateurs in an overly simplistic, misleading and prejudicial manner:

Professionals and amateurs are different . . .
The one works for money, the other plays as part of an adventure at self-discovery and growth. The one wants to do a workmanlike job, that has value for his employers, whereas the other seeks to bring about a game well-played.

Contrary to Weiss' suggestion, a professional's working for an employer and a wage does not exclude his having an autonomous desire for excellence, self-discovery and adventure through his sport, and surely amateurs are often motivated by less noble concerns than the ones Weiss mentions. His simplistic and jaundiced view of professionalism is really a corollary of his commitment to keep sport and the life of the body in a subordinate position.

Professor Weiss locates the essence of sport's fascination in the ultimate performances of champions who "operate at the limit of bodily capacity" and thus "show us what we are ideally as bodies." Linking the appeal of sport to man's interest and pride in what the best of his species can accomplish bodily is one of Weiss' more interesting ideas, and helps account for spectator interest and the human preoccupation with records. A proponent of this

view is, however, hard pressed to account for the broad appeal of sport for participants who are not at one of its pinnacles. Weiss' rather lame remark that such people "can at least make evident the kind of work that must be done if excellence is to be achieved" does not really explain why they find it appealing to do so. Weiss tends to neglect that part of sport's attraction that is independent of ideals of excellence.

The book culminates in a strong plea for the "standardization of sport," that is, for the working-out of a radically comprehensive system of handicaps and equations that would enable fair and universal comparisons of excellence among performances by athletes of different ages, sexes, sizes, etc.; among performances made under more or less ideal conditions; and even among performances in different sports. The ultimate commensurability of all modes and parameters of sport envisioned by this provocative and ambitious program seems to me, however, a philosophical pipe-dream, very much like the wishful and naive supposition of classical utilitarian philosophers, such as Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, that all types of pleasures and pains could theoretically be reduced to some common hedonistic currency in terms of which they could all be compared. Weiss breezily and unconvincingly tries to deflect the kind of difficulty posed by having to compare performances in the shop-put, the sprint and golf by pointing out that different sports "are not altogether incomparable is evident from the fact that we do sometimes scale them on the basis of spectator interest" and "money spent on them." But the interesting question is not simply whether performances in different kinds of sport can be compared somehow or other, but whether they can all be truly assigned comparative values as human achievements.

Weiss' vague and promisory reference to the possibility of using "more pertinent measures, such as the amount of strength exhibited, the grade of difficulty involved, or the degree of gracefulness demanded or achieved" simply raises once again the problem of commensurability. I doubt that it is really possible or even meaningful to assign comparative values to the strength exhibited by a soccer player and an oarsman, or to the grace achieved by a champion driver and a great basketball player.

It is to be hoped that this book, despite its flaws or perhaps because of them, will serve to incite others to develop further and more sensitively the important sorts of issues, long neglected, it has raised.

From:

Betty B.

I
CAN
REALLY

Betty B. goes out with the boys alot
she's one of them
she parties with them
she drinks with them
and when they all pile out of the car
to take a leak
she climbs out
pulls down her pants
and pisses standing up.
In the morning she wonders
at the stickiness
of her thighs
and looking down
her heart freezes
when she notices
that her penis is missing
but in another minute
realizes
that she had never really owned one.

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