

Philosophers and Cricket – Samir Chopra

Many years ago, as I began graduate studies in philosophy at the City University Graduate Center in New York City, I stumbled upon the work of the English philosopher JL Austin—more precisely, his book *Sense and Sensibilia*—in my philosophy of language seminar. I was delighted to find that Austin, in his discussion of performative utterances or speech acts—words, linguistic objects, that make things happen in the ‘real world’—provided the now-classic example of a cricket umpire saying "Out." The umpire says so; and so it comes to be. (The Decision Review System (DRS) has introduced a slight wrinkle in this theory.) This discovery prompted me to initiate a characteristically self-indulgent project to collect cricket references in philosophical literature. I found many philosophers—among others, Bertrand Russell, HLA Hart, Michael Oakeshott, and Gilbert Ryle—included tidbits about cricket in their writings to make or illustrate a philosophical point. The sheer incongruity of the presence of a ‘mere game’ in the midst of an ostensibly weighty discussion about matters metaphysical or ethical made such invocations especially prominent. Some of these references were ever so slightly tongue-in-cheek exaltations of cricket, declarations of the philosopher’s cricket fandom, as when Bertrand Russell memorably wrote, “Understanding language is...like understanding cricket: it is a matter of habits acquired in oneself and rightly presumed in others.” And some of the keenest cricket fans I know, with whom I’ve had some of my richest discussions about cricket, are philosophers. My search thus inevitably led to the question: Why are philosophers so fond of cricket?

My answer is simple. Cricket fandom provides a distinctive space for the exercise of philosophical perplexity. The essential contest of cricket, that between bat and ball, between batsman and bowler, between one fielding team and one lonely batsman, provides rich variation on a simple theme; the atom of a cricket game, the bowler’s delivery, can have as many different resolutions as there are possible paths of the cricket ball following contact—or not—with the bat. Cricket thus repays philosophical analysis and speculation; the closer you look, the more you inquire, the more detail pops into view, providing further fodder for the philosophically trained or inclined mind. Matters of acute philosophical interest reliably possess such ‘fractal’ qualities.

The fundamental preoccupations of philosophers are metaphysical, epistemological, aesthetical, ethical, and political. Cricket provides means for the sustained pursuance of these inquiries; many questions of interest to cricket fans have a philosophical dimension, which philosophers unsurprisingly seize on and set out to explore. There is the fundamental question of how an activity like hitting a ball with a piece of wood can come to acquire meaning. Or consider epistemic questions. Should cricketers use the DRS only when they *know* the umpire is wrong or also when they *believe* the umpire is so mistaken? What would be the difference? Results aside, is the notion of one cricketer or team being ‘better’ than another a meaningful question? Can statistics establish such a distinction? Is it morally wrong to bounce an incompetent batsman? Should fielders appeal when they know the batsman is not out? Does the distinction between rules and standards in the philosophy of law illuminate the notion of ‘the spirit of cricket’? Is an edge for four, played when eight wickets are down and seventeen runs needed to win, a ‘more beautiful’ shot than a conventionally classic cover drive played in a less challenging match situation? Cricket is played by nations; it invokes talk of nationalism, colonialism, imperialism, culture, and race, matters of acute interest to political philosophers. Modern cricket is tightly coupled with television media; cultural theorists find much in this relationship to intrigue and enthrall them. Philosophers are often numerical nerds; we find ourselves fascinated by cricket statistics, by what they reveal and by what they conceal. Cricket’s terminology too, provides a specialized language for a particular species of human activity, a ‘form of life’, a matter of great interest to philosophers of language who are interested in how meanings arise from the use of words in social contexts and linguistic communities. Philosophers—the smart ones, at least—are sensitive to historical detail, and their subsequent devotion to the history of cricket pays adequate recompense in enriching their contemporary fascination with the game. I suspect I could write a book titled *Cricket and Philosophy*, in which I would rely exclusively on cricketing examples to illustrate the most basic philosophical questions: What exists? How and what do we know? What is the Good, the Right, the Beautiful, the Just, the True?

A crucial factor in philosophers’ fascination with cricket is the Test match, whose five-day, thirty-hour spread offers an unparalleled sporting space for the exercise of the

philosophical imagination. The vast expanses of space and time a Test match traverses produce intense daydreaming and speculation in its fans, an exercise of the creative imagination that can only enhance philosophical thought. Because of its gradual development and denouement, a Test makes possible many conceptions of cricket: a drama, a comedy, a tragedy, with heroes and villains, as—more problematically—an armed conflict, and of course, as a proving ground for all kind of human failings and strengths. The draw, an indecisive sporting encounter which manages to enthrall those who watch, also induces the right kind of philosophical perplexity. Lastly, Test cricket is often best enjoyed on the radio; the best kind of work to do while listening to commentary, even more than dusting the furniture or doing the dishes, is to edit a journal article or manuscript—the kind of thing academic philosophers always seem to be doing.

Other games, of course, fascinate philosophers too. Baseball even tempted John Rawls, the American moral and political philosopher, to recklessly proclaim it ‘the best of all games.’ But Rawls’ reasons—‘the rules of the game are in equilibrium’, ‘the game does not give unusual preference or advantage to special physical types’, ‘the game uses all parts of the body’, ‘all plays of the game are open to view’, ‘the only game where scoring is not done with the ball’ and lastly, ‘[its playing] time never runs out,’ all—other than the last one—apply to cricket too. (Incidentally, Rawls’ penultimate reason suggests an ignorance of cricket, but he corrected himself in the same piece where he originally offered this analysis). Furthermore, Rawls is mistaken about the last factor because it is precisely the impending close of play that gives draws their distinctive frisson. Furthermore, the absence of a ‘foul’ territory, made possible by the extension of the batsman’s scoring area to all around the bat, adds an indispensable richness and complexity to cricket. Still, Rawls’ analysis provides us with philosophical reasons to consider cricket an ‘interesting’ game: it is proportionate in the right ways, it is ‘fair’ and ‘beautiful.’

But Rawls should recognize attempts to provide an objective grounding for something—sporting fandom—which can in the end only be an irrational enterprise is neither wise nor desirable. It would be too reductive, a philosophical sin I am unwilling to commit. Let this then—the question of why philosophers are so intrigued by cricket—be a mystery, and remain of continuing philosophical interest.