

# 1      Physicality

## **Activity**

Lift a heavy stone, jump over a fence or run to catch a ball and you will be pleased with yourself. You will have a sense of your own power and ability. You will feel invigorated and possibly a little out of breath. Your pulse rate will raise briefly. You have done something, performed an action, acted, been an actor. Even if your capabilities are limited, as everyone's are to some degree, you will still want to exercise them, preferring to do what you can alone and accepting help only when needed. Catching a ball is a simple but disproportionately pleasing activity. An exercise in hand-eye coordination, it consequently feels like an achievement. Satisfaction comes with a clean take: when the ball smacks perfectly into the palm of your hand, sticking securely.

It is pleasing in and of itself to be active, I shall argue. Everyone needs rest and relaxation, of course, but these have to be properly balanced with activity in order to be enjoyed. Too much inactivity gets us down. Enforced idleness is torture. There are many different forms that activity can take, but to understand the role of sport in our lives, and in our societies, we should start with physical activity that is for its own sake. Although I shall focus on the importance of abilities in sport, my account will reject ableism.

Swimming is as good an example as any to consider in more detail. There are some reasons why it might be necessary to swim but my focus here will be the most common case where someone swims for pleasure; that is, just for the sake of being active. Let us consider the ways in which we enjoy the activity of swimming. There is the sensation of the water on one's skin as one is unfettered by cumbersome outdoor clothing. One is surrounded by water and yet also with a sense of freedom in that medium. The real pleasure then starts when feeling the water slide over your body as you move through the water: when you are properly swimming. The four recognised strokes all consist in cycles of coordinated motions, mainly of the legs and arms, whose movements are synchronised. There is much else to get right too, though: your breathing, optimum head position and so on. Getting the technique right allows you to cut through the water at pace. We see that some are faster and better swimmers than others so we know that the technique can be improved with practice. Some swimmers make it look effortless but this is because they have mastered the technique. They have control over their bodies and know all the small details that can add efficiency. Novice breast-strokers might leave their fingers apart, for instance, as the water then offers less resistance. One soon learns to keep one's fingers closed together so that the hands form a scoop or paddle and that the feeling of resistance is what really matters and is how you pull yourself through the water.

The satisfaction of swimming is not just about control and mastery of one's own body, although that can bring a very great pleasure indeed. In this case, there is also

a satisfaction in mastery over the water. One might recall one's childhood, entering water for the first time, and being scared that it could cover your face. Contrast that now with how you can kick off from the side and glide a quarter of a length under the water, knowing to blow bubbles out of your nose as you go. Feeling comfortable and at ease in the water comes from confidence in one's technique and then being pleased that one has conquered a fear and gained mastery over a potentially hostile environment.

The acquisition of new physical skills can itself bring a sense of achievement, even when you cannot yet execute those skills well. I don't mind admitting that I was a late swimmer and even now that I have much to learn. It had long bothered me that while I had developed a good stroke, I still couldn't dive into the pool. I had to climb down the ladder or shuffle into the shallow end off my bottom. I could tolerate the embarrassment but it annoyed me that there was something I was unable to do but which looked relatively easy when others did it. Where did one start on learning an ability like that at my age, though? Did I just need to take the plunge (literally)? Was fear the main thing stopping me? What would it be like throwing myself off a ledge into thin air? Would it hurt when my body hit the water? Could I bang my head on the bottom? Would I be able to get back up for breath in time?

Admitting my vulnerability and taking a few tips from a good swimmer, I one day resolved that I was going to learn to dive. Hence there was a first time when I crouched low on the edge of the deep end, looking into the water below me, arms extended, fingers together and

pointing ahead, when I had to be brave and make the leap. The first attempt was not great, technically, but it was enough to realise that the water hitting your chest wasn't too painful. Within a minute I was back out and ready for another go. After a few attempts it felt like it was getting better and I could go straight from my dive into an underwater glide and then come up and start my stroke. I felt proud of myself, to an extent, for having conquered a physical fear.

It was not only that, though. My delight came from a sense of pride but also a celebration of my physicality. I had learnt and controlled my body adequately enough to be able to perform a novel skill. I was newly able to execute a significant physical action: cutting through the air and breaking into that potentially hostile environment. I felt alive, capable, powerful, in control of myself and my surrounds, in direct contact with my world, a human being, embodied.

### **Extensions**

The pleasure gained in exercising one's physical abilities is not limited to sporting activities. One might gain pleasure from learning the quick and intricate fingering of a new tune on the guitar, for instance. A novice might be pleased just from learning to play their first recognisable chord. Playing a musical instrument can be a lot of fun in no small part because it requires skill, usually with both hands and a lot of concentration and coordination.

Likewise, one can gain pleasure in mundane tasks where one successfully completes a complicated operation.

Setting aside employed work, which might bring no pleasure since one is alienated from the product of one's labour, consider a household task performed for one's own benefit. Suppose you bought a Scandinavian flat-pack bed that you are excited to have but then find that there is an 86-step self-assembly to complete. The assembly requires holding large planks in place, balancing components in order to slot them together, reaching around corners, screwing in 104 bolts, turning the whole bed over, and so on. There might be some frustrations along the way but, if the task is executed successfully, some self-satisfaction is likely. This is possible for all sorts of chores, tasks and labours performed not for wages but because you wanted them done. Being capable feels empowering in a range of contexts.

There is a further physical pleasure that can be found in some work, and maybe even some musical or other activities, but especially in sport and recreation. This is the pleasure of a good workout. When I swim I like at some point to go for it hard, to put in a sprint over a length, or to have an extended swim, testing the limits of my endurance. At the end of it, I might feel tired, my pulse and respiration are fast and I can feel aches in my muscles, sometimes even burning sensations. It is pleasurable nevertheless. When one gets very fit, exercising hard can bring feelings of euphoria, a strong physical pleasure mixed with the pain and fatigue.

Apart from the immediate sensational pleasure, there can be a use to pushing these physical limits. As in the case of playing a musical instrument, abilities can be lost through lack of use. With physical fitness, we know that it is

not just skills that can be forgotten, but capacity can decline too. Periods of inactivity will see muscles gradually waste, cardiovascular efficiency fall away, weight increase, and it will become generally harder to exercise next time. Activity makes more activity easier and fitness can usually be increased by pushing oneself a bit beyond one's comfort zone each time.

How far can physical fitness be extended? In our own case, we cannot be sure. As most of us are not professional athletes, we have practical limitations on how often and how long we can exercise, so we do not know our ultimate capacity. We can get some hints by extension, however, when we look at what the best athletes do.

There are some skills that require such a level of dexterity that we might think them not humanly possible. Consider Simone Biles' beam routine in which she performs manoeuvres that were previously thought too hard for anyone to execute in a controlled enough a way for competition, such as a squatted triple spin on one foot (Biles has four unique gymnastic moves named after her). Similarly, there will be some acts of endurance that we might at some stage think impossible, such as running a marathon in under two hours. Eliud Kipchoge proved in 2019, however, that this can physically be done, although he did not run the distance in competition conditions. Still it showed us something important and was enthralling in its own way. Biles and Kipchoge push forward those limits of human capacity on our behalf. They tell us something about ourselves not as individuals but *qua* human beings. We human beings can, after all, perform these feats. This might be why we can take

vicarious pleasure from seeing others exercise their physical capacities.

The connection between sport and physicality is loose. Physicality is one part of sport; but only a part. And physicality is important outside of sport too. Nevertheless, to understand sport, and our interest in it, we must acknowledge our physical embodiment. Much of what I have said could apply also to activities like dancing, indeed any activity where we use our bodies in a skilled and demanding way. Dancing requires a high level of fitness in order to do it well but can be done to various levels of expertise. With dance, it might be even more obvious that the activity serves no immediate purpose and is done largely for its own sake, for the pleasure it brings. Of course, it is possible that someone dances because they need to get fit or because it can be a social activity and a way of meeting people. But for the most part, I maintain, we dance for pleasure. It is possible to show off, when dancing, and it has long been a convention to dance in order to attract possible partners. Showing off can be more innocent than that, however, since it can be an additional pleasure to display one's capacities to others. We are social beings, after all, and do not practise and exercise our abilities simply for our own pleasure. Just as a musician can take some pride in mastering a difficult piece in private, a public performance adds something. It means that others may not only enjoy the music but also marvel at the dexterity and control on show. Perhaps there is nothing shameful in this showing off. We want to please others. Performing an ability that those others lack is not necessarily a bad thing, which it could be if done in a spirit of gloating. If

the ability is exhibited in a spirit of pleasing others, after many hours of dedication in order to acquire the requisite skill, then usually the performance is welcome to its viewers.

It seems that we get this in the case of sporting and recreational abilities too. Spectator sports are for our entertainment and consumption and it would be very rare, even perverse, to resent an athlete for having got so good at their chosen sport. Some professional athletes are annoying, certainly, but that is usually because of their perceived personality flaws rather than that they are good at their sport. Displaying one's physical prowess is not of itself a vice. Gloating or using it to belittle others might be.

We can then have a satisfying complementarity, where it can be a pleasure to show your physical abilities to others and pleasurable to see others show their physical abilities. This is a foundation for sports spectatorship since we should acknowledge that sport is not just about participation. For many people it is mainly about watching.

### **Being Bodied**

Philosophers spend much time considering the nature of the mental and frequently ignore the significance of physical activity. What I have described so far, however, suggests a celebration of the fact that we are bodied beings, able to take pleasure in what we can do with our physical existence.

There is a tradition, deriving from Descartes, which denies that we are essentially physical things. This is appealing *prima facie* because a person is not just their body. The body can survive the death of the person, for instance, even



though it usually decays once death has occurred. Might we then also think that the person can survive the death of the body, where death is merely the parting of the soul from the body and where the person lives on as a disembodied soul? There would be a problem with this view, however, if persons are essentially dependent on their bodies, even if they are not identical with them. I support a nuanced version of this view in which we are essentially physical beings and this is a fact upon which the pleasure of exercising physical capacities to a degree rests.

The Cartesian tradition directed our attention towards the nature and existence of mind, but philosophers have started to take embodiment seriously, Merleau-Ponty being a key figure. I am slightly nervous about use of the term 'embodiment'. This suggests that there is a thing, in the body, that has become *embodied*, when it previously was not; or it is at least possible that it is not in a body. Just as someone without power can become *empowered*, it suggests a prior lack. I am not persuaded, however, that a person can either be *disembodied* or *unembodied* in the first place, in which case being *embodied* might also be misleading. In the interests of clarity, then, I will just say that we are bodied.

The claim I make is that it is not merely a contingent feature of our existence that we are physically bodied beings, contrary to the Cartesian view. Descartes argued that he was essentially a thinking thing. He would cease to exist only when he ceased to think, not necessarily when his body ceased to be. He could at least imagine, so he supposed, that he lived a disembodied existence in pure thought.

I am not sure that we should concede the possibility to Descartes too readily, however. It seems like he is imagining the minds that we have received and experience as bodied beings, and the thinking that we are able to perform, as if being bodied were some dispensable component of it, which you could discard, just as you might throw away a ladder once you have used it to get out of a hole.

What if, instead, the causal interactions that we have with others, and with the physical locale in which we are situated, shape our nature and identity not just in the past but on an ongoing basis? Everything that I learn, or that stimulates my senses, has come originally through my body. Maybe I can do maths purely in my head now, but the techniques were originally taught to me in interaction with my teachers. And, even now, so much of how I approach the world is shaped by being bodied. I interact with other people who recognise me and in many ways treat me as a white, middle-aged man. Think of how different would have been the experiences that have shaped my personality and thinking had I been black in a mainly white society, or a woman, or facially different, or much shorter than I am, or brought up in a completely different culture at a different place and time. What I think and how I think is shaped by my situation, which I acknowledge to be a position of many privileges. Bodies have locations and orientations in space and time, whereas thoughts do not in the Cartesian framework (which has some appeal; is your thought that today is Thursday to the left or to the right of your desire to be rich?). And think of the confidence with which I walk down the street because I am an able-bodied man, capable

of climbing stairs unaided or jumping over a fence if it is in my way. That shapes my experience and my psychology.

Could I even imagine what disembodied existence would be like? Or does the capability of exercising physical capacities shape my whole view of the world? My bodiment might be inseparable from what Wittgenstein called my form of life. Wittgenstein said 'if a lion could talk, we would not be able to understand it' (*Philosophical Investigations*, section 326). I cannot imagine at all what life would be like having never had a body; and I'm not even sure I can imagine what existence would be like if I no longer had my body. So, to paraphrase Wittgenstein, if a disembodied soul could talk, we would not be able to understand it. We would not be able to relate to or even recognise so different a form of existence. Therefore, while I am not ruling out entirely the possibility of something that passes as thought but without a physical existence, it would be such a radical change from our lived experience that I think our natures and identities would be lost in such a scenario. There would be nothing recognisably us in this disembodied thing.

To be human is to have a body, I say, but this does not require that we have exactly the same body over time. As we know, our bodies can change. I might lose a limb, for instance, and this would change the way in which I encounter the world since others might start to treat me very differently. My sense of empowerment might also change, since there would be things I can no longer do that I used to be able to do. This is not to rule out the possibility that I learn new abilities once my body has changed.

Logically, might I even be able to change my body completely, in one day? Perhaps in the future my mind will be able to occupy a robot body. The possibility raises all sorts of puzzles and difficulties (How easy is it to extract the mind from the brain? What if the same mind were duplicated in more than one robot body?), but I need not go into those issues. My claim is 'only' that it is part of our nature to be bodied, which does not commit to it always being the same body that we have.

A final point on bodily capacities is that we should not think of their exercise as a solely physical matter. People think. And whether it be in dancing, playing music or sporting activities, many of the capabilities that we exercise require accompanying thought. Suppose it is my turn in a game of tenpin bowling, for example. This might be thought of as a simple physical act of swinging my arm and throwing the bowling ball down the lane towards the pins. But this is also a mental act. I first consider my strategy. Where must I hit to get the remaining pins to fall? Should I throw hard or could a slower shot be more controlled and accurate? How many points do I need in the game? Setting that explicit thought aside, though, I also need hand-eye coordination. I am monitoring my actions throughout the action, including proprioceptively. I am not merely an automaton but a free agent whose actions are minded, deliberate, controlled and adaptable. My body and mind are, in this respect, inseparable. The Cartesian view overlooks the extent to which they are integrated. Typically, a physical act is also a mental act; and frequently a mental act is also a physical act.

## The Desire for Activity

We can now turn directly to what is the main claim of this chapter, in that it is vital to the account of sport that I defend. The claim is that it is pleasurable to exercise our physical capacities. I should spend some time explaining what this means and then I will discuss an apparent objection.

First, what is a capacity? We use this term, and cognates such as ability, capability, skill and power, to signify something that we can exercise or act upon but which we possess even when it is not exercised. I am not going to make any serious distinctions between any of these cognate terms. Some seem more apt in certain contexts, but it might be that their difference is primarily a linguistic one. They are all associated with use of the word 'can', but this word gives only a rough approximation of what we mean. For instance, when you say that you can jump one metre off the ground, it doesn't mean that you are actually doing so now but that you are able to do so, you are capable of doing so, you have the power to do so, and so on.

It should be clear that there is a close connection between sport and the exercise or manifestation of abilities. Sports involve tasks such as jumping over bars and across sand, pulling oars in a boat, running around a track, scoring goals, knocking balls across grass and into holes, throwing a javelin, stopping opponents with your fists, directing a stone accurately over ice at a target, swimming to the other end of the pool, and so on. All these require that the athlete is able to do something and, in organised sports, exercise their abilities in certain prearranged situations.

The athletes will know that here, in this event, is their time to show or prove that they can do what they have been practising to do. Sports will also involve comparative measures of those abilities, showing not just that one can jump over a high bar but that one can jump over a higher bar than all the other entrants, one can swim the distance quicker than the others, get one's stone closest to the target, or throw the javelin the furthest. Hence, we are typically looking for who can manifest the greater ability since most abilities come in degrees. They are not just an all or nothing matter.

That sports measure these abilities seems clear, and I will discuss this issue more in Chapter 2, but I do not want my analysis of the nature of sport to be back to front. Specifically, I do not think that it is a pleasure to manifest these abilities simply because we do so in sport. Rather, my account says the opposite. Sport satisfies a pre-existing want to manifest our abilities where we have that wanting because it brings us pleasure to manifest those abilities. First came the desire for activity, and then came sport as a vehicle for the satisfaction of that desire.

The evidence for this thesis is primarily empirical. First I would point out that people want to manifest their abilities even in non-sporting contexts. Sport seems to provide a codified and often competitive arena in which we can manifest our abilities, but there are plenty of non-sporting and informal settings in which we do the same. I have already mentioned dance, music and work for one's own needs as examples of activities people enjoy performing. Often the performance of such abilities will bring no tangible benefit and seem plausibly to be done purely for its own

sake. Second, one could think of the pleasure one finds in being useful and the displeasure of feeling useless. People like to contribute and be helpful, this natural state being compromised in the cases where they feel exploited, as with paid labour, or where there is some form of compulsion. On a voluntary basis, we want to be doing things. Consider the cases where children see an activity performed and eagerly ask if they can have a go. Third, one can consider the great pleasure of learning a new skill. The acquisition of an additional ability is one of the greatest pleasures presumably because new possibilities are opened up that were not there before. I took great pleasure in acquiring the ability to dive into water since I knew that it wouldn't be only then that I dived but that I would have the option open to me for time to come. Similarly, consider the great pleasure of learning a new language. The first two times that one is able to hold a conversation in a new language are thrilling partly because that can be the moment of realisation that you have the ability. After all, we cannot know for sure that we have an ability until the first time or two that we display it, just as I needed two or more dives into the pool to check that the first success wasn't a fluke.

It might be worth contrasting the case of abilities with liabilities, though I won't offer much detail on the latter. We could think of an ability as a power that it is useful to have and a liability as one that it is not useful to have, or worse. Liability has a negative connotation. Typically, one is pleased to have an ability but displeased to have a liability such that one would prefer to retain one's abilities or have more of them but one would prefer to be rid of one's

liabilities. One might then argue that just as it is pleasurable to manifest an ability, it is displeasing to manifest a liability. For example, consider a high jumper who is liable to knock off the bar with her ankles when she has otherwise cleared it. She certainly wishes she did not have this failing and is unhappy every time that she manifests it. What counts as an ability or liability is likely to vary by context, however, including sporting context. Hence, an ability to run 100 metres in ten seconds is an advantage for a sprinter but it is no use at all to a horse-racing jockey and, given the necessary muscle bulk, would certainly be a liability.

There is a special case of the exercise of an ability that deserves particular mention. Some call it 'flow'; athletes think of it as being 'in the zone'. I take it that flow occurs when someone exercises an ability to the full extent in which they possess it. It is the optimum performance of the ability. It is not just in sport that one can be in the zone. A writer might feel the same, when their writing is going well, or a lecturer. What seems so enigmatic about flow is the way it vanishes as soon as you realise you have it. If you think you are in the zone, then you are no longer in the zone. How is this possible? Here is a theory. To exercise an ability fully, whether it be mental or physical, one needs to put all one's concentration into its execution. If for one moment one thinks of other things, then that distracts from the performance and makes it suboptimal. And the thought that one is in the zone is apparently one of the most distracting thoughts of all, after which it might take a long time to return to that same place.



This is only a brief statement of the case for it being pleasurable to exercise an ability. Perhaps I could have said much more since I have hardly offered a watertight argument. But I am also mindful of David Hume's statement that 'Next to the ridicule of denying an evident truth, is that of taking much pains to defend it' (*A Treatise of Human Nature*, Book I, part 3, section 16). I would say that everyone is able to confirm in their own experience that it gives them pleasure to manifest their abilities. I don't need to use more words in convincing them of what they already know.

### **Objection: It Is Not Pleasurable to Exercise Some Abilities**

What might be more useful, then, is if I defend the claim against a possible line of objection. In making this defence, we will also come to understand the claim better and will discover a more nuanced but defensible version of it.

The objection is that we have some abilities that it is not a pleasure to manifest and which are not obviously liabilities. Many people are capable of doing wrong and it brings them no pleasure when they do so. Let us assume that a person, A, has an ability to angrily shout at B and that if A manifests this ability, it brings no pleasure to A. Instead, A feels shame. I am ruling out the cases, therefore, where someone takes pleasure in shouting at other people, as an uncaring person might. We can set those cases aside since they would not present a counterexample to the theory that it is pleasurable to exercise an ability. They would be consistent with it. The theory only has a problem if what is

exercised is both an ability and brings no pleasure, or the opposite of pleasure, when it is exercised.

The simplest answer to the objection would be that the problematic cases all concern liabilities so it does not matter; indeed, it is to be expected that their exercise brings no pleasure. I do not want to rush towards this solution, however, since I think it is not obviously right. Person A here does seem able to do something, even though that thing is wrong in most contexts. The salient point is that the opposite of an ability is not a liability but an inability. If one lacks the ability to  $x$ , whatever  $x$  may be, one is unable to  $x$ . We cannot deny that A is able to shout at someone if they do indeed shout at someone. Liabilities are a different kind of thing, suggesting more a lack of agency: something in respect of which one is passive or has a lack of control. So we should set liabilities aside and come back to the question of whether there are some abilities that fail to bring pleasure.

To address this problem, I suggest that we need to make a distinction between basic and contextualised actions. To understand the distinction, we must see that our actions typically have different layers of description and significance. For example, one and the same action could be described as any of the following:

- i. Moving one's finger
- ii. Turning on a light
- iii. Disturbing someone's sleep

I am calling i a basic action, since it describes only a bodily movement, decontextualised from its setting or any intentions of the agent. With ii we get more information that

allows us to understand something further about the action, such as its setting. The finger was in contact with a light switch. The agent, in moving her finger in that way, was turning on a light. Description ii is more illuminating than i (no pun intended) since ii provides a reason for i. We can assume that this agent would not have moved her finger but for the purpose described in ii. With iii we get more information concerning the context. Our agent wasn't just turning on a light but was disturbing someone's sleep. Moving one's finger does not seem to be a blameworthy action in itself, nor does turning on a light, but if we see that this same action was also disturbing someone's sleep, then we might regard it as blameworthy. Instead of the blameworthy iii, had the same action described in i and ii been in different circumstances, it could have been the praiseworthy:

iv. Showing a visitor the way at night

This means that the information provided by the contextualised description will be crucial in evaluating the moral worth of the action. There might be even higher and more sophisticated levels of description that pertain to this evaluation. For example, was the action described by iii performed because of a prior arrangement in which someone asked to be woken at an agreed time?

With these examples we see how the displeasure of a wrong contextualised action can outweigh any pleasure that performing a basic action would otherwise give in a different context. For example, suppose that A and B are in a friendly game of tug of war, pulling against each other on different ends of the same rope. Both A and B can take

pleasure in exercising their abilities, tightly gripping the rope and using their muscles to pull their opponents towards them. Treating the game as a bit of fun, both A and B take pleasure afterwards in having exerted their powers as much as they could. Perhaps A has a bit more pleasure than B, if A is the winner.

But let us change the context of this imagined tug of war. It is now played in anger across a ravine, into which the loser will be dragged and plunge to their death. A and B, we can suppose, perform exactly the same basic actions as in the fun game but this time, I think likely, take no pleasure in exercising their capacities. The loser dies and even the winner, to be realistic, will be traumatised by the experience and likely to feel the shame of survivor guilt.

We cannot see anyone taking pleasure in pulling on the rope in a life or death situation. And this would be supported by a view in which we prefer to understand our actions in the most contextualised way that we can. For example, when asked what someone is doing, we will almost always offer a contextualised answer: they are turning on the light to show a visitor the way, rather than simply moving their finger. We have purposes to our actions and these are understood and articulated in contextualised ways, at levels ii, iii or higher.

This account allows us to say, where someone exercises an ability but without pleasure, that it would be pleasurable to exercise the same basic action in other circumstances; but the wrongness of a contextualised action rids even the basic action of pleasure. We thus have to grant the objection to an extent and provide

a more nuanced statement of the theory. The abilities that we exercise in actions are pleasurable only in the right context: A and B enjoy the fun game of tug of war game but not the tug-of-war death match. In the death match, though, it is not as if A and B are getting pleasure from their basic actions, which then just happens to be outweighed by the displeasing context. Even the basic actions bring no pleasure, here; but those same basic actions could, in different circumstances. We should grant, then, that not every exercise of an ability brings pleasure. The main claim of this chapter is to be understood, therefore, as true only ‘for the most part’, as Aristotelians say, rather than true absolutely. For the most part, exercise of an ability is pleasurable. This is not simply an ad hoc evasion of the problem since I also offer a principled explanation of why the claim does not hold universally. It is not simply arbitrary that some abilities are pleasurable to exercise and some are not.

### **An Important Lesson for Sport**

I might now face the accusation that the foregoing discussion has significantly weakened what was advertised as the main claim. We started with the idea that it is pleasurable for us to exercise our physical capacities or capabilities and sport provides an opportunity for us to do so. The charge is now that I have had to retreat from this thesis and concede that only some exercises of our capacities bring pleasure whereas some do not.

Nevertheless, this alleged defeat should instead be taken as a bigger victory, if our primary aim is a better understanding of sport. In addressing the objection, we became aware of the distinction between basic and contextualised actions and saw how the latter was the key to understanding whether or not we were able to enjoy manifesting our abilities. This is a significant result. Might it be, then, that sport provides a set of contexts in which we have permission to enjoy the exercise of our capabilities and it does so by creating safe environments for their exercise? A fight to the death is not sport, but we could use some of the same basic physical actions that might be involved in such a fight instead in a safe environment in which the loser remains unharmed. All parties to the contest are then at liberty to exercise their abilities to the full and take joy in doing so. By conceding some ground to the objection, then, we have actually improved our theory of sport.

Our task of understanding sport is far from finished, however, and there are still questions to face. Indeed, a critic might be sceptical about the view just expressed that losers are unharmed by the contest. It seems appropriate, therefore, that we move on to consider the issues of competition, winning and losing. This shall be our next chapter.