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## The Ethical Turn on the Sports Field *Spor Sahasında Etik Dönüş*

### Abstract

The assumption of sports being a natural and fair competition area has been challenged by scholars and athlete-activists in the last decades. This article, focusing on three periods in the history of –the agones in Ancient Greece, the birth and early development of modern sports, and contemporary sports relation– offers a brief historical analysis of how fairness has been conceptualized in different ways throughout the centuries. By doing that, it sheds light on the changes in the (self-)making of sporting moral subject over time. Drawing upon the broader anthropological debates which problematize the objectivity and neutrality claims of ethics, the article calls for a non-normative and contextualized approach to ethics within the sports field so that we may reach a better understanding of how sporting moral subjects navigate, negotiate, and challenge the existing ethical codes of behavior in modern sports.

### Öz

Sporun doğal ve adil bir rekabet alanı olduğu varsayımı, son yıllarda aktivist sporcular ve sosyal bilimciler tarafından sorgulanmıştır. Bu makale, Antik Yunan'daki yarışmalara (agon), modern sporun başlangıcına ve günümüz spor ilişkilerine odaklanarak sporcu etik öznenin (öz-)inşasında zaman içerisinde yaşanan dönüşümlere ışık tutmaktadır. Etiğin nesnellik ve tarafsızlık iddialarını sorunsallaştıran antropolojik tartışmalardan yararlanan makale, spor ve etik ilişkisine normatif olmayan ve bağlamı dikkate alan bir yaklaşım çağrısında bulunmaktadır. Bu sayede, sporcu etik öznenin modern sporda var olan etik davranış kodlarıyla ne tür müzakereler ve meydan okumalar yoluyla ilişkilendiğine dair kavrayışımızı geliştirebileceğimiz savunulmaktadır.

### Keywords

Ethics, sports, anthropology, morality, fair play

### Anahtar Kelimeler

Etik, spor, antropoloji, ahlak, fair play

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## Introduction

Sociological and anthropological approaches treat sports as a constructed and dynamic social field and allow us to challenge the definition of sports as an area of fair competition. The encounter between sports and social sciences is an exciting and enriching one since the sports field is one of the few areas where considerably contradictory experiences “such as playfulness and seriousness, leisure and work, individualism and collectivism, pleasure and violence, hierarchy and equality, morality and corruption” are fused (Besnier, Brownell, & Carter, 2018, p. 1). A close and critical engagement with this encounter is useful to revisit key binaries and foundational premises in the field of sports. While this encounter allows us to question the claim of fairness in sports, scholarly inquiry should go beyond merely pointing that the sports field is not a domain of natural and fair competition.

This article offers a brief analysis of how the moral framework of physical competition has been transformed throughout history. Three significant historical periods that help me demonstrate this transformation lucidly are the agones in Ancient Greece, the birth and early development of modern sports, and contemporary sports relations. Rather than discussing these historical periods in thorough detail, this article focuses on the potential contributions of debates through the ethical turn on our understanding of morality on the sports field. By focusing on the changes in our understanding of what is moral in the sports field and the ways in which fairness is achieved or maintained, the article makes a preliminary attempt to contribute to the broader anthropological debates on the relationship between ethics and normativity from the perspective of the sports field. I firstly present a brief review of the theoretical debates on ethics in the field of anthropology. Then I offer brief analyses of the moral framework in physical competitions with the help of three focal points mentioned above. Finally, I locate the “ethics in sports” debate within the terrain of anthropology and pose several questions by drawing upon the contributions made by the ethical turn in anthropology.

## The Ethical Turn

Ethics/morality is not a recent interest in ethnography and anthropology. While anthropologists engaged with morality since the early days of the discipline, the concept itself was mostly taken for granted; “not explained, depicted, or analysed” (Edel, 1962, as cited in Klenk, 2019, p. 333). Klenk (2019) states that the attempts in that direction have remained sporadic<sup>1</sup>. Mattingly and Throop (2018, p.476) claim that “the foundations of the field were clearly shaped by theoretical and ethnographic engagements with ethical dimensions of social life” and give anthropological classics as early examples of this varied engagement, including the works of Malinowski (1926, 1929, 1936), Evans-Pritchard (1937), Mauss (2002 [1923-1924]), and Bateson (1936).

Ethnographic works that focused on the diverse systems of meaning, norms, and values in different societies often questioned the dominant Western understanding and set of concepts regarding ethics. There were others, however, that adopted a normative ethical relativist approach. The field has almost always been in a complex dialogue with philosophy; criticisms against the claims of rationality and objectivity were raised from within the field (Benedict, 1934; Evans-Pritchard, 1937; Mead, 1935). The field witnessed an increase in the studies that focused on moral emotions in the personal level in the 70s and the 80s (Evans, 1982; Geertz, 1973; Lutz, 1988; Mayer, 1981; Scheper-Hughes, 1989) and these works were followed in the following decade by powerful studies on ethics that closely engaged with systematic violence, trauma, and suffering (Asad, 1993; Farmer, 1992; Kleinman, 1995; Lambek, 1993; Wikan, 1989). Another anthropological debate that focused on ethics was the long-standing discussion on “how an ethnographer should position themselves vis-à-vis ethically relevant situations in the field” as Nuhrat (2020, p. 3) states by giving the works of Scheper-Hughes (1995) and Valentine (2003) as examples. However, an explicit and systematic anthropological approach to ethics has emerged only in the last two decades, and this shift has been named the ethical turn.

The ethical turn is an attempt to go beyond the comparisons between different communities with diverse systems of meanings, values, and norms. As the scholars within the discipline acknowledge, everyday experience is filled with ethical questions and these questions are not necessarily dealt by high level philosophical debates (Keane, 2016; Lambek, 2010). The ethical turn moves away from the Durkheimian paradigm, which can be roughly explained as carrying Kantian morality into the realm of social. Zigon remarks that Durkheim’s efforts to replace universal moral laws with socially constituted rules and obligations still make it difficult “to analytically separate a moral realm for study” (2007, p. 132).

According to Klenk (2019, p. 334), there are “[m]ore mundane problems, such as ordering coffee (Manning, 2008) or dressing for work (Bourgois, 2003), [that] have ethical dimensions to them, too, and they arise frequently”. Faubion (2014, p. 440) similarly claims that ethics is “among the pervasive constituents of collective life, just as constitutive as power relations or gendered relations or kinned relations or what have you.” Anthropologists, as Mattingly and Throop claim, have been engaging with ethics as a self-evident category long before the ethical turn:

“From this perspective, while the specific practices, assumptions, ideas, beliefs, values, rules, duties, and happenings deemed to have moral significance could vary quite drastically from one community to another, the enveloping category of morality or ethics itself was held to be visible and thus ethnographically traceable” (2018, p. 477).

This does not mean to discard Durkheim’s take on the constituent impact of social rules on the ethical codes of society. Rather, the ethical turn claims that human moral experiences and possibilities should be analyzed from a broader and more layered perspective (Laidlaw,

2002). Relevantly, Keane argues for a more complex framework than the naturalist and historical deterministic explanations of ethical behavior and he coins the term “ethical affordance” to refer to the possibilities for the people to “evaluate themselves, other persons, and their circumstances” in terms of ethics, of which coherence “in any given instance is construed through social process” (2016).

Having said that, it is important to note that the scholars who contributed to the ethical turn do not follow a unilinear path despite the existence of a shared critique. There are different strands within the ethical turn in terms of the ways they approach morality. According to Mattingly and Throop (2018, p. 478), “(an) ordinary language philosophy and a focus on ordinary ethics, (b) phenomenology and an emphasis on moral experience, (c) Foucauldian and neo-Aristotelian traditions of virtue ethics” are the most influential frameworks.<sup>2</sup>

Before moving to the field of sports studies, I would like to return to the anthropological debates around the ethical and the political, emphasizing how the ethical turn differs in its approach. While the ethical was initially considered equal with the “do no harm” approach in the field and “speaking truth to power” against the structural atrocities and deeply entrenched inequalities in the social life (Scheper-Hughes, 1995; Farmer, 1999), scholars of the ethical turn question the overlap between the ethical and the political that can be traced in much anthropological research and aim to reveal how morality can be mobilized by political institutions to maintain and reproduce existing power relations (Fassin, 2012; Ticktin, 2011). Mattingly and Throop (2018) state that many scholars who analyze the interplay between ethics and politics today demonstrate that the moral self-fashioning of a person is a complex phenomenon that may exceed the political positioning of the actors included (Stevenson, 2014; Das, 2007; Dave, 2012; Bialecki, 2016). As Pandian (2009, p. 224) puts it, “the making of moral subjects is a complicated and uncertain process, never easily deduced from the plans that people may fashion for their own lives or from the goals projected for them by others”.

## **Sports**

Fair play is one of the first keywords that come to mind when talking about the making of moral subjects in sports. The concept of fair play has many layers including but not limited to kindness, fairness, integrity, playing by the (written and unwritten) rules, equality of opportunity, respecting the rights of others, avoiding harsh play, and others. This makes debates around the concept also multilayered. However, until recently, the relationship between sports and ethics has been predominantly discussed within the field of philosophy. This philosophizing thrust limits conceptual debates to descriptive analyses of the institutional attempts to maintain fair play and their failures. An exclusively philosophical approach, furthermore, lacks the analytical tools that can enable us not only to problematize fair play as an ethical-political project but also detect where the sporting moral subject exceeds the limits of predetermined subject positions while still operating inside the fair play framework.

By engaging with recent anthropological debates, it is possible to problematize decades-long assumptions about fairness in sports, demonstrate how the normative definition changed throughout the years and across geographies, and expose how different communities and individuals navigate, negotiate, and challenge existing ethical codes of behavior in modern sports. The non-normative approach to ethics, as Nuhrat states, “differs from how much of sports philosophy engages with ethics, which, though not necessarily exhaustively Kantian, ultimately aims to identify the ethical (e.g., Loland 2002; Simon 2010) or assumes that there is a consensus on what is “moral” when for example considering the cultivation of ethics through sports (McNamee, Jones, and Duda 2003)” (2017, p. 30-31). In the remainder of the article, I describe the changing relationship between ethics and sports by focusing on three periods in the history of sports.

### ***Agones in Ancient Greece***

The oldest date written in Greek history is 776 BC: the year that the Olympic Games began. Pohlenz interprets the fact that the earliest recorded memory for the Hellenes is of an agonal victory as being indicative of the characteristics of the Greek culture (1962). Ethical values of this culture, for which *agon* is a core concept, are “seen as a conflict between competitive and cooperative virtues” (Murray, 1999). Whereas some scholars emphasize the non-instrumental and performative character of *agones* (Burckhardt, 1999), others oppose this idea of ‘goalless’ activity and argue that the gains and interests at play were much more complex than the common ‘idealized’ depiction of *agones* (Weiler, 1969, as cited in Katsafanas, 2018).

Greek men who participated in these contests aimed to achieve material gains which ultimately lead the winner to achieve intangibles such as fame and honor (Beidelman, 1989). The events were not merely physical contests neither for the sporting men nor for the crowd. The ideal of “*mens sana in corpore sano*” [a sound mind in a sound body] was being displayed in these popular rituals and numerous people were coming to Olympia to watch the beautiful and powerful spectacle of the ideal humanity. For the “Greek man,” as a person who lives in a community, competition with others and thus distinction from them was one of the most desirable ways of gaining recognition by his community (Pohlenz, *ibid.*).

Weiler (1969, as cited in Katsafanas, 2018) offers a realistic portrayal of the Greek *agon*: just as the fame and honor came with the victory, the defeat was followed by shame and ignominy. Brutal violence was so frequent that death was not surprising. Cunning and cheating were also typical to the Greek *agon*. This perspective warns us against anachronistic and idealized analyses that intend to implement the framework of fair play to the narrative. Dunning also states that “ancient Greek sports were based on a warrior ethos and involved traditions of honour rather than fairness” (1971, as cited in Renson, 2009, p. 6). The task of the anthropologist, however, is not limited to avoid idealized interpretations of this period; ethical turn invites us to go beyond the mere comparison of changing moral codes across temporalities.

In line with this invitation, how could an anthropological theory of ethics help us imagine a new strand within the exhaustive debate on the moral framework of athletic contests in Ancient Greece? What happens if we interrogate how the ethical choices and experiences performed during these games might have been constituent of collective life instead of interpreting the significance of physical competitions by focusing on how they indicate and reflect the inherent values of the culture (Faubion, 2014)? In which ways could the term “ethical affordance” substantiate the debate? Could zooming on field actions enable us to go beyond explanations centering on social conformity?

### ***Birth and Early Development of Modern Sports***

At the beginning of modern sports, the objective to “civilize” played a central role as sports were believed to regulate and control the expressions of violence (Jarvie and Maguire, 1994). Competitive games were included in public school curricula across the British Empire in the nineteenth century. The aim was to educate pupils on “teamwork, leadership and physical courage”, which were “the key tenets of what became known as Muscular Christianity” (Collins, 2013, p. 30). Badenhorst (1988) defines “Muscular Christianity” to be the new masculinity which prioritized discipline, mental strength, and loyalty to the team rather than physical endurance and violence. The idea of the gentleman amateur, packed with moral values, was being taught in schools.

The way Muscular Christianity was performed in sports became “a means to realizing what was seen as an ideal masculine, moral and Christian upbringing” (Loland, 2001, p. 13). The formal norm that combines muscular self-assertion and self-control through a set of rules was called “fair play.” The term could be found even on the first sports journal of the world, *The Sporting Magazine*, that started publishing in 1792 in Britain. Muscular Christianity, for Besnier (2014, p. 435), was a significantly effective idea “in the early globalization of sports, [...] which sought either to virilize colonial subjects that they considered “degenerate” or, alternatively, to bring the “excessive” masculinity of others under colonial control”. To invalidate other masculinities and to define how to be masculine in the right way, sports was a useful tool since for the Muscular Christians, sports “had an intrinsic meaning and message that transcended mere play” (Collins, 2013, p. 30).

As one needs caution against anachronistic and idealized explanations of Greek agones by contemporary concepts, so should researchers rethink the story of modern sports’ origins. Adrian Harvey points to a misrepresentation in sports history in asserting that, contrary to popular belief, early ball games were sophisticated although they are often misrepresented as barbaric caricatures. Harvey goes on to claim that the adoption of barbaric representation of pre-modern games by later historians stems from two reasons: “lack of information on the popularly played football games in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries” and adherence to “underlying developmental theories in which society gradually became more sophisticated” (2005, p. 229-30).

This period is one of the most studied topics in the nexus of sports and social sciences for its significance in early modern society. Differentiating modern sports from the past (and non-modern) forms of play, establishing as well as standardizing formal rules, and the making of the new moral sporting subject were all tasks that required a process of normative knowledge production. Physical education in public schools have been crucial in the production of knowledge on ethics (fair play) as well as the production of the new hegemonic masculinity.

Such emphasis on the construction of a new ideal, however, might carry the risk of obscuring alternative ethical constitutions. The modern political repertoire has always been open to non-normative interplays between the ethical and the political. For instance, equality, as a core value of modernity, was considered among the seven fundamental characteristics of modern sports (Guttmann, 1978). However, it was also adopted by sporting women who were largely excluded from the promises of modern sports and struggled for equal rights and opportunities (Ferez, Ruffié, and Héas, 2017). By focusing excessively on one single formulation of sports ethics in the early period of modern sports, one might miss out the non-normative formulations that are offered by the ever-present struggles of the marginalized bodies. What other non-normative ethical-political formulations could be revealed by questioning the existing historical narratives on curricular fair play? Which alternative perspectives and methods would an anthropology of ethics offer us, for instance, to investigate the practices of everyday masculinity?

In his pivotal essay, Beidelman (1989) explores the social world of “Homeric Greek” by focusing on the classical works of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* using a social anthropological framework. He recounts Odysseus defeating the Cyclops by cunning with an emphasis on the Cyclops’s response that he did not expect the defeat would come from “such a puny one as Odysseus” (ibid., 247). The Cyclops, who did not need and thus lacked cunning, misevaluated the relation between the physical appearance and the real power. What novel perspective could this already intensively analyzed illustration offer us when we carry it to the contemporary debates on playing tricks such as tackling and “diving” and using supportive material, including performance-enhancing drugs and technologically advanced equipment (Simon, Torres, & Hager, 2015), in physical competitions? Considering entrenched inequalities in a broader sense, is it not too simplistic to lump them all under unfairly obtained advantage? Are there occasions when what seems unfair advantage might work to level the playing field?

### **Contemporary Sports Relations**

Standardization of rules in the birth of modern sports was synchronous with the commercialization of sports. Collins argues that modern sports was not an effect of the expansion of capitalism but “an integral part of that expansion, not only in the economic organization but also in ideological meaning” and adds that “modern sports was capitalism at play” (2013, p. 5). As

the politico-economic structure of the world changed, sports relations adapted to this transformation. The moral framework of the field was not an exception. The contemporary professional sports field differs from the agones of Ancient Greece, where the result of athletic contests was crucial in the establishment of one's social self as well as the assessment of one's value in the eyes of others. Anthropology of ethics could provide us with new tools to interrogate the change not only of the values of the game but also of the athletes. Is it possible to claim that professional sports today is still a social phenomenon or has the world of sports completely transformed into a marketplace? Can a professional sports field function as a public arena? What are the commercial limits to moral behavior or what is the role of these commercial inputs on the formulation of today's moral behavior? What is the weight of adherence to moral values for an athlete in the assessment of their market value?

While one can surely state that neoliberal capitalist market ethics largely dominate -especially professional- sports today and that it is almost impossible to cultivate non-commodified relations between actors (fans, athletes, administrative bodies, technical staff, press, etc.), it is necessary to consider the role of other regulatory actors in shaping the official moral framework of the field. The contemporary moral framework is chiefly presented and maintained by global and regional sports governing bodies. National sentiments, though in a decreasing manner, are also still influential in the making of sporting moral subjects. As for the role of gender and sexuality, while definitions of fairness and masculinity in sports have always been interrelated, this relationship is much more complicated and problematized today than ever thanks to decades-long struggles of marginalized sexualities for their right to sports.

The International Fair Play Committee, who states that there are many different definitions of fair play principle, "regards the following five aspects as crucial to putting fair sport into practice: (1) performance and achievement, (2) creating rules and complying with them, (3) equal opportunities, (4) respect, (5) health" (2007, p. 6). The regulatory aspect of fair play serves to reproduce sex roles and leads to the foundational exclusion of women and non-conforming sexualities (Allen, 2014; Besnier, Brownell, & Carter, 2018). While regulations once excluded women from the Olympics or banned women's football in several countries, today the fair play principle can also justify institutional practices such as sex testing and sex segregation and police the sexuality of athletes in order to maintain a level playing field. These practices cause severe human rights violations against women, trans, non-binary, and intersex individuals (Pieper, 2014; Mitra, 2014) and demonstrate that the cis-heteronormative origins of the principle still affect the field.

Paradoxically enough, the fair play principle also includes a rights-based discourse and extends its scope beyond the material sports field. There is a significant number of sports events and human right campaigns that target racism, sexism, and LGBTQ+phobia by utilizing the principle of fair play. While the actors in this field converge on the objectives such as equality and inclusion, the field is nonetheless heterogeneous. Fair play can stand for a one-



time, seven-a-side match in an authoritarian country and provide LGBTQ+ athlete-activists an alternative space for resistance and visibility, or frame mega-events in which Eurocentric postulations are largely preserved (Caudwell, 2018; Caudwell & McGee, 2018; Symons, 2014).

The complex picture calls for a meticulous approach. The participants of the transnational field of LGBTQ+ sports activism frequently adopt the principle of fair play in their conversations with each other, the public, and funding institutions. Framing inclusive sports relations with such a charged concept is paradoxical and deserves a closer look at how the athlete-activists engage with this moral framework. As the container of modern values, the fair play principle helps the activists to link with transnational institutions as well as mobilize at the European level (Ayoub, 2016). While providing the activists with resources and political opportunities, it might also conflict with contingent definitions of fairness in local contexts and might contribute to reinforce multifaceted inequalities. Therefore, an anthropological perspective towards the dominant moral framework of contemporary sports might be more crucial today than ever for revealing the contested terrain of sports activism, contextualizing the principle, and reflecting on the potentials and creative maneuvers.

It would be simply unfair to deny the positive transformation in the modern sports field towards higher degrees of inclusivity. As widely known today, the main actor of sports was the cis-gender and heterosexual white male until recently, and ‘the rest’ was largely excluded as the constitutive Other. This picture seems to have ameliorated. However, there remains the question of how the othering processes in sports are being re-defined as modern values are transforming more broadly. What are the ethical implications of this shift for the limits of the field, both in the material and conceptual sense? Who are the new others or ‘still-others’ of the modern sporting moral subject?

Davidson, who analyzed specific cases from the events of the Gay Games and Outgames, argues that these events “have come to exceed the potential emancipatory promise of modern identity categories, and have shown up the limits of liberal human rights discourse for progressive social change” (2003, p. 59). While scholars should not ignore the agency of queers who creatively and strategically engage with the dominant moral framework, they nevertheless should closely investigate the present othering processes which are often mobilized through the homonormative (Duggan, 2003), homonationalist, and sexually exceptionalist practices (Puar, 2007). While LGBTQ+ people come together on the fields in a more visible and crowded manner than ever, there is the risk of entrenching the primordial dichotomy between a ‘superior’ and ‘safe’ West and an ‘inferior’ and ‘barbaric’ non-West (Ayoub & Paternotte, 2014). Is it ever possible for the LGBTQ+ athlete-activists to engage with the fair play principle in a way that does not cement the ideologically and ethically superior position of the West?

## Conclusion

After presenting theoretical debates on ethics in the field of anthropology, I narrated several different ways in which the moral framework of sports has been framed. Although I focused on three periods in the history of sports, the examples can be multiplied, and each one must be analyzed much more in detail. In this preliminary work on how sports studies might benefit from the ethical turn's contribution to the field of anthropology, I presented the three periods as examples of the normative constitution of morality concerning the shared ethical values of a particular time and context. While presenting each historical moment, I posed several questions against the claims of neutrality and objectivity of normative ethics. The non-normative approach to ethics might allow us to make sense of the mundane experiences of morality in sports as well as to analyze how the moral subjects in-making navigate, negotiate, and challenge the existing ethical codes of behavior.

Considering the field of ethics as a field of negotiation means to acknowledge that there is not a single ethical truth to achieve but rather that we could constitute ethical principles of the space we share with others. Analyzing the discriminatory and exclusionary rules and regulations from this perspective reveals the power relations within the sports field and calls for an interrogation of how to disrupt the existing power relations to access equal opportunities while negotiating the deliberative space of ethics. It might seem impossible to imagine a sports field today where "unceasing competition has been replaced by cooperation" or sports practices of a society "that has freed itself from capitalism" (Collins, 2013, p. 129). Nevertheless, a non-normative approach to ethics invites us for a continuous exercise of critique and imagination.

Dave, in her book on queer activism in India, argues that activism is an ethical practice which includes the critique of social norms, invention of alternatives, and creative practice (2012). Characterizing the compulsory engagement with legal norms to be legible, achieve security, and bring wide-scale social change as "a conflict between the political model of visibility and an ethic of envisioning" (ibid, p. 202), Dave asserts that "containment -fixing of potential into certain normative forms- is an inevitable part of activism, and one that is productive of ethical engagement rather than its closure" (ibid, p. 203). This is a refreshing perspective for anyone, especially those who are engaged with sexuality politics in the sports field, as it reminds us that the struggle is not over, and that there is more yet to come. We need to ask more questions to inspire each other and envision a world beyond the normative limitations of the relationship between ethics and sports.

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- 1 This article follows the literature reviews offered by Klenk (2019) and Mattingly & Throop (2018). For a more comprehensive review of the literature on ethics within the field of anthropology, see these works.
- 2 This article does not elaborate on these frameworks. For a comprehensive analysis, see Mattingly & Throop (2018).

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