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PURISTS, PARTISANS, AND THE AESTHETIC DIMENSION OF SPORT

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SUMMARY

Stephen Mumford, in his book *Watching Sport*, identifies two types of sports spectator – partisans and purists. Partisans are more concerned to see their team win, whether they do so in an aesthetically pleasing way or not, while purists have no such irrational commitment, and instead pursue the higher aesthetic experience of sport. The purist, Mumford argues, is superior because she watches sport for aesthetic and intellectual reasons and sees the game, it seems, more objectively, whereas the partisan is emotional and victory-seeking, experiencing the game through the lens of their desire for victory. But this distinction, I argue, doesn't do justice to the actual experience of spectators. Whilst Mumford is correct to suggest that the aesthetic dimension is vital in our enjoyment of sport, there is no reason to suppose that the partisan cannot partake in the aesthetic appreciation of sport. Furthermore, whilst winning is obviously hugely important in judging the quality of sports teams, they are likely to be more fondly regarded if they do so through the demonstration of virtues that are aesthetic in nature. Even the most vociferous of partisans are capable of appreciating such teams.

Keywords: sport, aesthetics, partisans, purists

INTRODUCTION

After watching a local derby between Nottingham Forest and Notts County in 1934, the novelist and playwright J. B. Priestley (1933/2012, p. 239) observed, amongst other things and with no little disdain, “the monstrous partisanship of the crowds, with their idiotic cries of ‘Play the game, ref!’ when any decision against their side has been given”. To an outside observer, the supposed tribalism of football crowds appears irrational and base. The word tribalism itself carries strong pejorative connotations, a primitive bestiality and a blind obedience to the group. Such partisans are the very antithesis of the purist, an altogether rarer breed. The purist is the embodiment of the rational and unbiased football supporter, a fan of football itself, able to enjoy a heightened aesthetic experience because untainted by the irrational biases of tribal support.

Priestly might be thought to be simply describing the average football spectator – blind, irrational, partisan. However, despite his disparaging initial remarks, Priestley goes on to say that partisans are “not mere spectators in the sense of being idle and indifferent lookers on; though only vicariously, yet they run and leap and struggle and sweat, are driven into despair, and raised to triumph; and there is thrust into their lives of monotonous tasks and grey streets an epic hour of colour and strife that is no more a mere matter of other men’s boots and a leather ball, than a violin concerto is a mere matter of some other man’s cat gut and rosin” (Priestley, 1933/2012, p. 240). To enjoy the festival of the crowd, almost a conscious organism in its own right, is part of the aesthetic enjoyment of any sporting event – to lose oneself in the heaving, swaying, singing, braying mass. The psychological benefits of partisanship extend even further, to feelings of identification with the local area, civic pride, and comradeship.

The apparent and supposed superiority of the partisan over the purist is emphasised by the philosopher Nicholas Dixon. In a paper entitled “The Ethics of Supporting Sports Teams”, Dixon (2001) argues that the partisan not only enjoys the psychological benefits associated with offering unconditional support to the local team, but also has an ethical advantage, in that her commitment and passion is *more virtuous*. He says, for example, that she exhibits “the great virtue of steadfast allegiance to her team even if its fortunes decline” (Dixon, 2001, p. 153).

Dixon thinks the same thing happens when one is in love, romantically speaking. At the beginning of a romantic relationship, we come to love our partner’s good qualities, but over time we develop something deeper, namely a love of their “unique instantiation of those qualities”, their special identity (Dixon, 2001, p. 151). Furthermore, when some new potential partner comes into our lives, as they often do, we are reluctant simply to “trade up”, even if the new prospective mate scores higher on, or better instantiates, those valuable qualities. Love can also endure change: a partner may lose the qualities to which we were initially attracted, but we stay in love regardless. Despite the changes, there is a constant nucleus that remains the object of our love. In much the same way, I don’t change my team with each new defeat. Although the two types of love are qualitatively different, we feel an enduring loyalty to the object of our devotion.

Dixon goes even further when specifically discussing the ethics of supporting sports teams, suggesting that the partisan displays a side to her character lacking in supporters willing to change teams – the tendency to form bonds with others, especially with those we are familiar. Drawing an analogy with the ability to form friendships and lasting romantic attachments, the purist “displays a character flaw that would be condemned from a standpoint of virtue ethics” (Dixon, 2001, p. 155). Why is the purist normally regarded, as Dixon suggests, as lacking commitment, as barely qualifying as a fan at all?

The purist, we might say, is prepared to “trade up” at any given opportunity. Her support is based purely on her love of the game, and she is prepared to follow whichever team best exemplifies the virtues and admirable qualities most prized: fairness, excitement, skill and style. In a sense, as Dixon points out, the purist seems to have the moral high ground here, as her choice is based on purely sporting excellence, rather than the arbitrariness of place of birth. If we want to teach our children the value of fairness, at least partly through the games that they play with each other, why should we also give them the strong impression that they should stick with their team even when it cheats and connives, and

otherwise privileges a win-at-all-costs mentality? “Rather than being a genuine fan, the purist approaches each game as a neutral, hoping that his team will continue its excellent play, so that he will be able to continue supporting it” (Dixon, 2001, p. 152).

Of course, the loyal support of the partisan can itself be dangerous, or just plain stupid. Why would I continue to love a partner who continues to abuse and betray me? To give our love and support unconditionally to another becomes masochistic if the significant other is genuinely not worthy of it. Therefore, something that could be called “moderate partisanship” might be the best option: I’ll give my whole and undivided support to my team, but there is a limit.

A more robust defence of the purist can be made, however. Stephen Mumford (2012), in his book *Watching Sport: Aesthetics, Ethics and Emotion*, actively privileges and praises the virtues of the true purist, arguing that the issue turns to a large extent on the respective aesthetic experiences enjoyed by our two different types of supporter. But how and why do different types of supporter have different aesthetic experiences? Obviously, a partisan may enjoy the game less if her team loses, trudging home disconsolately and awaiting the barbs of colleagues on Monday morning, while the purist enjoys the spectacle even if her adopted team loses, because she enjoys primarily the aesthetic experience offered up. In fact, the purist may even find the very idea of supporting one particular team rather disagreeable. What matters is the quality of the play and of the game, not who wins. But the differences, according to Mumford, go even deeper than that, as we’ll see after a brief consideration of the ideas of Arthur Schopenhauer.

Schopenhauer, the famously pessimistic German philosopher, placed great importance on the enjoyment of aesthetic experiences. In *The World as Will and Representation*, Schopenhauer argues that the world is indifferent to human suffering – and suffer we do. Human existence, Schopenhauer says, has no intrinsic meaning or value, and is characterised by suffering, pain, and misery. This is because humans are animals who have will and desire: we have desires (and needs) that we seek to satisfy, and our will drives us on to do so. Unfortunately, as soon as one desire or need is satisfied, another arises, making our lives a continual succession of new desires in need of satisfaction that ends only in death. In fact, happiness may be defined in purely negative terms, as the temporary absence of pain.

Fortunately, we have three choices open to us. Firstly, we can commit suicide. Those of us unwilling or unable to end our own lives can consider the second option, that of pursuing an ascetic lifestyle – the denial of the will-to-live – by which we renounce our desires. Finally, we can temporarily remove ourselves from the constant striving and misery of everyday life through art, and through the aesthetic experiences that attend our genuine appreciation of it.

Some types of art, however, are superior to others, or at least lend themselves to a superior aesthetic experience. Schopenhauer mentions architecture, sculpture, painting, and poetry as examples of art that allow for meaningful aesthetic experiences in different ways – but music is by far the most important. The reason for this hierarchical ordering is that Schopenhauer believes that the different types of art allow us better access to the Platonic Forms, or Ideas, the “in-itself” of the world. Schopenhauer seems to be saying that when, for example, one experiences and genuinely contemplates a piece of sad classical music, then one is not experiencing some particular *example* of sadness, but that one has access to sadness *itself*, to the Form or essence of sadness. Music and art are perceptual

representations of universal ideas that cannot be accessed through our normal perceptions of the world around us.

The problem with art, excepting music, is that it is still connected to the will and to the striving of everyday life. We cannot experience art (again, excepting music) without understanding it through the prism of our needs and interests, thus distorting it and lending it a subjective bias. But music is different: music releases us from the endless striving and suffering and desiring of life. Schopenhauer describes it as follows:

“When an external cause or inward disposition suddenly raises us out of the endless stream of willing, and snatches knowledge from the thralldom of the will, the attention is now no longer directed to the motives of willing, but comprehends things free from their relation to the will. Thus it considers things without interest, without subjectivity, purely objectively ... Then all at once the peace, always sought but always escaping us on that first path of willing, comes to us of its own accord, and all is well with us ... For that moment we are delivered from the miserable pressure of the will.” (Schopenhauer, 1969, p. 196)

In this sense, the having of a genuine aesthetic experience demands a kind of disinterestedness, a denial of the will and all it strives for. Usually, we see the world around us in the self-interested context of how specific aspects of it might be utilised or manipulated to help us satisfy our desires. But through the aesthetic experience of music, we become detached from ourselves and from the pressures placed on us by our desires and needs, and can enjoy it objectively, for its own sake.

It seems that what Schopenhauer says here about music and art can be applied to the aesthetic enjoyment of watching sport. Mumford argues that the “purist” sports spectator enjoys a heightened aesthetic experience because she has no special desire to see one particular team win. A partisan supporter may see an exciting game of football, for example, but still be disappointed because their team lost. Just as the quality of our aesthetic experience of art depends on our ability to become detached from our desires, so too does our aesthetic experience of sport. So, whereas Dixon sees the purist’s flexible and conditional support as a drawback, to the extent that he suggests that purists are not genuine supporters, Mumford sees it as a positive benefit, allowing her to enjoy a heightened and more authentic aesthetic experience.

The purist, Mumford argues, perceives the game differently from the partisan, the latter having what he refers to as a “competitive perception” (Mumford, 2012, p. 12). Reporting on a match he saw between Hearts and Celtic in 1996, Mumford suggests that our desire to see our team win at all costs distorts our perception of the game. Sitting with the Hearts fans, he observes them calling vociferously for corners, free kicks, and even throw-ins for their team when it was clear that the ball was Celtic’s: “In their perception, the ball really did seem to have come off a Celtic player last before leaving the field ... Were they being disingenuous? Or could this really be two different and honest perceptions? I decided it could be” (Mumford, 2012, p. 13).

This leads Mumford to suggest that purists and partisans simply perceive the game differently from each other. Drawing on the thesis of the theory-dependence of observation, he says that “one’s beliefs and desires can determine what one actually sees” (Mumford, 2012, p. 13). Again, this reminds us of Schopenhauer’s idea that it is possible to avoid the distorting effects of the will in our aesthetic experience of art. (This, for example, is a good reason to demand that referees are neutral.)

But if the purist and the partisan just “see” the game differently, then on what basis are we allowed to suppose that one interpretation is better than the other? The implication must be that the purist sees the game more objectively, for the simple reason that she lacks the unconditional loyalty and passion that might otherwise distort perception, blinding her to the objective reality of what is in front of her.

This takes us back to a point mentioned earlier in passing. If Dixon supposes that the purist is someone who supports a team for the qualities they embody, then Mumford supposes that the more genuine purist is one who supports no team at all. For the most authentic aesthetic experience, to see the game for all its beauty and drama, the purist must not have any investment in any one particular team. Thus, she has no interest in where the beauty and the drama come from, only that she can experience it, and without experiencing it through the distorting prism of partisanship. In this way, the true purist does not switch allegiance from one game to the next, depending on which team is the fairest or who plays the most attractive and exciting football, for she has no allegiance in the first place (although it might be said that some teams display certain virtues on a more continual basis, which possibly allows Mumford’s purist to develop *some* degree of allegiance).

If this is indeed the case (and I do not think that it is), then the analogy drawn earlier, between supporting a football team and one’s love for a partner, is misplaced – or, at least, the wrong inference is drawn. Mumford agrees, and develops the following analogy: “The purist is more in the position of a parent with a number of children ... The parent wants to see all their children do well in life and realise their full potential. They do not choose a favourite among their children and hope for them to do better than their siblings” (Mumford, 2012, p. 16).

In that case, it would be a mistake to think that the partisan is more passionate about the game – it’s simply more likely that the passion of the purist is less conspicuous. Invoking John Stuart Mill’s distinction between higher and lower pleasures, Mumford says that the purist enjoys the game in a deeper and more satisfying way. She can, for instance, focus more on “the style of play, the tactics, the movement of the ball, rapidity, grace, economy, incisiveness, and so on.” To be concerned with the identity of the winner or the final score is “a crude measure of the worth of a game” (Mumford, 2012, p. 17).

A number of objections could be raised at this point. Firstly, why the sharp distinction between partisans and purists? Isn’t the dividing line drawn by both Dixon and Mumford artificial and arbitrary? I think so, for the reason that the distinction fails to capture the actual lived experience of many football fans. My evidence here might be considered anecdotal and personal, but I think valid generalisations can be made.

There seems to be no reason, *prima facie*, to discount the possibility of supporters being both partisan and purist. One can appreciate an excellent performance from an opposing team without thereby denying one’s commitments to one’s own team. For example, and speaking from personal experience, I once saw a game involving the team I have passionately supported all my life, in which an opposition player scored a spectacular goal, which won the game. The supporters, including myself, spontaneously broke into an appreciative round of applause. Of course, this may not generally be the case, as Mumford points out in his experience of the Hearts-Celtic match. But why exclude the possibility?

Mumford also suggests that one of the virtues of purism is to study and appreciate tactics. Again, there is no reason why partisan supporters cannot do the same. In fact,

having an appreciation of the finer tactical points of any sport can help one to understand the strengths and failings of one's own team. If even partisan supporters are capable of appreciating tactics, the skill and grace of opposition players and teams, and so on, then the distinction between the purist and the partisan begins to break down. As ever, the truth lies somewhere in between.

Furthermore, and here's the second objection, the main part of Mumford's argument is based on the theory that the purist actually has a superior or more genuine aesthetic experience, which obviously begs the question: can we enjoy meaningful aesthetic experiences from watching sport at all? Can sport be said to be an "art"? We can obviously say that sport can be the *object* of art, as Lowry's wonderful "Going to the Match" demonstrates on its own. Douglas Gordon and Phillipe Parreno's film/art installation, *Zidane: A 21st Century Portrait*, is also, ostensibly, a work of art, and yet it blurs the line: can Zidane's performance against Villarreal, upon which the well-known film remorselessly focuses, itself be considered art? My temptation is to say yes, as it embodies the grace, elegance, poise, and balance that Mumford thinks are key aesthetic sporting qualities. It also embodies the striving, determination, and occasional brutality of football (Zidane is sent off for violent conduct towards the end of the match).

Linguistically speaking, at the pragmatic everyday level of language-use, we naturally attribute aesthetic qualities to sport – "that was a beautiful goal", "Xavi's pass was a work of art", or that "Barcelona played beautiful football today". We use such language to describe both individual and collective examples of aesthetically pleasing play. Certainly many football players and managers have been obsessed by the supposed superiority of the aesthetic approach, privileging "attractive" football over the win-at-all-costs mentality – a feature of football brought out nicely by the famous and oft-mentioned enmity between César Luis Menotti and Carlos Bilardo, the aesthete and philosopher versus the arch pragmatist.

Menotti once famously said that, "I maintain that a team is above all an idea, and more than an idea it is a commitment, and more than a commitment it is the clear convictions that a coach must transmit to his players to defend that idea. So my concern is that we coaches don't arrogate to ourselves the right to remove from the spectacle the synonym of festival, in favour of a philosophical reading that cannot be sustained, which is to avoid taking risks. And in football there are risks because the only way you can avoid taking risks in any game is by not playing ... I believe that efficacy is not divorced from beauty" (Wilson, 2011).

Intuitively, most football supporters understand this, even if they don't necessarily go along with it. We may, for instance, disagree on the exact source of aesthetic enjoyment. After all, we might get just as much enjoyment from watching a valiant backs-against-the-wall 0–0 game, especially if one of the teams is demonstrably inferior to the other, as we do from a 4–3 thriller characterised by awful and comical defending. Of course, these are not necessarily *aesthetic* qualities. Bad play may lead to an exciting game, but the sources of aesthetic pleasure are many and varied. For instance, the gradual increase in the number of goals per game in the English Premier League over the last few years might be cause for celebration for some, but bad news for fans of sophisticated defenders and defending. It depends where we find the beauty of football, and that might be at least partly subjective.

But is the aesthetic dimension of football an essential aspect of the game? Again, it depends where you stand. David Best makes a distinction between purposive and aesthetic sports. Best says that in purposive sports, such as football, “it is the independently specifiable purpose which at least largely defines the character of the activity, and the aesthetic is largely incidental” (Best, 1978, p. 104). Therefore, there’s no requirement, legally or morally, to bring aesthetic qualities to the performance. Aesthetic sports, on the other hand, are obviously based, to a large degree, on the aesthetic aspects of the performance: there is a concern for the manner in which such games are performed. In such sports, the “purpose cannot be considered apart from the manner of achieving it. There is an intrinsic end which cannot be identified apart from the means” (Best, 1978, p. 104). And Jim Parry (1989, p. 17) agrees on this point, saying that: “In football I can distinguish the means of scoring a goal from the end, but in gymnastics the means are part of the end.” The awarding of points in sports such as gymnastics focuses on relevant qualitative aesthetic qualities. Here is an excerpt from an expert’s summary of Ludmilla Tourischeva’s gold medal-winning floor exercise at the 1972 Munich Olympics:

“Of qualities of form, she displayed poise, controlled balance, cleanness of line, and each in turn – an arched, curled, twisted and extended torso; her long supple limbs described sinuous and circular movements and her shapely flexible fingers made florid gestures in space. Her footwork had a precision at times forceful and firm and yet again dainty with impeccably shaped and patterned placings.” (Arnold, 1990, p. 166)

On this theme, Mumford (2012, p. 29) acknowledges the “aesthetic pluralism” of sport, meaning that different aesthetic categories apply to different sports: speed, strength, grace, and so on. Furthermore, what Mumford refers to as competitive sports, which involve primarily the overcoming of opposition, and football is a perfect example, provide spectators with a further aesthetic dimension – the unfolding of a drama as the teams battle for a limited resource, namely victory. Sports that depend more on measurement, such as long jump, and sports that depend on the judging of aesthetic criteria, such as figure skating, do not quite generate the same excitement and tension. According to Mumford (2012, p. 22), the drama of such sports “tends to be less regular and is not what the nature of these sports is all about.”

Nonetheless, the main point is that, despite the enjoyment of observing the unfolding drama of a football match, aesthetic qualities are not necessarily inherent to football, even though they may be highly desirable. Footballers can succeed if they are slow, weak, fat, graceless, and so on, although they are clearly more likely to be more successful if they possess none of those qualities. But I think that we can say that some players and teams are better than others in different ways relating to technical and aesthetic criteria. Some athletes are more graceful, even though they might not be more successful, while others might lack grace but be physically bigger and stronger than their opponents – does this make one “better” than the other? If not, then this suggests that the principle of aesthetic pluralism holds *within* football as well as without. The question is whether any specific criteria are objectively more significant than others, in this case because they add to the aesthetic experience of spectators – technique, flair, vision, and so on. Football supporters are likely to be familiar with a debate that suggests that the Barcelona teams that played under the management of Johan Cruyff (the so-called “Dream Team”) and, later, Pep Guardiola, are two of the greatest club sides ever seen, *because* of the aesthetic qualities

they embodied. At the same time, the Greece side that won Euro 2004 is often derided for the poor quality of their football during that tournament. (Greece scored only eight goals in seven matches during Euro 2004, and on only one occasion did they score more than one goal in a game.) It is perhaps worth noting that aesthetically pleasing football teams, whether successful or not, tend to endure in the popular consciousness more than those renowned for achieving success cynically or by playing in a “boring” manner. For example, any football fan well versed in the history of the game remembers the Dutch side of 1978, even though they lost the World Cup final of that year.

Such assertions, of course, prove nothing, but the implication is clear – that there are standards of taste, as David Hume would put it, that go beyond the subjective. But how can we decide whether something offered up for our aesthetic appreciation is worthy of being objectively superior? In terms of works of art, Hume suggested that endurance over time as an object of aesthetic appreciation is one criterion. Another standard is given by paying attention to the opinions of those with refined and delicate sensibilities, such as critics and experts. Of the current crop of the best football teams in the world, which will be remembered, and which will be *fondly* remembered?

Many will resist Hume’s conclusion that there are standards of taste that go beyond subjective preferences. The discussion so far has drawn on examples from football, a purposive sport. Since aesthetic qualities are incidental to purposive sports such as football, as Best says, then issues of taste might be considered irrelevant. But this rather begs the question – is winning all that really counts, even in purposive sports? Can we possibly find a reason to say that the aesthetic dimension is more than just desirable, even for those sports in which the end in question can be distinguished from the means? In purposive sports, achieving some desirable state of affairs, i.e. victory, in any way not proscribed by the rules counts as success. Does doing so in a way that violates relevant but not required standards of taste somehow devalue that success?

To help us here, we can use a distinction noted by Parry (2006, p. 206), namely the distinction between athletics and game-sports. In athletic sports, such as the 100 m sprint, the purpose of the sport cannot be separated from the manner of achieving it. For the 100 m sprinter, “He wins *by* running. Just by the running” (Parry, 2006, p. 206). In game-sports such as football, it’s more complicated: “in game-sports it is quite possible to execute a task to the highest standard and still not be successful” (Parry, 2006, p. 207). This means that the demonstration of excellence in the performance may not lead to victory, so the result is “supervenient” on the performance of the player or players. In other words, the best team might lose on the day, whilst it cannot be said that the fastest runner in the 100 m sprint will not win. Parry (2006, p. 207) goes on to say: “The fact that the aim of the activity can be specified independently of the manner of achieving it means that claims to excellence are ambiguous. They could refer either to success in terms of victory or to quality of style or to both.”

It seems obvious to say that a team cannot be considered the best if they consistently demonstrate qualities that many spectators consider to be aesthetically pleasing while losing games. At the same time, a team that wins by utilising an effective but dull and ugly style of play would be maligned by neutral observers (purists), although perhaps not by their own supporters (partisans). Both winning and playing well are important factors in

determining, for example, which football teams deserve to be lauded in the present and fondly remembered in the future.

Although aesthetic criteria are not absolutely decisive in such considerations, they're still hugely important in the minds of both purists *and* partisans. Argentina's World Cup winning side of 1986 will be remembered not only for the individual brilliance of Maradona, but also, and perhaps primarily, for the cynicism of manager Carlos Bilardo, while Menotti's exhilarating 1978 side – World Cup winners also – will be more fondly remembered. Of course, there are no trophies handed out to teams who lose in style, and the lists of champions in the history books make no note of the winners' aesthetic qualities. Nonetheless, to view victory as everything is, to paraphrase Mumford, a crude measure of the worth of a team.

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PURISTÉ, PARTYZÁNI A ESTETICKÁ DIMENZE SPORTU

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SOUHRN

Ve své knize *Watching Sport* Stephen Mumford identifikuje dva typy sportovních diváků – partyzány a puristy. Partyzáni se zajímají spíše o výhru svého týmu, ať už je jejich hra estetická, nebo ne, zatímco puristé nemají tento iracionální zájem a zajímá je vyšší estetický sportovní zážitek. Mumford považuje puristy za nadřazenější, protože sledují sport z estetických a intelektuálních důvodů, a zdá se, že vidí hru objektivněji, zatímco partyzáni jsou emocionální a sledují hru skrze touhu po vítězství. Moje argumenty ukazují, že toto pojetí adekvátně nepopisuje zážitek diváků. Zatímco Mumford vhodně uvádí, že estetická dimenze sportu je důležitá pro naše potěšení ze sportu, není důvod předpokládat, že partyzáni nemohou oceňovat sport esteticky. Navíc zatímco je výhra očividně velmi důležitá při hodnocení kvality sportovních týmů, budeme je hodnotit lépe, dosáhnou-li ji prokázáním estetických hodnot. I ten nejhlučnější partyzán je schopen takové týmy ocenit.

Klíčová slova: sport, estetika, partyzáni, puritáni

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