

Boxing: The Sweet Science of Constraints

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It would not be much of an exaggeration to say that many popular and academic discussions of boxing tend toward moralism or functionalism. Of course, oftentimes, these two discussions become entangled. But the general features of each can be roughly distinguished. In the first kind of discussion we hear much about the violence that boxing demands and glorifies, the archaic morality at work in the very existence of a legalized blood sport in civilized societies, and tales of hardscrabble youths who dream of championship belts and are exploited by unscrupulous managers and promoters. This moralist rendering of the sport is populated by a variety of normative positions—claims that seek to justify a legislative ban on boxing, arguments that try to establish the foundations for moral objections to the sport, and even attempts to defend boxing by highlighting what boxers themselves think about and learn from pugilistic practice. Paternalistic claims about the harm done to individual boxers, communitarian concerns about the corrosive effects of boxing on communal norms, and arguments in defense of the individual liberties of boxers are commonplace.¹ In the second kind of discussion, what is central is not establishing normative grounds for the abolition, immorality, or value of boxing but rather explaining the macrolevel causes that push people into the sport. This functionalist rendering of boxing is predominated by causal appeals to background forces such as crime, social exclusion, unemployment, anomie, urban decay, street culture, and racism as various ways to explain the role and function of boxing in society. We are, for reasons sociological, historical, and economic, typically encouraged to look “beyond the ring” and examine the larger coercive social facts that force some members of a given society into the sport of boxing.²

In this article I draw on work in rational-choice theory to present a more philosophically robust alternative to the moralist and functionalist renderings of pugilism. Specifically, I develop relevant aspects of Jon Elster’s constraint theory to outline an account of constraints in the sport of boxing. For in boxing—as in jazz or poetry—more options are not always preferable, or even rational. On the contrary, in pugilism athletes deliberately choose their constraints and reflexively incorporate a coach’s or trainer’s imposition of additional bounds as a crucial part of becoming skilled in their craft. My core thesis is that, in boxing, athletes undertake to bind themselves in ways that enable creativity and maximize individual skills and that sparring in a boxing gym—with its flexible constraints and approximation of what Elster calls “optimal tightness of bounds”—is a paradigmatic form of such a rational undertaking. Developing this thesis should not only help to clarify what

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boxers actually do but also demonstrate the rich potential of constraint theory to contribute to a better understanding of the sport of boxing.

To be sure, boxers are not alone as athletes who constrain themselves and are, in turn, constrained in various ways. In fact, the analysis of boxing I develop here is part of a larger attempt to outline what I want to call a “constraint theory of sport.” Most generally, such a theory holds that in competitive athletic endeavors individuals primarily strive to maximize their skills and creativity within constraints. Put simply, a constraint theory of sport is designed to explain the embedded rationality and creativity of athletic action. The argument is developed as follows. I begin with a brief summary of Elster’s constraint theory (Section 1). From there I go on to suggest an account of sport as “constrained maximization” and briefly contrast that account with a related position in the philosophy of sport, that of Suits’s discussion of sport as games (Section 2). In the core section of the essay, I develop a constraint theory of boxing (Section 3). I conclude with a summary of the basic argument and anticipate certain objections (Section 4).

1. Constraint Theory

Although rational-choice theory has made extensive inroads in many branches of philosophy and the social sciences, it has yet to find a home in the philosophy of sport. This is perhaps unsurprising, given its formal conception of human action as utility-maximizing behavior governed by preferences that are consistent, fixed over time, and exogenous or given. Such a rationally thin and contextually unspecified conception of individual action seems inadequate, not only to the hurly-burly of sport but also as an explanation of many human behaviors and everyday practices wherein action is both ineluctably embedded in institutional and social constraints and embodied in the fluid preferences of human agents.

Constraint theory is Jon Elster’s unique attempt to develop, from within methodological individualism, a conception of rational action that is thick enough to capture the relationship between such constraints and preferences. Although it has many dimensions and applications, the seeds of constraint theory can be found in Elster’s *Ulysses and the Sirens*, wherein he argues that all human action is the result of “two successive filtering devices”:

The first is defined by the set of structural constraints which cuts down the set of abstractly possible courses of action and reduces it to the vastly smaller subset of feasible actions. The second filtering process is the mechanism that singles out which member of the feasible set shall be realized. (3: p. 113)

A thorough examination of the nature and functions of both of these “filtering devices” or constraint mechanisms in human action is what distinguishes Elster’s work from more atomistic accounts of rational-choice-guided action. Elster is interested not only in the rationality of individual preferences and choice-maximizing action but also in (a) the role that constraints play in shaping those preferences and choices; (b) the fact that many constraints on human action are not merely structurally prefiltered but can, themselves, be reflexively *selected* by individual actors; and (c) the forms of choice and action, such as creative action, wherein these two filters are not successive but interactive.

The mythological hero Ulysses is Elster's model of a constraint theorist at work. For in his encounter with the Sirens, Ulysses deliberately has himself constrained by his crew.³ In this way Ulysses's own intentional reduction of his feasible set (a choice of constraints) frees him to hear the call of the Sirens (a choice within those constraints). In Elster's more recent study, *Ulysses Unbound*, he attempts to characterize more fully this interaction of choice of constraints and choice within constraints (4: p. 176) in an analysis of creativity and constraints in the arts, wherein artists bind (and often seek to unbind) themselves in various ways. In this study, as well, Elster provocatively suggests but does not develop the relevance of constraint theory for the philosophy of sport (4: p. 281). The attempt to develop and apply a constraint theory of sport here should be understood as a provisional pursuit of such a suggestion.

2. Sport as Constrained Maximization

In his constraint-theoretical account of art, Elster argues that artistic creation is "guided by the aim of maximizing aesthetic value under constraints" (4: p. 200). In art, the philosophically interesting constraints are not so much objectively given or "hard" constraints such as technical or physical limitations but, rather, "soft" constraints or conventions—those "restrictions that *constitute* a specific genre" (4: p. 190, my emphasis).⁴ On Elster's account, soft constraints or conventions in the arts are constitutive rules.⁵ Adhering to them, like adhering to the rules of chess, does not merely normatively regulate artistic endeavors; it defines such behavior as an artistic endeavor. Indeed, despite the dream of high and postmodernism, Elster demonstrates that in the absence of soft but constitutive constraints no coherent account of artistic creation can be given. Sonnet writers are, at least at one decisive level, simply artists who have chosen to bind themselves by working within the conventions of the sonnet form. The absence of the constraints of the sonnet would mean, quite literally, the impossibility of sonnet writing. "Expression needs form," as Elster rightly insists (4: p. 177).

Yet, Elster is no mere formalist. His analysis concedes that sonnet writers, if they are to be composers who achieve anything of aesthetic value or excellence, cannot simply adhere to or unintentionally "embody" their chosen constraints. There is always more to writing a sonnet than simply following the rules of sonnet writing. Sonneteers must intentionally seek, through reflexively monitored revisions, continued variations, and deliberate experimentations, to maximize their creativity and skills of written expression within their elected constraints; they must, that is to say, practice the rational art of what Elster calls "constrained maximization" (4: p. 201) to excel in their creative production.

Such is the case, or so I want to suggest, with competitive athletes, as well. They, too, are engaged in a more or less complex practice aimed at constitutively constrained maximization. In playing a particular sport, they, like artists, have chosen their soft constraints and deliberately adopt the constitutive conventions or rules of a specific game. Following the rules of tennis is what it means to play tennis and be a tennis player, just as following the conventions of the sonnet is constitutive of sonnet writing and being a sonnet writer. Of course, *how* one plays and competes—the quality of the choices and the skillfulness and creativity of the moves one makes—within those rules is what makes one a better or worse tennis

player. In this respect, Roger Federer is Shakespearean in his athletic realization of constrained maximization in the sport of tennis.

The basic argument by analogy being introduced here is simply that, at least at one level, competitive sports are athletic genres in which individuals strive to achieve constrained maximization. The inverse of such a striving would be something like engaging in sport (or art) as a leisure activity or recreational hobby wherein the only objective is constrained diversion. Maintaining a distinction between constrained maximization and constrained diversion does not necessarily imply that there are any essential differences between a “serious athlete” and “recreational player” or between athletic action and mere play.⁶ Instead, from the rational-choice perspective I am developing here, such a distinction simply makes explicit the relative potential for increasing individual skill and creativity in each case. Like the accomplished sonneteer, the competitive athlete’s committed rational (utility-maximizing) orientation toward his or her constraints characteristically enables skill levels and forms of creative action that are difficult if not impossible to realize in the pleasure-maximizing activity of constrained diversion wherein individual relaxation and recreation, and not excellence and innovation, is sought.⁷

To be sure, there is no need to push this preliminary analogy between constrained maximization in art and constrained maximization in sport too far here. There are many distinctions to be made, but two in particular seem especially relevant in this context. First, the orientation athletes adopt in relation to the rules of their chosen sport is not identical to that of artists in relation to the conventions of their chosen genre. For example, artists often self-consciously seek to violate or reject the conventions of their genre by subverting or exceeding them. This is especially the case in much contemporary art. Athletes, by contrast, must endeavor to maximize their creativity and skill levels within existing constraints. Indeed, the “deconstruction” of soft constraints or the establishment of new ones is not, generally speaking, one of their aims.⁸

Second, the relative constitutive quality of soft constraints (rules) in sport and conventions in art are quite different. For example, today almost anything and everything counts as “poetry.” But what counts as tennis remains playing by the rules of tennis. And what counts as playing tennis well is an individual’s ability to maximize his or her choices and actions from within the constitutive constraints of tennis. The conclusion to be drawn from this difference in the nature of soft constraints in sports and the arts is not that the elimination of all (or even most) soft constraints further enables creativity and skill. Rather, the opposite is typically the case: In eliminating constraints rather than choosing them, creativity and skill are undermined rather than potentially optimized. What athletics, unlike contemporary poetics, make clear is that where a certain number of soft constraints obtain, more possibilities to tighten or loosen the bounds of action exist.

The binding that athletes regularly engage in is, thus, at once more demanding and potentially more enabling than the conventional bounds of artists, at least those of a high- or postmodern sensibility. Consequently, it is understandable that athletes rarely attempt constrained maximization of their chosen athletic genre on their own, but rather routinely seek out additional constrainers—coaches, trainers, advisors—to help them optimize their constraints.⁹ This important use of additional constrainers in sports also helps sharpen the distinction between constrained maximization and constrained diversion introduced previously. Individuals seeking constrained

diversion in sport do not require additional constrainters to realize their goals. Indeed, it would be odd to argue that sport hobbyists *need* coaches or trainers simply to enjoy their athletic diversions; the term “hobby coach” rings counterintuitive.

In light of the important role of constraints and constrainters in athletics, I propose a constraint theory of sport. Such a theory holds that athletic endeavors involve the interplay of three types of individual choices designed to achieve constrained maximization. These are (a) choice of constraints (electively self-binding), (b) choice of constrainters (electing others—coaches, trainers, etc.—to bind one’s self), and (c) choice within constraints (“a”) and constrainters’ constraints (“b”).

At the risk of sounding programmatic, I think that the central task of a constraint theory of sport should be to make explicit and describe how this dynamic matrix of choices and constraints works in case studies of particular sports.

The kind of theory I am proposing here is, of course, not without important antecedents in the philosophy of sport. In fact, two core elements of game playing singled out by Bernard Suits in his “The Elements of Sport” are consistent with aspects of a constraint theory of sport. Specifically, constraint theory shares with Suits a conception of the rules of sport as constitutive rules. It also shares with Suits a general sense that game playing entails that game players adopt a certain attitude *qua* game players toward those rules—or what Suits helpfully describes as “the lusory attitude.” Athletes can be defined, at least in part, as individuals who take up a lusory attitude *vis-à-vis* constitutive rules: They choose their constraints or knowingly accept constitutive rules “just so the activity made possible by such acceptance can occur” (16: p. 11).

Yet, a constraint theory of sport is not merely an attempt to define the conditions of the possibility of game playing. It is also an attempt to explain the conditions and actions of game playing that make for skill-maximized game-playing endeavors. For athletes are, on this account, not merely game players but also skilled constraint maximizers. In this respect constraint theory addresses a central element of sport as game playing that Suits leaves largely unexamined. In particular, a constraint theory of sport provides an explanation of what Suits calls, somewhat misleadingly, “rules of skill” (16: p. 9). From the perspective of the constraint theory of sport, such “rules,” which for Suits are expressed in an injunction such as “keep your eye on the ball” (16: p. 9), are not really rules at all. Rather, they are those skill-maximizing embedded actions that result from choices within constraints and constrainters’ constraints and characteristically make for better or worse athletic undertakings.

Now, admittedly, in “The Elements of Sport” Suits makes clear that his purpose “is to define not well-played games, but games” (16: p. 10). Constraint theory should thus be viewed as a supplement to rather than a critique of Suits’s work. That supplement could be summarized as follows: The function of the lusory attitude (choice of constraints) adopted by athletes is not merely to make game playing possible but also to make for well-played games by enabling choices within those constraints that maximize individual creativity and skill.

3. A Constraint Theory of Boxing

From a distance, the sport of boxing would appear an unlikely candidate for constraint theorizing. Indeed, pugilism typically conjures up images of human

action far more Hobbesian than Elsterian. In boxing it is not the rationality of constrained maximization but rather an unbound state of nature that appears to prevail. The boxing ring is frequently alluded to as a kind of observable site of raw egoism in which the virtues of force and fraud and the war of all against all appear in miniaturized form. Boxing, it is often argued, “makes violence central” (15: p. 355) and entails a mean-spiritedness that is morally unintelligible (2).

Sports announcers, popular media, and often boxers themselves do much to provoke this image of boxing as a sport where vicious human actors engage in violent and harmful physical conflict. Ringside commentators and “experts” commonly describe boxing matches as “street fights” or “brawls,” and boxers as “street fighters” or “brawlers.” The 1974 heavyweight championship fight in Zaire between Muhammad Ali and George Foreman was called the Rumble in the Jungle; an episode of the popular American television series, *CSI*, opens with a boxing ring as a crime scene in which a professional boxer has been murdered in the course of a bout; and the popular *Rocky* film series presents the ring death of one of its lead protagonists as nothing less than a murder to be avenged in a future match. To this short list we could easily add Mike Tyson’s (and others’) wild ring antics or the desire that “Iron Mike” once expressed at a prefight press conference to eat the children of heavyweight champion Lennox Lewis.

The apparent irrationality and viciousness of boxing and of some boxers is often conjured in such images and sound bites. But these images and sound bites badly obscure the elaborate matrix of choices and constraints in which boxers act as rational practitioners of their chosen athletic genre. For rumbles and street fights are forms of human action by definition devoid of rationally chosen constraints. Actors engaged in such actions are limited only by the arbitrary motivations of their own emotions, the emotions or threats of others, circumstances, or some combination thereof. In this sense, then, rumbles and street fights are paradigmatic of rationally unbound action. They lack, precisely, the bounds of rational choices designed to maximize creativity and skill that define and make possible athletic endeavors as such.

In boxing, by contrast, one seeks to restrict choice in ways that enable creativity and skill maximization. The fact that in so many prizefights individual boxers fail to achieve constrained maximization is not the result of an absence of constraints. Instead, I want to argue here that such failures are primarily the result of the suboptimal soft constraints constitutive of prizefighting. Indeed, to see why both amateur and professional prizefighting suffer from suboptimal constraints we need only to consider here a few of the many soft constraints of each and the kinds of choices within constraints they enable.

The choice boxers make to pursue their sport as amateurs or to “go pro” is one of the most basic choices of constraints that they can make. The choice is based on a wide variety of factors—including, for example, the hard constraint of age (professionals must be at least 18 years of age; amateurs cannot be over the age of 35)—and establishes the framework of constraints within which boxers seek to maximize their skill levels. As amateurs, boxers compete as part of a team in tournaments and bouts where, among many others, the following soft constraints are constitutive of the sport:

- Five-round bouts, 2 minutes per round, 1-minute rest between rounds.
- Computerized scoring by points—judges press a button every time they believe

a legal blow has been landed; when three or more of the five judges press this button within 1 second of each other, the blow counts as a point for the boxer who lands it.

- Mandatory protective headgear.
- Opponents randomly assigned within designated weight classes by tournament organizers on the day of the match.¹⁰

In professional prizefighting there are no teams or tournaments in the amateur sense. Rather, individual boxers fight on a “card” or previously arranged program of several bouts leading up to a main event. Some of the soft constraints constitutive of professional boxing include

- Up to 12-round bouts, 3 minutes per round, 1-minute rest between rounds.
- Individualized scoring by rounds—known as the “10-point must system,” in which each of three judges awards 10 points to the boxer who in the particular judge’s eyes wins the round; 9 points or less can be awarded to the loser of each round.
- No protective headgear allowed.
- Opponents preselected within designated weight classes by promoters in consultation with boxers and their trainers and set by a “matchmaker.”¹¹

Even a cursory glance at these two much-abbreviated lists of soft constraints suggests the high potential for failure to achieve constrained maximization in the sport of boxing. Let me consider the soft constraints of amateur boxing first.

With its 2-minute rounds and scoring by points, amateur boxing fosters a kind of “more is more” approach among boxers. Indeed, in amateur bouts boxers typically throw many more punches than their professional counterparts in a hurried attempt to score points during the short duration of the rounds and the match. The wearing of headgear only exacerbates this “more is more” approach. It enlarges the size of the target, emboldens boxers to lower their guard and rush their opponents, and dramatically increases the number of punches aimed at the head. What results in amateur boxing matches is, thus, frequently no more than 10 minutes worth of wild flurries of punches targeting an opponent’s headgear.¹² In this way, attempts at point-scoring headshots are maximized, while creativity and skill in producing complex punch combinations that include head and body blows are minimized.¹³ Minimized, as well, in amateur boxing is a boxer’s cultivation of “ringmanship”—the practical skills needed to maneuver oneself and one’s opponent around the ring in a fluid fashion.

Moreover, the randomization of matchmaking in amateur boxing, although obviously designed to promote fairness, means in fact that the ring experience of individual boxers is discounted entirely. A seasoned veteran of 30 or more competitive bouts can “draw” an opponent making his or her amateur debut. For these and the aforementioned reasons, the soft constraints of amateur boxing almost always produce suboptimized individual athletic endeavors. In short, from the vantage point of constraint theory, the length of rounds and bouts, the point method of scoring, the wearing of protective headgear, and the randomization of matchmaking in amateur boxing are simply too tight to produce constrained maximization with any kind of consistency.¹⁴

In professional boxing soft constraints are also wont to produce suboptimal athletic endeavors, but for opposite reasons. Longer rounds with longer bouts, round scoring, and the absence of headgear tend to promote a style in which boxers do little other than seek to land a “big blow” or knockout punch. A telling example of this kind of suboptimization can be seen in the so-called rope-a-dope method invented and popularized by Muhammad Ali during the middle and late years of his professional career. Such a style—in which a boxer leans against the ropes with guard up, enduring round after round of blows in hopes that the opponent will eventually exhaust himself or herself and become easy prey to a knockout punch in later rounds—may, at times, be an effective way to win a professional boxing match. But this amounts to the victory of suboptimal constraints that foster artless inaction, not constrained maximization.

To clarify the observation being made here, consider the following counterfactual example. Imagine that the rules defining victory in singles tennis matches required winning 8 of 15 possible sets. One can readily conceive of the emergence of a kind of rope-a-dope strategy under such soft constraints: A player could opt to allow his or her counterpart to win the first seven sets in the hope that the opponent will exhaust himself or herself and be easily defeated in the remaining eight sets. But such a strategy, like Ali’s rope-a-dope style, would only serve to highlight the suboptimal character of the sport’s rules and the artless choices and inaction enabled by those rules. From the perspective of sport as constrained maximization, the antidote to rope-a-dope strategies in professional boxing is to tighten that sport’s constraints by shortening the overall length of the contests, requiring that each boxer throw a minimum number of punches per round, and establishing an upper limit on the number of clean punches that can be landed on an opponent in any given round before triggering the automatic stoppage of a bout.

In addition, while the randomization of matchmaking in amateur boxing too tightly constrains opponent selection, the nearly complete freedom to choose one’s opponents in professional boxing is far too unconstrained.¹⁵ Indeed, matchmaking in professional boxing often amounts to little more than fixing bouts between “contenders” and the “club fighters” and “journeymen” preselected for them to defeat. In this and the other ways mentioned previously, the soft constraints of professional boxing are simply too loose.

Given the tightness of the constraints of amateur boxing and the looseness of those of professional boxing, it is not surprising that boxers spar far more eagerly and more often than they compete in tournaments and on cards.¹⁶ For with its rich potential for optimizing constraints, sparring is a crucial but rarely examined subgenre of boxing in which optimal tightness of bounds and constrained maximization are more readily achieved. Unlike amateur and professional competitive matches, sparring is, at least from the perspective of constraint theory, unique in three important respects.¹⁷

First, the soft constraints of sparring are flexible and can be manipulated, modified, and even added or subtracted by a well-chosen constrainer (coach) to help foster individual attempts at constrained maximization and the preservation of mutual equilibrium during a sparring session. In sparring, constraints and choices interact. Individual boxers are obliged, deliberately, to incorporate modified or additional soft constraints—such as doubling up jabs or throwing only body shots

for a set number of rounds—into their schemes of actions. Failure (as well as success) in doing so in the course of a sparring session can lead to the imposition of additional or different constraints by a constrainer.¹⁸

Second, the choice of a sparring counterpart is neither random nor preselected with the consent of the individual boxer, but chosen instead by the constrainer based on boxers available on designated sparring days and the specific working objectives of the sparring session. And given the flexibility of soft constraints in sparring, pros and amateurs, women and men, heavyweights and middleweights can be paired without undermining the possibility of achieving constrained maximization; indeed, under the trained eye of a good constrainer, such seemingly odd pairings can actually further enable the cultivation of creativity and skill among individual boxers.

Third, and finally, sparring entails what Elster calls “mutual self-binding” (4: p. 277). In sparring sessions, individuals also engage in a form of shared cooperative action and practical improvisation designed to instruct one another in mutually beneficial ways, such as when boxers reflexively “correct” one another’s mistakes with controlled well-placed blows.¹⁹ In sparring, mutual self-binding fosters a distinct kind of reflexive social cooperation and creativity in which attempts at constrained maximization are often optimized.

4. Conclusion

In this essay I have drawn on the work of Jon Elster to try to introduce a constraint theory of sport. The overarching thesis of that theory is that competitive sport is primarily an endeavor to maximize skills within the constraints of a chosen athletic genre. Following Elster, I called such an endeavor an attempt at “constrained maximization.” I then went on to acknowledge that my account shares with Suits’s work a conception of constitutive rules and the importance of the “lusory attitude” for athletic endeavors. But I also sought to show how a constraint theory of sport supplements Suits’s discussion of rules of skill and the function of the lusory attitude in important ways. I argued that conceptualizing athletes as constraint maximizers not only illuminates what it means to play a game but also sheds light on how skilled excellence in game playing is realized. The function of the lusory attitude (choice of constraints) adopted by athletes is not merely to make game playing possible but also to make for well-played games by enabling choices within those constraints that maximize individual creativity and skill.

From there I considered boxing as a case study for a constraint theory of sport, examining the nature of constitutive rules, or soft constraints, and some of the choices enabled within the constraints characteristic of pugilism. Under constraint theoretical analysis, it was revealed that boxing, despite popular stereotypes, does not suffer from an absence of constraints but, rather, from suboptimal constraints in both its amateur and professional versions. I then went on to show that, from the perspective of constraint theory, it is in sparring—where the constraints of a chosen constrainer play a vital role—that an optimal tightness of bounds and constrained maximization are most readily realized in the sport of boxing.

I began this essay by suggesting that a third alternative to the functionalist and moralist discussions of pugilism can be found in a constraint theory of boxing. In closing, let me anticipate two likely objections to that alternative.

A functionalist-inspired critique might direct its attention to the presupposition of voluntary choice on which a constraint theory of sport appears to be based. It would insist that a constraint theory of boxing, and constraint theory more generally, is sociologically naïve. For the notion of voluntary “choice” on which constraint theory depends assumes a kind of abstract autonomy that is nowhere to be found in the material life of everyday agents, especially those who “choose” to become boxers.

A moralist critique of constraint theory might also focus on the issue of voluntary choice, but its criticism would likely move in the opposite direction. That is to say that it would grant that constraint maximizers in general, and boxers in particular, are indeed pursuing their individual goals with relative autonomy. But it would maintain that the ends realized in such a pursuit have no value or are, at least in the case of boxing, legitimated and sanctioned in ways that are morally forbidden in other sports and everyday life. The argument, in other words, would be that intentionally striking others in vicious attempts to harm them is, in fact, morally decisive for criticizing what boxers voluntarily choose to do.²⁰

One rejoinder to the functionalist would be to argue that it is a mistake to overburden what Elster calls the first “filtering device” of human action. A strong holism of this sort unjustifiably privileges and makes determinate the initial filtering (constraint) mechanism of human action. In so doing, it reifies structural constraints at the expense of individual choice, creativity, and autonomy.²¹ It also obfuscates the attitude of the individual constraint maximizer, as well as the nature and function of soft constraints (or constitutive rules) in sports. A constraint theory of sport can readily accommodate the intuition that choosing to pursue constrained maximization as a boxer, rather than as, say, a golfer or bowler, is never merely the result of disembodied preferences. Yet, it can do so without degrading boxers (or golfers or bowlers) to mere bearers of structural forces. Like all other human actors, boxers are embedded agents. This means that they reflexively choose their constraints not from a set of abstractly possible courses of action but, rather, from a feasible subset thereof. As we have seen, in pugilism it is not individual irrationality or the holistic power of structural constraints but, rather, soft constraints—the constitutive rules of amateur and professional boxing—that make constrained maximization in the sport so difficult to achieve.

An immediate response to the moralist is somewhat more difficult for constraint theory to formulate. Evaluating the moral merits or demerits of boxing, or any other sport, for that matter, is not something a constraint theory of sport is designed to accomplish. Yet, the constraint theory of boxing developed here does provide some basis for speculation. For example, one could begin to examine more closely the cooperative ethos cultivated in sparring. Part of what the constraint-theoretical analysis of sparring in this essay has made explicit is that one spars with a partner, not an opponent. What this suggests is that the mutual self-binding of sparring fosters not viciousness and violence but a unique kind of sociability—a form of reflexive social cooperation not without potential moral value. Further constraint-theoretical discussions of sparring in a boxing gym would need to analyze more fully the sociability of sparring to ascertain whether there is, in fact, something akin to a moral grammar at work in one of boxers’ most common but least studied activities.

One other lingering question about constraint theory should, at least, be considered here by way of conclusion. That question is a methodological one. How generalizable is a constraint theory of sport? The types of sports examined in this essay have all been individual, head-to-head competitive sports. No reference to team sports has been made. Does such selectivity reveal theoretical weaknesses and empirical shortcomings? The open methodological question, in other words, concerns the applicability of a constraint theory of sport to athletic endeavors involving “we” concepts such as teams, squads, and crews. The answer to such a question lies in future attempts to refine and apply the constraint theory of sport introduced here.²²

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For Coach Edgar and all the fellas at Authentic Boxing Club, Kansas City, Missouri (USA).

Notes

1. For a useful summary of the philosophical foundations of these positions, see (13) and (15). See also (10) and (17), where it is argued that “professional boxing is a throwback, a vestige of our dark, irrational past” (17: p. 185). Most notable in this vein is (2), which eschews arguments about a legislative ban on boxing in an attempt to demonstrate that the central ethical problem in boxing resides in the fact that the “essential nature of boxing . . . finds no moral sanction in the rest of life” (2: p. 61). The normative argument here is that the sport of boxing should not be morally countenanced.

2. See, for example, (11) and (12).

3. Of course, in stopping their ears Ulysses also forces his crew to be bound. The forced binding of others is an explicit theme of Elster’s analysis of politics and constitution making (4) but beyond the narrow scope of the present inquiry.

4. In fact, Elster develops a more elaborate typology of constraints than I, for reasons of space and immediate relevance, shall consider here.

5. This distinction between constitutive and regulative rules is, in my view, most fully elaborated in (14). It also has directly relevant antecedents in Suits’s work (16) in the philosophy of sport. I shall consider Suits’s work briefly at the close of this section.

6. As Keating (6) unfairly suggests in the following passage,

In essence, play has for its direct and immediate end joy, pleasure, and delight which is dominated by a spirit of moderation and generosity. Athletics, on the other hand, is essentially competitive activity, which has for its end victory in the contest and which is characterized by a spirit of dedication, sacrifice, and intensity. (6: p. 43–44)

7. Of course the goals of utility maximization and “pleasure maximization” can coincide in individual “player-athletes.” As Feezell (5) points out in his objections to Keating, surely some athletes manage to fuse the pleasurable spirit of play and the winning spirit of competition. Their “purpose is to win the contest *and* to experience the playful and aesthetic delights of the experience” (5: p. 89). But even here, such a complex, often contradictory set of purposes is not without deep tensions, as anyone who has played a game of pickup basketball against an elite former college ball player soon discovers.

8. Clearly, there are obvious exceptions to this generalization. Snowboarding, for example, is a case where a new athletic genre—a new set of constitutive constraints—was created by athletes. But such an exception, which is itself parasitic on existing constraints in the sport of skiing, does not undermine the central thesis being advanced here. New constraints are simply the introduction of a different *set* of constitutive soft constraints.

9. Various artists also have “coaches” of a sort. Classical singers often have voice coaches, for example. To the extent that voice coaches are routinely used explicitly *as* constrainters in the ways that one finds coaches used in most sports, singing may also be a rich domain for the application of constraint theory.

10. This incomplete list is meant to be indicative. The rules of amateur boxing in the United States are available online at www.usaboxing.org/1068.htm

11. For an intriguing discussion of matchmaking in professional boxing, see (18).

12. Here we should also add what experienced boxers already know, namely, that headgear is mostly “for show.” That is to say that headgear primarily protects boxers from cuts and accidental clashes of heads (“head butts”). Consequently, while amateurs are rarely cut, they almost always take more blows to the head than professional boxers do. A great many professional bouts are stopped as the result of cuts and severe bleeding, but mandatory headgear in amateur boxing makes such stoppages virtually impossible. Hence, calls for reforms in professional boxing that insist on mandatory headgear are largely misplaced and could in fact have effects directly contrary to the ones sought by headgear advocates. To be sure, requiring headgear in professional boxing would make the sport less bloody, but it could also contribute to an increase in injuries resulting in long-term brain damage.

13. In fact, one of the unfortunate hallmarks of amateur boxing is the dearth of punches aimed at the body (“body shots”).

14. In the boxing world it is well known that a good amateur boxing career is a relatively poor indicator of a successful professional career. Indeed, often the opposite is the case: Too much time spent at the amateur level can actually hamper a boxer’s skill development. The decision to turn professional is, thus, often not merely a choice to change constraints but, as we shall see, to choose a less restrictive set of constraints. The other motivating factor to turn professional is money. Most average professional boxers are not paid well enough to make a living by boxing. The typical wage is \$100–150 per round, with a coach/trainer taking 40% of a fighter’s gross earnings. But pro boxers do regularly use boxing as a source of supplemental income. In this regard pro boxing is, from the perspective of its practitioners, both a sport and a second job. Those interested in reforming pro boxing would do well to attend to the proletarian character of professional boxing and advocate unionization and the kinds of comprehensive pension plans common in many other blue-collar professions.

15. There are such things as “mandatory defense” fights in boxing, wherein a champion must eventually agree to fight a top-ranked contender. But these can be almost endlessly delayed, and division champions can, in fact, refuse such fights if they are willing to surrender their titles.

16. Though anecdotal, I can say that in 3-plus years as a member of an urban boxing club, I have seen many boxers decline to fight in a prospective match but have not once seen a boxer refuse to spar.

17. In what follows, I draw on my own experience, as well as the rich ethnography of the “social logic” of sparring in (19). A related discussion of sparring can be found in (8).

18. In my experience, individuals who fail to incorporate a coach’s constraints into their sparring sessions, either as a result of poor temper or the desire to “get off” (land heavy blows), are routinely refused the privilege of sparring and tend to give up boxing rather quickly.

19. Thus, a “cooperative informal order” (1) is established.

20. Such is the argument advanced in (2).
21. Elsewhere in my work in the philosophy of action (9) and the philosophy of social science (7) I have developed such arguments in some detail.
22. For helpful comments on an earlier draft of this essay, I am indebted to the anonymous reviewers for and the editor of the *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*. Thanks also to all those who responded to a much-abbreviated version of this paper presented at the International Association for the Philosophy of Sport's group session held at the 2006 Eastern Division American Philosophical Association Annual Meeting.

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