Sport, physical activity and well-being: An objectivist account

Article *in* Sport Education and Society · January 2011

DOI: 10.1080/13573322.2011.608948

CITATIONS
31

READS
4,512

3 authors:

Andrew Bloodworth
Swansea University
27 PUBLICATIONS **472** CITATIONS

SEE PROFILE

Michael John McNamee
KU Leuven
200 PUBLICATIONS **2,783** CITATIONS

SEE PROFILE

Richard Bailey
119 PUBLICATIONS **4,379** CITATIONS

SEE PROFILE

Sport, Education and Society
Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cses20

Sport, physical activity and well-being: an objectivist account

Andrew Bloodworth [a], Mike McNamee [a] & Richard Bailey [a]
[a] Swansea University, UK

Available online: 22 Aug 2011

To cite this article: Andrew Bloodworth, Mike McNamee & Richard Bailey (2011): Sport, physical activity and well-being: an objectivist account, Sport, Education and Society, DOI:10.1080/13573322.2011.608948

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13573322.2011.608948

Sport, Education and Society
2011, 1–18, iFirst Article

Sport, physical activity and well-being: an objectivist account

Andrew Bloodworth*, Mike McNamee and Richard Bailey
Swansea University, UK

It is widely maintained that sport and physical activities contribute to the development of young people's well-being. Others argue that sports' contribution to good living is so strong that it is even thought to be a human right. Typically, however, the value of physical activity and sport to our well-being is conceptualized and researched within a subjectivist framework. We reject this framework on three grounds: (1) its impermanence; (2) its hedonistic shallowness; and (3) its epistemological inadequacy. In contrast, we argue that the value of sports and physical activities ought to be situated in fundamental arguments about the necessary conditions for human flourishing. According to this objectivist view, there are certain constituents of a good life without which human flourishing becomes impossible. We argue that sports and physical activities offer distinctive ways to help realize these objective constituents. It follows that, to the extent to which certain sections of society are deprived of opportunities to engage in sport and physical activity, or are offered diminished provision thereof, they thereby suffer a deficit in well-being.

Keywords: *Well-being; Sport; Health; Subjectivist; Objectivist; Human flourishing*

Introduction

It is widely maintained that sport contributes to the development of young people's well-being. Sometimes the belief that sports contribute to good living is so strong that it is couched in the language of 'human rights' (Kidd & Donnelly, 2000). This supposition was evident at the UNESCO-organized meeting of ministers responsible for Education and Sport in 2004, Athens, where numerous member state representatives were supportive of a proposal that Physical Education and Sport be recognized as a 'fundamental human right'. A more modest and more readily defensible position was eventually agreed upon, stating that 'the development of physical education and sport is one of the most effective means of improving, *inter alia*, health, hygiene, the prevention of HIV/AIDS, and the overall well-being of individuals, in particular young people' (MINEPS IV, 2004).

The more cautious conclusion drawn in Athens reflects an alternative mode of expression for the value of sport that is to be found not in the realms of policy discourse but in more fundamental arguments about the necessary conditions for human flourishing. According to this view, there are certain elements without which

*Corresponding author. College of Human and Health Sciences, Swansea University, Swansea, SA2 8PP, Wales, UK. Email: a.j.bloodworth@swansea.ac.uk

ISSN 1357-3322 (print)/ISSN 1470-1243 online/11/0000001-18 © 2011 Taylor & Francis
DOI: 10.1080/13573322.2011.608948

flourishing becomes impossible, and, it is argued, sporting activities offer distinctive ways to help realize such elements.

In light of the aforementioned claims, and notwithstanding their validity, it follows that the considerable body of evidence regarding inequitable access to sports participation should be a cause of concern (Sabo *et al.*, 2004). Given that the promotion of well-being is an intrinsic feature of social justice (Powers & Faden, 2006), and that social justice, in turn, is generally understood to be concerned with those dimensions of well-being that are of moral import precisely because they matter to everyone, it follows then that policy makers (whether arising in the context of education, health or social welfare) ought seriously to be concerned with the provisions of such opportunities. Moreover, the extent to which certain sections of society are deprived of these opportunities to engage in sport and physical activity, or are offered impoverished or partial provision, a significant ethical deficit has occurred.

This ethical deficit, however, cannot be properly considered by those who advocate, or merely adhere to the dominant model of well-being in physical activity research. Well-being within the psychology research is typically understood as a subjective concept, dependent upon the individual's own assessment of how well things are going and the presence of positive and negative affect (Eid & Larsen, 2007). Exercise psychology research (predictably) focuses upon subjective states, and thus fails to fully articulate the value of physical activity to well-being. A fuller discussion of the value of sport and physical activity must extend beyond pleasure and satisfaction to consider what else is important in our lives. We, therefore, offer an objectivist proposal which is at odds with the dominant psychological model and the fashionable belief that human well-being rests entirely on the satisfaction of one's desires. This model broadens the discussion of the value of sport and physical activity to our lives. It also provides greater substance for sports educators, and indeed sports enthusiasts, to consider the benefits or outcomes of sport and physical activity.

The structure of the essay is as follows. We outline a common classification of theories of well-being. The distinction between objective and subjective theories we set out provides a framework in which we examine the approaches taken in mainstream psychology and exercise psychology research. Sport may indeed be enjoyable and pleasurable, but its contribution to good lives cannot be reduced to these experiences. We argue for a broader evaluative space within which to understand well-being, and the contribution of sport and physical activity. This reference to evaluative or conceptual space echoes Sen's (1993) critique of utilitarian and resource-driven conceptions of the human good, and we utilize his capabilities approach to show an alternative perspective from which to argue for the value of sport and physical activity. We argue that this approach is superior to subjectivist approaches and the objectivist approaches based on biomedical or natural scientific models which tend to dominate health-based physical activity and sport policies. We do not go so far as to defend a specific theory of well-being. Our more modest aim here is to articulate a broader conceptual space within which to contemplate the value of sport and other forms of physical activity.

Theories of well-being: common classifications

The conceptual distinction between objective and subjective theories of well-being offers a useful starting point for critical analysis. A subjective theory of well-being suggests 'that being well-off will depend (in some way or other) on having a favorable attitude toward one's life (or some of its ingredients)' (Sumner, 1996, p. 38). Subjective theories ensure that the efficacy of judgments of well-being properly rests under the dominion of the individual.

Objective theories, by contrast, hold that certain values or goods are central to an agent's well-being regardless of his or her attitude toward them. This approach entails, as Arneson observes, 'that there is a fact of the matter as to what is prudentially valuable for a person, so that claims about what types of things are prudentially valuable are true or false, and thus can be mistaken' (Arneson, 1999, p. 116). The 'agent sovereignty' (Arneson, 1999) of subjective theories is replaced with a clear idea of what enhances a life, independent of the person's evaluative stance.

Following well-known lines of demarcation in utilitarian scholarship, a further sub-classification of subjective theories is widely observed in the philosophical literature between: (1) hedonistic; and (2) desire fulfillment theories of well-being.[1] 'Hedonistic' accounts are premised upon the view that what would be best for someone is what would make their life happiest and place greatest emphasis on the quality of personal experience. 'Desire Fulfillment' theories of well-being focus on those things that would allow an individual to fulfill or satisfy their desires.

Subjective well-being: hedonism, sport and physical activity

Hedonistic theories equate well-being with a certain quality of felt experience. Subjective well-being, the prominent psychological approach to well-being initiated by Diener (1984), should not, however, be interpreted as a hedonistic theory. Composed of a personal judgment of life satisfaction, alongside positive and negative affect (Diener & Suh, 1999; Eid & Larsen, 2007), the life satisfaction domain, in particular, extends beyond an individual's experience. Someone may report satisfaction with a life relatively lacking in pleasure, or positive affect, but fulfilling in other non-hedonistic ways.

Within the exercise psychology literature, however, this possibility is often overlooked and positive affect (very loosely conceived of as 'pleasurable experience') is afforded elevated status as an indicator of well-being. There is a plethora of literature concerned with sport and other physical activities' contribution to an individual's positive psychological states (see Biddle *et al.*, 2000; Weinberg & Gould, 2003; Biddle & Mutrie, 2008). Indeed affect, and its relationship with exercise, has been the subject of rigorous methodological and theoretical debate (See Ekkekakis & Petruzzello, 1999; and Ekkekakis *et al.*, 2005). Moreover, positive feelings like fun are frequently cited by teachers and coaches as primary goals in introducing young people to sport (O'Reilly *et al.*, 2001; Garn & Cothran, 2006). Of course, pleasure and positive affect associated with exercise are not insubstantial goods. Yet,

considering the benefits of physical activity in terms of these positive psychological states, without a proper analysis of these states, or the values associated with them, appears to obscure non-hedonistic ways in which sport and physical activity might enhance our well-being.

First, pleasurable experiences do not necessarily contribute to one's well-being. Critics of hedonistic axiology object that a life of passivity and simulated experience is a life not worthy of human agency. This is the central point of Nozick's (1974) celebrated thought-experiment 'the experience machine': to reject 'plugging in' reflects the desire to be and to do certain things and not merely serially experience pleasant sensations.[2] In the same vein, Griffin (1986, p. 9) refers to authenticity in the realm of friendship. This value does not enter into our experience, but Griffin argues, is preferred to more pleasurable (though inauthentic) alternatives:

> Even if I were surrounded by consummate actors able to give me sweet simulacra of love and affection, I should prefer the relatively bitter diet of their authentic reactions. And I should prefer it not because it would be morally better, or aesthetically better, or more noble, but because it would make a better life for me to live.

Griffin argues that the better life is one of authentic relationships, even if the delusions of friendship or simulacra generate greater pleasure. Sumner (2000) illustrates the preference at the core of this distinction. We are concerned with how things are, not just with mental states:

> If what you have treasured as an important ingredient of your well-being – your accomplishments, say, or your deep personal relations – turns out to have been an elaborate deception, you are likely to feel hurt and betrayed. How else to explain this, except to say that, at least in this area of your life, what mattered to you was not merely how things seemed but how they actually were? Your reaction to the deception certainly looks, and feels, like a reassessment, in the light of your own priorities, of how well your life has been going for you. And that seems to place it squarely within the domain of prudential value.
>
> (Sumner, 2000, p. 6)

In the domain of sports it is rational to prefer the satisfaction of achieving a four-minute mile to the mere simulacra of such. This is not to deny that the simulacra has value, but that it is of lesser value since all that is experienced is the end state, shorn of the means that render it meaningful. Equally, we do not just want to feel accomplishment *simpliciter*. As Griffin (1986) notes what we want *is* accomplishment and not merely the sense of it. Other things being equal, merely believing that running a 20-minute mile is an accomplishment to be proud of would be delusionary. There are necessarily supra-personal/individual standards as to what constitutes athletic accomplishments. Equally, veridical awareness will ordinarily be thought superior to delusionary happiness. At the risk of laboring the point, merely experiencing positives states does not necessarily prefigure elevated well-being.

Thus, the heightened affect with which sport and physical activity is often associated is not a fail proof indicator of its value to the agent (its prudential value). The discipline and dedication required for successful sporting participation often

requires the experience of harsh and unpleasant means to the desired end. But such means often render the achievement more meaningful or enduring. Hochstetler (2003, p. 232) rightly notes that 'Part of understanding sport, then, is paying attention to the prose, the everyday, the arduous, the repetitive'. Sporting participation over a lifetime often entails doing many things we find dull, frustrating or even painful, both during training and in competition. Yet, this does not preclude their (potential) contribution to our well-being.

The examples above indicate that we commonly pursue the less pleasurable options and embrace activities that are not necessarily 'pleasurable'. By contrast pleasant experiences may stand in need of further values (such as authenticity, accomplishment and agency) if they are to contribute to our well-being more reliably. An understanding of the values associated with certain sporting pleasures is a precursor to discriminating among them in order to get a grip on the ways in which they might enhance well-being. Some pleasures or satisfactions might be transitory and have limited relevance to our identity. Others might have longer-lasting benefit in terms of our well-being. Kupperman urges us to be wary of clocking up miles on the 'hedonic treadmill':

> The 'flow' experiences (of being caught up in exercise of skills) reported by Csikszentmihalyi's subjects also can be related to sense of self, especially when there is room to be proud of the skills involved; and these satisfactions too can be largely exempt from the hedonic treadmill.
>
> (Kupperman, 2003, p. 26)

The 'hedonic treadmill' refers to a process of adaptation to enhanced satisfaction. Mere duration of an experience that is ordinarily perceived as pleasurable may well diminish over time (rather like economists' notion of 'diminishing marginal utility'). Satisfactions related to our sense of self may be of an extended duration, such as when engagement in sport requires the mastery of new skills. This point is interesting because it highlights the importance of the *type* of activity chosen and engaged in. There simply is more to offer in chess than in drafts just as there is more (potentially) to experience in baseball than T-ball (where there is no pitcher). It also, implicitly, cuts away the case for purely pleasurable experiences, with its emphasis on meaningful activities and the learning of new skills.

A further difficulty with hedonistic theories in this context concerns the association (or, worse, reduction) of sport and physical activity with (or to) fun. This may indeed be preferable to a 'win at all costs' approach, as Austin (2007) observes. And there may be times in the sport life cycle where (as a coach or teacher) one's focus is primarily on the fun young participants experience. But, with respect to sporting careers, something is clearly missed if one's participation is arrested with the playful engagement of the activity (or component thereof) to the neglect of the pursuit of victory. Many authors have noted sport's potential for ethical development but it is not at all clear how this value will be served by an exclusive focus on fun. In light of the analysis above, we also suggest that to focus on certain forms of pleasant experience, such as fun, may well foreclose other satisfactions associated with

exercise, play, games and sports. The value of effort and mastery to be found in sport will typically be associated with non-hedonic means such as perseverance and tenacity.

None of this should be taken to mean that sport experiences ought not be felt positive and enjoyable by the learner. Nor should it be taken to imply that educational lessons ought not be experienced as rewarding or fun. It is merely that such feelings alone cannot provide an adequate basis for justifying the value of sport and physical activity nor explaining its contribution to well-being. A more robust case is needed. To that end we now consider a modified subjective account in terms of desire fulfillment.

Subjective well-being: desire fulfillment, sport and physical activity

It would be somewhat unfair to suggest that the vast psychological research addressing the benefits of physical activity is confined to its 'feel good' effects in narrow hedonistic terms. Biddle and Mutrie (2008) review evidence that physical activity is perceived as enjoyable and enhances physical self-perception and self-esteem. We accept that these subjective assessments have an important part to play in our well-being. This section will, however, seek to question whether a favorable subjective evaluation of an activity, whether in terms of its enjoyment or its contribution to some form of positive self-perception is sufficient (or indeed necessary) for the enhancement of one's well-being. The limitations of desire theories of well-being will provide a clear indication as to the fallibility of our judgments in this domain.

While hedonistic theories concern the quality of an individual's experience, desire theories of well-being need not concern experience at all. As Sumner observes 'a desire theory is a state-of-the-world theory, since the actual occurrence of a desired state of affairs is one necessary condition of the analysis' (Sumner, 1996, p. 128). Desire fulfillment theories claim that life goes well when one's desires are satisfied. A difficulty with this sort of perspective is that it is easy to conceive of an instance in which one's desires might not bear at all on their well-being or indeed be detrimental to it. Rawls (1971) famously imagined a person who, having reflected on alternatives, decides to spend as much time as possible counting blades of grass in city parks. If that seems implausible, consider, instead, someone 'glued' to a television set, or to a computer game, or countless other activities that seem impossible to equate with a flourishing, fulfilling life.

Other examples of desire fulfillment bring into sharp relief the potential problems of desire fulfillment theories. Consider the case of an individual whose desires lead to actions that are actually harmful to their well-being, such as those resulting in eating disorders or exercise-dependence. Those who radically *mis*perceive their body shape (see Loumidis & Wells, 2001) and or deny their exercise-dependency clearly act in ways that they subjectively deem contributive to their well-being. The palpable fact that we recognize erroneous misperception or judgment suggests something more

objective, over and above, the mere satisfaction of desires. This immediately raises another problem with desire fulfillment theories of well-being, at least with regard to scope. Even if we are inclined to accept an adult's judgment about his or her interests, we would be foolish to extend this to children.

There is a further difficulty with desire fulfillment theories of well-being. Actual desires are highly malleable. One consequence of this phenomenon, referred to as 'adaptive preference formation' (Nussbaum, 2000), has attracted considerable attention from a range of social scientists. The philosopher-economist Sen (1999) has shown how people's assessments of the quality of their lives are mediated by identities, norms and institutions. Nussbaum develops this point when she argues that women in particular often find their options constricted by notions of obligation and legitimacy, which affect the decisions they feel that they are able to make. Thus, it is that women's perceptions of themselves are largely constituted by the circumstances before them, and, as Annas (1993) put it, in a society where women have fewer options, they settle for less. The point is often made about the conceptual limitation of negative freedom (i.e. freedom from interference): thus, one finds oneself freer, other things being equal, by wanting to do nothing. Insofar, as one wants to do nothing one may encounter fewer obstacles in the pursuit of one's goals. Moreover, as Williams (1985) argues, there is something rather fishy about this conceptualization of freedom. Likewise, then, for desire-satisfaction models of well-being, the less one desires in life the less one is frustrated. So as the comic slogan goes: 'achieve all your goals! Aim low'. The process of adaptive preference is not necessarily or even typically a conscious act, as norms and expectations become internalized. The privileged quickly become accustomed to their wealth and opportunity; the marginalized frequently adapt their expectations and desires to the lower level of life they are accustomed to. How can they demand fundamental elements of well-being if they are unaware that they exist? (Nussbaum, 2000).

How do these ideas impinge on our consideration of physical activities and well-being? Familiar subjective assessments of the value of an activity, 'it is enjoyable', 'it does me good', or 'it makes me feel better about myself' do not guarantee the enhancement of well-being. The point regarding adaptive preference formation is especially salient in terms of youth sport. Youth soccer in Britain is renowned for its competitive nature, and the recent Football Association campaign 'Respect',[3] is in part a response to the inappropriate ethos to be found there (one which mimics the highest levels of the professional game). Calls have been made for those in youth soccer to place less emphasis upon result and power, and a greater emphasis on skill and technique.[4] Strategies may include, for example distributing the better players throughout A and B teams, rather than having one elite squad, or encouraging a shorter passing game, even though the more efficient means to a winning result might be long hopeful balls latched onto by the bigger, faster player. Coaches may resist this on the grounds that the players' enjoyment would be compromised by failing to employ the best route for success. 'The players ultimately enjoy winning and that is what we are here to do', the argument goes. In the intense atmosphere that is the product of this narrow mindset, the players may pursue winning to the

exclusion of other goods, following the norms laid down by coaches and reinforced by pushy parents, but it is a moot point whether this preference is one that has been formed autonomously.

Nussbaum argues in the realm of development, that a list of central capabilities necessary for a life to be deemed 'fully human' enables us to understand when a preference is both adaptive and destructive. In the sports arena, broadening an understanding of the value of physical activity beyond the subjective, to consider certain values or capabilities that sport and physical activity supports, might help us to question destructive behaviors even when they are accompanied by time-specific subjective endorsement.[5]

What of instances in which an individual fails to endorse a value or good as contributive of their well-being? Can we also conclude that such judgments are flawed, and thus that well-being can be enhanced in the absence of subjective endorsement? This question, in essence goes to the heart of an objective theory of well-being, which advocates that certain goods, values or capabilities are constitutive of well-being regardless of our attitude toward them. In the main, goods such as friendship, play or self-expression will be endorsed by an individual. In exceptional instances in which such endorsement is absent however, it seems perfectly feasible that life may be enhanced by their achievement. Consider Arneson's example:

> Suppose Samantha writes a brilliant poem but denies that this achievement has any value or in any way enhances her life. Her ground for this dismissal is a shallow and silly aesthetic theory which she has thoughtlessly embraced. In these circumstances, her failure to endorse her achievement does not negate its value for her.
>
> (Arneson, 1999, p. 136)

Arneson (1999) acknowledges that life may be improved further by endorsement of the accomplishment, experiencing pleasure in succeeding or achieving some relevant standard. Can this point be squared with the idea that well-being can be improved in the absence of endorsement of a value attained. Certainly, life goes better if one both fully understands the significance of an accomplishment and enjoys it. Subjective attitudes are not unconnected to well-being. It is not necessary, however, for the achievement of a value such as accomplishment to be endorsed, or enjoyed, in order for well-being to be enhanced.

Well-being, sport and physical activity: a positive account

Psychological research on well-being has focused exclusively on subjective states. These include the elevation of mood (Biddle, 2000) and enhanced self-esteem (Fox, 2000). While of importance in terms of both well-being and prolonged participation, we have argued that this focus prevents a fuller analysis of the value of physical activity to our well-being. We have also argued that the role of pleasure in well-being cannot be understood in isolation, but requires an understanding of the values associated with it. Nor can subjective states and evaluations be assumed to have veracity; indeed they may be flawed indicators of how well our lives are going. Our

critique supports a conception of value independent of subjective evaluations, within which to contemplate both well-being, and the value of physical activity. Nevertheless, we do not wish to endorse every conception of objective well-being.

The form of objectivism offered in biomedical accounts, for example, restricts the 'conceptual space' in which to consider the value of physical activity to well-being. Here, the value of physical activity is reduced to disease-prevention and the maintenance or enhancement of physical function. The 'objectivism' on offer here relies upon the scientific, apparently 'value free' categories of health, disease and illness. We will not offer an extensive argument for a normative conception of health or disease. Yet these normative approaches to health, such as Nordenfelt's (2007) can help to contribute to a better understanding of the value of physical activity.

Nordenfelt defines health in terms of our bodily and mental ability to achieve our vital goals.[6] Ideas of health and in turn disease and illness are shaped by conceptions of our central ends. Diseases represent a frustration of these central ends, they are not significant purely as natural events, as Sedgwick (1982) observes. This view departs from the positivistic objectivism implicit in biomedical accounts of the value of exercise to well-being. This biomedical type of account, though it may contribute to an overall understanding of the value of physical activities to well-being, is as narrow and one-sided as the subjectivists'. What might a third way look like?

As we have noted, there are echoes of the pioneering work of Sen in arguing for an alternative conceptual space within which to understand well-being. Sen conceives of 'the state of being happy as one among several objects of value' (1993, p. 48). As we have seen he refers to the propensity of those in poverty to adapt as an indication that ratings of subjective satisfaction, or actual desire fulfillment theories of well-being, are flawed. He also argues against development being monitored according to resources or a Rawlsian notion of primary goods. Sen encourages a consideration of those 'basic ends' (1993, p. 41) that are served by these goods or resources.

In terms of physical activity and its contribution to our well-being, it is our contention that the debate must be extended to include objective values. Both subjective accounts of well-being and the biomedical case for the value of physical activity, at their most convincing, assume certain central ends. Nevertheless, the value of these ends ought not be reduced to either subjective experience or desire fulfillment. We will now turn to examine theories of well-being better equipped to respond to the objections presented above. As we have noted, it is not our intention to substantively articulate or defend one particular theory of well-being, but to indicate that objective theories offer a better framework within which to understand the value of physical activity.

How might an objective conception better understand the value of sport and physical activity?

A plethora of objective lists of the elements of well-being have been published (Gasper, 2004). Some choose to use alternative terminology, Nussbaum, for

example, refers to the idea of a 'fully' or 'truly human life'. The 'Capabilities Approach' developed by both Sen (1993, 1999) and Nussbaum (1999, 2000), though in differing directions, remains one of the best-known theories of the human good. As noted above, Capabilities refer to what people are able to 'do or be in leading a life' (Sen, 1993, p. 31), as opposed to their levels of satisfaction, or the resources at their disposal. For Nussbaum, capability concerns our freedom to function in those valuable ways stipulated on a list of 'Central Human Functional Capabilities' (Nussbaum, 2000, p. 78). The capabilities listed are Life; Bodily Health; Bodily Integrity; Senses, Imagination and Thought; Emotions; Practical reason; Affiliation; Other Species; Play; Control over One's Environment. A threshold level of all the capabilities must be reached for a life to be called fully human.[7]

This list of capabilities clearly distinguishes between the pleasure or satisfaction with which a capability may be associated and the capability itself. Nussbaum's theory is designed for application in the field of human development, and this substantive list becomes an important critical tool when people are found to be lacking in such capabilities, even in the absence of dissatisfaction or low levels of utility. A list of values or capabilities, a threshold level of which are essential for a fully human life, may also provide some insight as to the value of sport.

As an example let us consider Nussbaum's fourth capability 'Senses, Imagination and Thought'. For Nussbaum this capability includes 'Being able to use imagination and thought in connection with experiencing and producing self-expressive works' (Nussbaum, 2000, p. 78). In explaining this capability further, Nussbaum also refers to freedom of expression and searching for the meaning of life in one's own way, as well as to pleasurable experiences and the avoidance of 'non-necessary pain' ((Nussbaum, 2000, p. 78). Nussbaum thus makes room for subjective experiences within this 'list theory'. It is remarked that education is essential for the truly human use of these faculties. Not all forms of physical activity will instantiate the demands of this capability. While skipping or step-aerobics may contribute to well-being on biomedical or subjectivist accounts they cannot develop this capability owing to the thinness of their cognitive repertoire. But modern sports and thicker forms of physical activity represent one way of functioning in these valuable ways. Advanced players in games such as football speak of expressing themselves. Many of them find in developing bodily control and awareness, in mastering skills and moving with economy and ease through a challenging movement sequence, in appreciating and developing game intelligence, a joyful and deeply rewarding experience. Sports, when they move beyond mindless drilling and conditioning, may also be understood as developing the capabilities of sense, imagination and thought. Physical activities certainly represent one way in which the whole person can be understood as expressing oneself, as in dance, tai chi or yoga, for example. Note, this is not to say the everyday drudgery that is part of the life of every serious athlete is not without value. Merely that it will not contribute to this particular capability, which is constitutive of well-being.

Nussbaum also includes 'play' on her list of central capabilities. Play is closely related to the enjoyment and satisfaction with which it is associated; indeed it is not uncommon for the value of play to be described solely in these subjective terms. Thus, examining the contribution of playful activities, including sport and physical activity, to our well-being is an interesting test case. Do playful activities contribute to our well-being independent of the enjoyment and pleasure with which they are associated?

Griffin (1986), in developing his own theory of well-being, does not consider 'play' to warrant a category in its own right preferring to include it within the broader category of enjoyment. This reduction could be challenged with reference to earlier arguments. Playing games (for example, football or chess) may not always be enjoyable but may be of broader value to our lives. They may represent genuine accomplishments, achieved via determination and perseverance, for example. Play, however, does not seem to require accomplishment of some kind to ensure its value. Indeed to focus upon this aspect might be to distort the value of play itself. A description of play is necessary to ensure that we do not depart too far from the genuinely accepted use of the term itself, in arguing for its value apart from subjective states:

> Summing up the formal characteristics of play we might call it a free activity standing quite consciously outside 'ordinary' life as being 'not serious', but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained from it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner. It promotes the formation of social groupings which tend to surround themselves with secrecy and to stress their difference from the common world by disguise or other means.
>
> (Huizinga, 2010, p. 132)

Huizinga's definition at least seems to leave open the possibility that a playful activity need not necessarily be experienced as pleasurable. Tasioulas (2010) points out that certain types of play (paradigmatically: sports) have at their core a tension, and require exertion both physically and mentally. In certain instances this might mean that enjoying them during participation is particularly difficult. This, however, need not negate their value. Such activities—aiming at forms of excellence—might still entail the mastery of new skills, being absorbed in a creative activity, expressing oneself. To consider the value of play one need not necessarily fall back on subjective explanations. What such explanations do indicate, however, is the interrelated nature of the values that are likely to form an objective list of the constituents of well-being. Explaining the value of play seems to draw at least partly from other values on such a list.

Many types of play are enjoyed, and that enjoyment, for games without a challenging component, would be the main reason for participation. In certain instances, however, and sports provide a good example, certain other characteristics may take precedence. Huizinga's characterization offers a starting point from which to examine the features of play, and how they might be of value to a life, even when the activity is not enjoyed.

A further reason for Nussbaum's inclusion of play as a central capability relates to the overarching aim of her theory. Nussbaum's list is politically motivated, providing a means for judging the success of those in power in ensuring a level of capability for its citizens. If enjoyment was proposed as a central capability within Nussbaum's approach it would be far from clear how any government obligation to provide it could be met. The capacity for enjoyment is universal, those in power might respond; yet we scarcely need a postmodernist to inform us that we all enjoy different things. Including the capability play, rather than referring to enjoyment, guides policy to a greater extent, encouraging the provision of facilities for physical activities as well as for other games for those of a range of ages. Play seems to suggest a certain range of activities, it certainly does not encompass all that we enjoy, but represents a type of activity central to a fully human life, according to Nussbaum.

This need not only be a pragmatic point. Consider again the example of youth soccer, where there appears potential for an overemphasis upon the result to threaten other values with which the activity might be associated. Sport may be enjoyed in a range of ways, but as we have suggested, the presence of subjective endorsements may not necessarily guarantee its value. Even in the case that an overcompetitive ethos, at the expense of other aspects of the game, does not seem to detract from the players' enjoyment we may still question whether such an approach is appropriate. It can be argued that sport in this form should still retain a playful aspect. One might point to canonical accounts of play such as Huizinga (2010) to further illuminate this case. Indeed, an objective list theory allows proponents to vigorously defend such values as play, creativity and self-expression as essential to a flourishing life, and therefore as important aspects of those activities such as sport if they are to positively contribute to our lives.

The more general point here is that a theory that is founded on goods deemed constitutive of well-being, independent of the enjoyment or pleasure with which those goods are associated, provides fertile ground for debate over the future form of sport. Of course, defending a particular form of an objective list, the reason for the inclusion and exclusion of certain values is another problem altogether, and one that is beyond the bounds of this paper. Nevertheless, to debate the values constitutive of well-being and how activities such as sport might best serve such values is a worthwhile process. Alternatively an insistence that well-being is a purely subjective matter, a combination of life satisfaction and pleasure seems not to advance the debate, nor cohere with how we often reason about our own well-being, and the form of those activities so central to our lives. As Griffin (1986) points out, we often subject our own desires to critical reflection, as well as the desires and decisions of others. We ask whether the actions of individuals are actually in their best interest, whether we ourselves have acted for, or against our own good. We may also question whether a sport in its current form continues to represent the values we hold dear, or whether it has departed from them. A firm commitment to a subjective conception of well-being attempts to restrict the debate in a fashion inconsistent with present modes of critical reflection. Nussbaum's list of capabilities offers scope to assess the value of activities to our lives. Sport and

physical activities constitutive of well-being will instantiate functionings related to these capabilities, such as self-expression. The contribution of sports and physical activities to a life may well include the pleasure and enjoyment with which they are often associated, but the list encourages us to consider other ways in which sports are of value to our lives.

Additionally, the notion of capability itself might encourage us to consider a more integral role for sport and physical activity in the good life. Play in its physical forms may in certain instances contribute to our health. (Not all sports activities, however, should be thought of as necessarily health promoting, consider the negative health implications that may result from high-level participation). Health can be understood as a foundational capability in the sense that a certain threshold level of health is required to pursue those other values central to a flourishing life. In this sense we might offer a stronger argument for certain forms of active play, or other physical activities, as one of a limited number of ways of enhancing the foundational capability of health. In some ways this aside echoes the biomedical account that often considers the benefits of physical activity in terms of physical function. It differs, of course, in locating such an account within a normative understanding of health as the ability to pursue those goals and values central to well-being.

There are, however, certain limitations of objective accounts or list theories of well-being. The most obvious, and perhaps most important, question is how are such lists generated. Modernist critics from a range of backgrounds typically reject the possibility of monolithic objective accounts of the good life whether Platonic or otherwise. In her defense, it should be noted that Nussbaum (2000) does not dream up her list from the philosopher's favorite vantage point: the armchair. Rather, she proposes that her list represents 'the result of years of cross-cultural discussion and subsequent modification'. (Nussbaum, 2000, p. 76) and that it must always be open to revision.[8] In responding to the common accusation of paternalism in respect of objective list-makers, Nussbaum also argues for capability provision, freedom to flourish, rather than hierarchical models of governmental policies to promote predetermined functionings.

The defense of an objective list is a difficult and contentious issue, well beyond the aims of this limited discussion. Nussbaum's use of question-begging language, the 'truly' and 'fully human' life, sits uncomfortably with those anxious that groups are not excluded from good lives by fiat. In her defense, Nussbaum argues that the employment of a list, however, is precisely to ensure that these capabilities are entitlements for all, even the poor who do not express dissatisfaction at their lot,[9] and that the list provides strong obligation for governments to facilitate capability for such groups. In Popperian fashion, she maintains that it is important for such lists to be thought of as perennially revisable in the light of new evidence or developments.

Being concerned here with an analysis of the value of sport and physical activity to well-being we will not dwell further on matters of justification, but return to the question of whether sports and certain physical activities may contribute to the capabilities central to human well-being. Our conclusion at this stage appears

somewhat tentative and perhaps even disappointing. Sport and physical activity in certain forms will instantiate those goods on an objective list and may be seen as one significant way of preserving the physical activity to pursue such goods. Considering the value of sport in terms of objective values has suggested that sports itself might offer greater potential for fulfilling such values than thinner physical activities that might be equal in calorific expenditure, but not so in the range of values and challenges they present. On the other hand, however, we should indicate that sports themselves can also threaten those values on an objective list. Exclusive focus on a sporting career might be at the expense of a balanced life. Authoritarian coaches, for example, might restrict an athletes' scope for self-expression or other aspects of autonomous choice. Again, however, an objective list provides the tools to criticize such instances, even if the dissatisfaction of the individuals involved is not obvious or even evident.

All this talk of the values on an objective list, however, can lead to the somewhat misleading picture of the individual or athlete in this context looking to secure abstract values such as play, accomplishment or self-expression. Sport, of course, should not be viewed merely as a vessel for these abstract values. We should not understand sports or physical activity solely as neutral means to goods on an objective list. Sport and exercise do not simply represent any old way in which such values might be realized. Midgley (1974) insists upon this point. We should not, she argues, understand games and indeed love in terms of general needs, disregarding the form they take:

> The restraining rules are not something foreign to the needs or emotions involved, they are simply the shape which the desired activity takes. The chess player's desire is not a desire for general abstract intellectual activity, curbed and frustrated by a particular set of rules. It is a desire for a particular kind of intellectual activity, whose channel is the rules of chess. (Similarly human love is not a general need, curbed and frustrated by the particular forms offered to it. It is a need for a specific kind of relation—say a permanent one—with a particular person, and for this purpose only some kinds of behavior will do.)
>
> (Midgley, 1974, p. 243)

Midgley's insistence that games should not be understood as merely a vessel for the realization of general values is borne out of her dismissal that games are closed off from the rest of society. And in this she is of course echoing a theme considered at length by Huizinga (2010). For Midgley (1974, p. 337) games are 'continuous with the life around them,' and the needs these games represent reflect our context. Our motives for participating are not general, but for the satisfaction of a very particular need for a very particular type of game:

> In the case of football or chess, to treat the traditional concern as accidental would mean that it could just as well be attached to something else; that the pattern of life surrounding them demands some game, but is quite indifferent what game it is. Well then, we will try substituting halma for chess and lawn tennis for football. Will there be any difficulties? There will. These rituals will not be suitable forms for the conflicts they are designed to ritualize.
>
> (Midgley, 1974, p. 237)

We will not concern ourselves here with whether ritualized conflict is the only or indeed the best way in which to understand the development of games such as football. Midgley speaks of needs but let us now bring the discussion back to our example of Nussbaum's capabilities and functionings, needs in the sense that they are deemed necessary, for a life to be fully human (Nussbaum, 2000). Sports and various forms of physical activity are not vanilla means to a general sort of capability or functioning, but represent specific ways in which we might realize capabilities.

Indeed Nussbaum intends her list to be more fully specified, she refers to its 'multiple realizability: its members can be more concretely specified in accordance with local beliefs and circumstances'. (Nussbaum, 2000, p. 77). The capabilities and functionings on the list are very general categories, that do not exhaust the ways in which we should understand the activities that instantiate them. Sport and exercise are of course not the only ways in which we find pleasure, joy, or indeed feel able to express ourselves. They will share family resemblances with other forms of expressive behavior. And like all such cultural forms, they represent variegated ways in which to achieve a very specific form of such values, ways developed from the context and history within which they are situated.

Conclusion: objectivist well-being, agency and advocacy

We have argued here that sport and physical activity can make a significant and distinctive contribution to individual well-being. Beyond their frequently cited biomedically couched benefits and their characterization as a source of pleasure and enjoyment, sports and certain forms of physical activity can play a role as valuable sources and features of a fulfilling life. We have critically questioned traditional associations of well-being with positive hedonic experiences and the satisfaction of desires, in favor of a more objective, supra-personal account. This account is based on a notion of capabilities that are universal and that focuses on what is common to humanity. In Nussbaum's terms, 'it begins with the human being: with the capabilities and needs that join all humans, across barriers of gender and class and race and nation' (1995, p. 61). Equally, health-promoting forms of sport and physical activity will also preserve the physical pre-conditions of valuable functioning, facilitating our pursuit of the good life. Sports and certain physical activity structured properly, we contend, will reflect human need for very specific instantiations of those values central to our well-being.

Notes

1. See for example, Parfit (1984) who classifies theories of well-being in terms of objective, hedonistic and desire theories.
2. For an illustration of which in the contexts of sport and physical education, see McNamee (1992).

3. See http://www.thefa.com/Leagues/Respect.aspx. The program is a Football Association initiative aiming to address unacceptable behavior both on and off the pitch in light of substantial numbers of referees quitting, and young players dropping out.
4. See for example http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/sport/football/article2971538.ece 'Sir Trevor Brooking facing some tough calls to kick some sense into our game' and http://www.independent.co.uk/sport/football/premier-league/trevor-brooking-youngsters-are-just-not-skilful-enough-445713.html Trevor Brooking: 'Youngsters are just not skilful enough'.
5. As Austin (2007) observes keeping score may help foster 'athletic and moral excellence' (2007, p. 144). Our observation here is that to focus upon result to the exclusion of such excellences has little long-term benefit for the sport itself, or indeed for the young player.
6. For full definition, see Nordenfelt (2007, p. 54) and his earlier book *On the Nature of Health* (1987).
7. Nussbaum fleshes out her account in subsequent writings (see for example Nussbaum, 2001, 2003, 2006a, 2006b).
8. Though this is not the place for specific philosophical objections see, for example, Pogge (2002).
9. Nussbaum (2006a) still considers her single list of central capabilities to be important to those with severe mental impairments (see pp. 186–195). She cites the danger of an alternative list providing an excuse for policy not delivering on matters central to human flourishing.

References

Annas, J. (1993) Women and the quality of life: two norms or one? in: M. C. Nussbaum & A. Sen (Eds) *The quality of life* (Oxford, Clarendon Press), 279–296.

Arneson, R. J. (1999) Human flourishing versus desire satisfaction, *Social Philosophy and Policy*, 16(1), 113–143.

Austin, M. W. (2007) Do children have a right to play, *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*, 34(2), 135–146.

Biddle, S. J. H. (2000) Emotion, mood and physical activity, in: S. J. H. Biddle, K. R. Fox & S. H. Boutcher (Eds) *Physical activity and psychological well-being* (London, Routledge), 63–87.

Biddle, S., Fox, K. & Boucher, S. (2000) *Physical activity and psychological well-being* (London, Routledge).

Biddle, S. J. H. & Mutrie, N. (2008) *Psychology of physical activity: determinants, well-being and interventions* (2nd edn) (London and New York, Routledge).

Diener, E. (1984) Subjective well-being, *Psychological Bulletin*, 95(3), 542–575.

Diener, E. & Suh, E. M. (1999) National differences in subjective well-being, in: D. Kahneman, E. Diener & N. Schwarz (Eds) *Well-being: the foundations of hedonic psychology* (New York, Russell Sage), 434–450.

Eid, M. & Larsen, R. (2007) *The science of subjective well-being* (New York, Guildford Press).

Ekkekakis, P., Hall, E. E. & Petruzzello, S. J. (2005) Variation and homogeneity in affective responses to physical activity of varying intensities: an alternative perspective on dose-response based on evolutionary considerations, *Journal of Sports Sciences*, 23(5), 477–500.

Ekkekakis, P. & Petruzzello, S. J. (1999) Acute aerobic exercise and affect: current status, problems and prospects regarding dose response, *Sports Medicine*, 28(5), 337–374.

Fox, K. R. (2000) The effects of exercise on self-perceptions and self-esteem, in: S. J. H. Biddle, K. R. Fox & S. H. Boutcher (Eds) *Physical activity and psychological well-being* (London, Routledge), 88–117.

Garn, A. & Cothran, D. (2006) The fun factor in physical education, *Journal of Teaching in Physical Education*, 25, 281–297.

Gasper, D. (2004) *Human well-being: concepts and conceptualizations* (Helsinki, United Nations University, World Institute for Development Economics Research).
Griffin, J. (1986) *Well-being* (Oxford, Clarendon Press).
Hochstetler, D. R. (2003) Process and the sport experience, *Quest*, 55, 231–243.
Huizinga, J. (2010) Nature and significance of play as a cultural phenomenon, reprinted, in: M. J. McNamee (Ed.) *The ethics of sports: a reader* (Abingdon, Routledge), 29–33.
Kidd, B. & Donnelly, P. (2000) Human rights in sports, *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 35(2), 131–148.
Kupperman, J. J. (2003) Comfort, hedonic treadmills, and public policy, *Public Affairs Quarterly*, 17(1), 17–28.
Loumidis, K. & Wells, A. (2001) Exercising for the wrong reasons: relationships among eating disorder beliefs, dysfunctional exercise beliefs and coping, *Clinical Psychology and Psychotherapy*, 8, 416–423.
McNamee, M. J. (1992) Physical education and the development of personhood, *Physical Education Review*, 15(1), 13–28.
Midgley, M. (1974) The game game, *Philosophy*, 49(189), 231–253.
MINEPS IV. (2004) *Fourth international conference of ministers and senior officials responsible for physical education and sport – declaration of Athens*, Greece, 6–8 December.
Nordenfelt, L. (1987) *On the nature of health: an action-theoretic approach* (Dordrecht, Kluwer).
Nordenfelt, L. (2007) *Rationality and compulsion applying action theory to psychiatry* (Oxford, Oxford University Press).
Nozick, R. (1974) *Anarchy, state and utopia* (New York, Basic Books).
Nussbaum, M. (1995) Human capabilities, female human beings, in: M. Nussbaum & J. Glover (Eds) *Women, culture, and development: a study of human capabilities* (Oxford, Clarendon Press), 61–104.
Nussbaum, M. (1999) *Sex and social justice* (Oxford, Oxford University Press).
Nussbaum, M. (2000) *Women and human development: the capabilities approach* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press).
Nussbaum, M. C. (2001) Political objectivity, *New Literary History*, 32, 883–906.
Nussbaum, M. C. (2003) Tragedy and human capabilities: a response to Vivian Walsh, *Review of Political Economy*, 15(3), 413–418.
Nussbaum, M. C. (2006a) *Frontiers of justice disability, nationality, species membership* (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press).
Nussbaum, M. C. (2006b) Capabilities as fundamental entitlements: Sen and social justice, in: A. Kaufman (Ed.) *Capabilities equality basic issues and problems* (New York, Routledge), 44–70.
O'Reilly, E., Tompkins, J. & Gallant, M. (2001) They ought to enjoy physical activity, you know? Struggling with fun in physical education, *Sport, Education and Society*, 6, 211–221.
Parfit, D. (1984) *Reasons and persons* (Oxford, Clarendon Press).
Pogge, T. (2002) Can the capability approach be justified? *Philosophical Topics*, 30(2), 16–25.
Powers, M. & Faden, R. (2006) *Social justice: the moral foundations of public health and health policy* (Oxford, Oxford University Press).
Rawls, J. (1971) *A theory of justice* (Oxford, Clarendon Press).
Sabo, D., Miller, K., Melnick, M. & Heywood, L. (2004) *Her life depends on it: sport, physical activity and the health and well-being of American girls* (East Meadow, NY, Women's Sports Foundation).
Sedgwick, P. (1982) *Psycho politics* (London, Pluto Press).
Sen, A. (1993) Capability and well-being, in: M. C. Nussbaum & A. Sen (Eds) *The quality of life* (Oxford, Clarendon Press), 30–53.
Sen, A. (1999) *Development as freedom* (New York, Knopf).
Sumner, L. W. (1996) *Welfare happiness & ethics* (Oxford, Clarendon Press).
Sumner, L. W. (2000) Something in between, in: R. Crisp & B. Hooker (Eds) *Well-being and morality essays in honour of James Griffin* (Oxford, Clarendon Press), 1–19.

Tasioulas, J. (2010) Games and the good-II, (reprinted), in: M. J. McNamee (Ed.) *The ethics of sports: a reader* (Abingdon, Routledge), 62–76.
Weinberg, R. & Gould, D. (2003) *Foundations of sport & exercise psychology* (3rd edn) (Champaign, IL, Human Kinetics).
Williams, B. (1985) *Ethics and the limits of philosophy* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press).