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TEAMWORK AS REFLEXIVE SOCIAL COOPERATION

Joseph D. Lewandowski

In this response to Paul Gaffney's "The Nature and Meaning of Teamwork," I draw on recent work in analytic social philosophy to provide a more robust vocabulary for understanding teamwork as a distinctly social fact. I argue that teamwork entails complex reflexive social cooperation aimed at achieving shared excellence within constraints of various kinds.

KEYWORDS reflexivity; social cooperation; social fact; teamwork

The great German philosopher Theodor Adorno once famously lamented that the problem with the philosophy of art was too much philosophy, and too little art. One could make a similar comment about some work in the philosophy of sport – though not, to be sure, in the case of Professor Gaffney's engaging reflections on the nature and meaning of teamwork in contemporary sport. Indeed, his wide-ranging paper is notable both for its concrete examples and the ways in which those examples helpfully address a number of important issues regarding the practical, moral, and aesthetic significance of sport teamwork, such as how teams are constituted, what moral obligations might bind teammates together, and the extent to which the aesthetic value of teamwork is akin to that of artwork. Yet to my mind, the most provocative elements of Gaffney's analysis emerge when he considers the *social* dimensions and functions of teamwork, and concludes by suggesting that teamwork offers individuals the feeling of belonging (p. 21) and an outlet through which to become 'fully human' (p. 20). Thus it is Gaffney's thinking about what I would describe as the *social ontology of teamwork* that I should like to consider, however briefly, in what follows.

I shall begin my response by drawing on recent work in analytic social philosophy to provide a somewhat different and more robust vocabulary for

understanding teamwork as a distinctly 'social fact'. From there I shall try to define and make explicit the complex nature and functioning of reflexivity in competitive team sports. To anticipate my argument for a moment: on my account, what makes teamwork *work* (in the sense of laborious and effective) is that it entails complex reflexive social cooperation aimed at achieving shared excellence within constraints of various kinds.

References to the existence and functioning of phenomena deemed 'social' are characteristic of numerous inquiries in the social sciences, philosophy, and, indeed, everyday life. The being of facts as diverse as classes, groups, movements, institutions, associations, structures, and teamwork are, among many others, consistently singled out as paradigmatic examples of inherently social entities. But what, precisely, makes something such as teamwork in sport a 'social' fact? More generally, how best, from the standpoint of the philosophy of sport, to develop an adequate social ontology of teamwork?

In the context of the current discussion, a useful answer to that question can be found in Margaret Gilbert's *On Social Facts*, a philosophical rehabilitation of Emile Durkheim's work on social facts (*faits sociaux*). As is well-known, for Durkheim social facts constituted external (or objectively 'given') and mutually shared constraints on human ways of thinking and doing. Casting his account of social facts in starkly coercive terms as shared inculcated norms, Durkheim maintained that, with the exception of brave innovators, human beings could no more chose the design of their houses than the cut of their clothes (1982, 58). Inspired by Durkheim, but also moving well beyond him in incorporating a philosophically robust and decidedly less deterministic account of human action, Gilbert argues that social facts are 'plural subject phenomena' (1989, 222–225). For Gilbert, plural subjects are those human groups that are constituted not simply by what individuals habitually do together but rather, more deeply, in *how they reflexively think of themselves as a unit*.

In fact, according to Gilbert the hallmark of social facts is that such facts share more than concrete actions or overlapping intentions. Two persons riding side-by-side in a train car may act quite similarly and clearly intend to head off in the same direction. But such actions and intentions do not sufficiently constitute them as a plural subject in Gilbert's sense. In plural subject phenomena, individuals share what Gilbert views as a 'special tie' (1989, 147) by virtue of a consciousness of a unity among them. They are not merely a collection of individuals ('I's') with related intentions and actions but rather a 'we' that is constituted by and constitutive of *cooperative* intentions and actions. Two individuals may intend to dance together, and succeed in doing so. But Gilbert's point is that it takes a genuine plural subject, or 'two', to tango, to paraphrase a well-known jazz tune. Indeed, for Gilbert social facts are properly understood as plural subject phenomena that coalesce only when individuals reflexively

dedicate themselves to incorporating the actions and intentions of others as they aim to realize shared goals and objectives of their particular 'we'.

Now, even in this admittedly coarse summary of her argument, it is not hard to see how Gilbert's thinking offers a powerful analytic framework for clarifying the social nature and functioning of teamwork in athletic competition addressed by Gaffney. Teamwork is, I would argue, best characterized as a social fact in precisely Gilbert's sense: it is a group phenomenon defined and enabled (and limited) by a shared sense of 'we' in which co-operating intentions and actions are oriented toward excelling not merely as individuals but more profoundly *as a plural subject*. That is not to say that teams have a 'collective agency' (p. 14) *per se*, as Gaffney seems at times to suggest. One of the chief merits of drawing on Gilbert's analysis here is that it allows us to eschew notions of a collective subject and a corresponding collective agency to describe teamwork in sport. Teams (and the work they do) are, in the end, undeniably made up of individuals. What is crucial to teamwork, however, is the unique way those individuals think and act – and are coached and conditioned to think and act – cooperatively *vis-à-vis* the thoughts and actions of one another. Indeed, we might even go so far as to say that coaches of team sports are in the difficult business of cultivating plural subjecthood among their individual players; I take this to be the gist of Gaffney's anecdote about his high school basketball coach's admonishment: 'You never look better individually than when you play as a member of a team'. This is not primarily an aesthetic claim about the beauty of teamwork. Rather, more prosaically, Gaffney's coach was simply enjoining his individual players to 'gel' in a way that constitutes a plural subject.

Throughout the first half of his paper, one appreciates Gaffney's steadfast rejection of any reductive psychologizing and atomistic account of teamwork in favor of a larger claim about the social character of sports teams and the role teamwork might play in the social construction of human selfhood. It is perhaps no coincidence that this commitment to elaborating the social dimensions of teamwork leads Gaffney, in the latter sections of his paper, to the social psychology of George Herbert Mead and, in particular, to Mead's notion of 'reflexivity'. Gaffney is right to see that understanding reflexivity is crucial to grasping the complex cooperative *work of teamwork*.

But Mead is not the best conceptual resource for explaining teamwork in an athletic sense. More specifically, the Meadean conception of reflexivity adopted by Gaffney, in which an individual scrutinizes himself or herself *vis-à-vis* a 'generalized other', is not adequately equipped to capture the kind of reflexivity that is characteristic of sports or teamwork in sports. In fact, and pace Mead's reference to the sport of baseball cited by Gaffney, achieving reflexivity in pursuit of excellence in sporting endeavors (both individual and team-based) is considerably more demanding than Mead's sense of reflexivity

admits. Reflexivity in sport is not geared simply to a 'generalized other', but, more fundamentally to the pursuit of excellence from within a complex and often quite varied array of enabling and limiting constraints. In fact, in team sports, plural subject ('we') thought and action is embedded in at least *four* interpenetrating contexts of constraints. And a reflexive orientation *toward each set of intertwined constraints* is crucial to achieving athletic excellence – or what I have called 'constrained maximization' (Lewandowski 2007) – in sport competition. Let me take up each of these in turn in an attempt to explain the importance of reflexivity for both individual and team sports.

In the first instance, competition in team sports, like all competitive endeavors in which excellence is the aim, entails the embedding of action within *constitutive constraints* – or what in sports we call 'rules'. Indeed, in an elementary sense, sport is, as Suits has argued, the voluntary adherence to and adoption of a 'lusory attitude' (1995) vis-à-vis constitutive rules. Flatly refusing to obey the 'three strike' rule in baseball is not simply a violation of the rules; it is ultimately a refusal to play baseball. In the absence of an elective embeddedness and maximization of effort *within* constitutive rules there is, quite simply, no sport to be played and no level of excellence to be achieved. Of course it hardly needs to be pointed out that athletes, be they engaged in individual or team sports, are always free to orient themselves to the constitutive constraints of their chosen sport in a wide variety of ways. The skillful and creative exercise of such freedom to 'play' within constraints is precisely what reflexivity means in this case. For the rules of sport do not simply limit what can be done. They also enable reflexive choices and improvisational actions aimed at maximization within the constraints of a particular sport.

Of course athletic endeavors are never simply a matter of reflexivity with regard to constitutive constraints. Competition in sport, be it team or individual, also requires a reflexive orientation with regard to the official interpreters of a given sport's constitutive constraints. Referees, umpires, judges, and so on thus create the second context of constraints – call them '*official interpretive constraints*' – in which athletic action is embedded. Here we need only consider the sophisticated kind of reflexivity required to apprehend the 'strike zone' in baseball. As every baseball player comes to learn early on in his career, while objectively defined and thus a constitutive constraint that enables the game of baseball to be played, the 'strike zone' is in fact a relatively free floating area subject to each plate umpire's authoritative interpretation. Thus it is never enough for a good hitter (or pitcher, for that matter) to simply adhere to and play skillfully within objectively pre-given rules that define a strike zone. Good hitters (and pitchers) must continuously reflexively monitor and adjust their actions to a particular umpire's practical interpretation of that zone. In this way, a hitter or pitcher in baseball must take up reflexive orientation not

only to the rules of baseball but also to the authoritative (if quite variable) enforcement of those rules by officials.

There is still another, even more fluid, set of constraints in which these first two are enmeshed. In competitive sport, reflexivity vis-à-vis constitutive rules and the authoritative interpretations of those rules by officials of various kinds must be coupled with reflexivity with regard to the *constraining actions of opponents*. Indeed, maximizing one's efforts and skill as an athlete engaged in an individual or team sport entails continual reflexive orientation to the limiting and enabling counter-actions of one's opponents. The sport adage that 'the best defense is a good offense' captures some of the kind of reflexive orientation this third context of constraints demands. In every sport, a good counter-attack is never willy-nilly. Rather, it is a way of acting reflexively in the context of the actions of others expressly interested in thwarting one's own efforts. In this sense the familiar coach's injunction to 'take what your opponent gives you' goes some way toward describing the prevalence of this uniquely reflexive oppositional orientation. In both individual and team sport the ability to make explicit and counter the embedded actions of those who oppose you from within constitutive rules and the authoritative but variable enforcement of those rules is essential.

Now, in team sport, individuals and their athletic efforts are clearly embedded in all three sets of constraints identified above (constitutive, interpretive, oppositional), as well as the '*we*' constraints of their given team. The social cooperation required in sport teamwork makes manifest yet another dimension of constraints, and demands yet another level of reflexivity. Here perhaps the simple contrast between singles and doubles tennis should suffice. A singles player must, to achieve excellence on the court, cultivate reflexivity vis-à-vis the three sets of constraints identified above. She must, that is to say, reflexively aim to maximize her play within the constitutive rules of tennis; she must continually monitor and reflexively adjust her play as needed to the authoritative (if variable) enforcement of those rules by umpires and line judges; and she must reflexively incorporate her opponent's actions into the schemes of her own play. Doubles players, however, have the added challenge of engaging in reflexive social cooperation *with one another* as well. They carry the reflexive burden, as it were, of playing as a '*we*'. Achieving genuine excellence in sport teamwork is thus, or so one could argue from the standpoint the constraint theory outlined here, the most reflexively exacting of athletic endeavors.

Here it is worth adding that, while his references to Mead do not do justice to the complexity of reflexivity in team sport, Gaffney is nevertheless right to highlight how the cooperative and competitive dimensions of teamwork are often entangled (p.15). This is the case even in non-team sports, where teamwork, understood as reflexive social cooperation, is necessarily

cooperative *and* antagonistic. Consider an individual sport such as boxing. In such a non-team sport, reflexive social cooperation is crucial to the successful preparation and training of athletes. In boxing, the absence of a plural subject quickly turns sparring sessions into fights. Boxers who are unable to learn how to engage in the demanding form of reflexive social cooperation required for sparring are typically denied the privilege of sparring, and their skill levels suffer accordingly. The point to be amplified is that teamwork is essential not merely in team sports but also in individual sports where reflexive social cooperation is decisive for optimizing skill levels and achieving excellence in competition.

In closing let me sum up what I have tried to say here and add a final observation about Gaffney's reference to teamwork and human sociality. In fleshing out Gaffney's provocative claims, I have sought to clarify some of the basic terms of his argument by introducing a more analytically robust vocabulary for thinking about teamwork. Drawing on the work of Margaret Gilbert, I maintained that teamwork in competitive sport is a highly reflexive form of embedded plural subjecthood. Teamwork, I argued, *is work* precisely because constituting a 'we' and achieving excellence in 'we' athletic pursuits entails complex forms of reflexivity that Gaffney's reliance on Mead does not adequately capture. Put bluntly: my argument has been that a proper understanding of reflexivity in sport is crucial to the development of a social ontology of teamwork.

Gaffney's closing comments about the degree to which participation in team sport should be connected to becoming 'fully human' strike me as a related but separate question in need of further exploration. For while teamwork in sport is an ineluctably social phenomenon, the larger normative claim about participation in team sport as an avenue for the achievement of a 'fully human' self and as the realization of a 'basic human need to take one's place within some group or larger community' (p. 21) is less readily defended. Teamwork in competitive sport is reflexive social cooperation in the pursuit of shared excellence within constraints. But the extent to which such teamwork also serves as a self-actualizing exercise in community building and belonging requires further analysis. It is thanks to Professor Gaffney's thinking about teamwork in sport that the groundwork for that discussion is now more firmly established.

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