

Being-for-others in Sport: Feelings of Shame and Pride

Presented at the BPSA, Cardiff 2010

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The main purpose of this paper is to provide a challenge to the view of sport as being a co-operative and positive enterprise that builds virtuous character and identity, epitomised by Simon's (2000) phrase; 'a mutual quest for excellence through challenge'. In contrast to this conception, I will argue that viewing sport in this way is to reject particular ontological facts. In this, I wish to present a much darker conception of sport and show how it can limit our being rather than enhance it. This paper has both ontological and psychological issues as its heart. It is about the definition and construction of the self and the way that others impinge upon and seek to control it.

A few years ago, I attempted to try to understand how the existential concept of authenticity worked in a sporting situation, specifically that of finding oneself as a player held in reserve, i.e. a player that is named not to start the match on the field of play but on the bench; a substitute that is available to be used as a contingency or in the event of a particular situation occurring. The worse case of this would be to remain as a player in reserve throughout the entirety of the game. This seems to go against everything that Sartre was advocating in his understanding of what it is to be (an authentic) human, in that we need to accept ourselves as free to create, recreate and determine our existence, and free to make choices as to how or what we are. For the player held in reserve, this seems to be contrary to Sartre's conception of freedom – for it is unlikely that anyone would freely choose to be on the bench; if you wish to play the sport, then sitting on the bench means you cannot do so; if you do not wish to play then it would be antithetical to sit on the bench as at any moment you may be called upon.

Being held-in-reserve is a phrase we find most familiar in Heidegger's work. It illustrates a technological attitude towards the world that divides it into elements for our use as and when we require it. It is to see our world instrumentally and extends to seeing others instrumentally and eventually even ourselves as such. This technological attitude of *being-in-reserve* resonates with Sartre's concept of *being-for-others*. In essence, it is an attitude whereby we are seen as an object, to be used and/or *ready-at-hand*, in another's world.

So I want to continue with this line of enquiry; in understanding how others affect one's freedom and conception of self. Let us start with a review of the basic premises of Sartre's existentialism.

First, by nature of our being we have no essence. This is a contingent fact. Second, if we are to be authentic, we must accept our freedom and our responsibility for our choices.

Third, this fact entails that we are a *being-for-itself* (we are a subject) not a *being-in-itself* (or object). Fourth, we must avoid seeing ourselves as a *being-in-itself* if we are to avoid being in *bad-faith*.



Although Sartre maintains that these facts do not necessarily lead to moral judgments as to how we ought to live or behave, it does perhaps give us some ontological or metaphysical claim which, upon accepting, affects our behaviour and conception of the world. Being authentic and in good-faith is, by definition, something better than being inauthentic and in bad-faith. To be both of these, according to Sartre, requires an acknowledgement that one is always free to choose, and thereby one must accept one's responsibility for past choices. But it also requires one to live and conceive of oneself as a being that is ontologically distinct from tables, chairs, inkwells, glasses, and other inanimate, unconscious objects.

Contrary to many lay-understandings of this type of Existentialism, such a conception isn't necessarily a negative philosophy but rather one that can be seen as liberating. For those of us who value autonomy over other principles, such a view makes logical sense despite requiring a degree of courage to accept. However, the main criticism of this view is that attempting to live an authentic life that is in good faith sounds all very well if we are seen as solitary beings. Yet, we are not solitary beings; we are by nature, social beings that inevitably impinge on each other's choices and identity. As such, Sartre can be criticised for holding a view of the authentic self is that it is incredibly idealistic and completely unachievable. Yet such a criticism is to misunderstand Sartre's conception of how the self is able to be; for our existence is contingent on the existence of others.

It is attempting to elucidate our selves through recognising this relationship with others that leads me to focus primarily on Sartre's conception of the self, for despite the apparent difficulties and contradictions, Sartre maintains that the self can only be conceived through the existence of others. This was one of his main strands of argument within his work *Being and Nothingness*. Sartre's conception of self as an entity that can only be understood through the existence of others helped to form his rejection against solipsism. It's a rigorous philosophical argument that essentially states being can only exist with reference to non-being. It is only through the gap between being and non-being that we are able to acknowledge ourselves as being. Prior to the existence of others, the concept of self is meaningless. Arguably, it is as a baby conceives the world; simply as a collection of phenomenological sensations with no limit to speak of. The self, as an entity, comes into being through the existence of others. The self, as a limit to the world, begins to emerge only through recognition of the existence of others.

Sartre's argument seems to correspond with our understanding of the development of self in childhood. It is only when children accept the existence of other minds (beyond that of their own) that they are able to lie – the concept of a lie makes no sense without others. Even the idea of lying to oneself – or as Sartre would call it, being in Bad Faith – only arises from a conflict between how one would see oneself through the eyes of others and how one is as a *being-for-itself*.

So let me now bring all this to bear to the realm of sport. Sport by its nature is a social enterprise. Though we might be able to play games whilst alone; for instance testing our self against a previous target or challenging our self against the terrain or elements, we can only take part in sport with others. When we play sport we do so in the public arena; we recognise that we are under the gaze or look of others (whether they are spectators, other players or coaches) and we are aware that we are seen by a being that is not the self. The existence of sport is dependent on being with others. In



being with others, we are always aware that they are with, and are knowingly with, us. As Sartre states;

..if we happen to appear 'in public' to act in a play or to give a lecture, we never lose sight of the fact that we are looked at, and we execute the ensemble of acts which we have come to perform *in the presence of* the look... (p305)

Through being aware of the Other we are aware of our self. It is this that makes being authentic and in good faith an ongoing battle. For we must be careful not to allow ourselves to acquiesce to the perspective of the Other which sees us as a *being-in-itself*, i.e. an object in their world, when to be authentic, we need to remain a *being-in-itself*. When we allow ourselves to be subject to the look of others, particular emotions, such as pride and shame, manifest themselves.

Sartre suggests that others act as drain-holes to our world; simply by being in our world our ego-centric perspective is pulled away from us and towards them. Sartre calls this change in perspective, a radical reorientation. Although we accept that others exist in our world, we initially acknowledge their presence as a special kind of object, and even though the Other acts a drain-hole to my world they remains an object. The struggle for authenticity and good faith occurs when the threat they possess to us – the threat whereby they limit our possibilities by transcending us and reducing us to a *being-in-itself* - is realised.

This radical reorganisation is demonstrated in Sartre's example of a man peering through a keyhole. In this tale a man is peering through a keyhole watching the events in the other room; he is not aware of his own being since he is a preconscious subject. However, he hears steps down the corridor and becomes aware of someone watching him looking through the keyhole. He is suddenly aware of himself as he appears to the other; in this case, aware of himself as voyeur and out of this awareness of the viewpoint of the other, he feels shame.

As Sartre maintains, shame is by nature an ontological recognition.

It is a shameful apprehension *of* something and this something is *me*. I am ashamed of what I *am*. Shame therefore realizes an intimate relation of myself to myself. (p245)

The point of Sartre's story is not that the man looking through the keyhole was doing anything morally wrong but rather that he experiences a radical reorganisation of his world whereby he goes from being a subject to an object simply by seeing himself through the eyes of an Other.

The penalty shoot-out in football provides a good illustration of this in sport. As you break away from your team-mates, your perspective alters from a preconscious subject and you become aware that all eyes are focused upon you; the supporters look at you with a mixture of expectation, fear and hope; the coaches look at you with apprehension; the goal-keeper looks at you with contempt, and the referee sees you as just another pawn in the game. As you take the solitary walk up to the ball you try desperately to regain control over your world and forget the gaze of these Others – you attempt to retain the perspective of a *being-for-itself*. And perhaps for a brief moment you manage it, that is, until the ball hits the back of the net, ricochets off the woodwork, away from the goal-keeper's hands or flies high above the crossbar. Then, the drain-hole created by the presence of



Others appears once more and your world is sucked away towards them; once again you feel 'the look' and this time you give in; if you were successful you feel pride and relief, if not, you feel the asphyxiation of shame. Either way, all of these feelings are the recognition of being seen and transcended by others. You are regarded by the Other as an object to be celebrated or one to be derided. You are no longer a *being-for-itself* but rather, you are now a *being-in-itself*.

Missing a penalty isn't shameful because of the act itself. If you were in your garden practicing spot kicks on your own the feelings of shame or pride would not manifest themselves. You may feel frustration with yourself for not connecting with the ball as well as you wish. But this pseudo shame is only in anticipation of the consequence of the same act carried out in the public domain. It is only under the acknowledged gaze of others that true shame occurs. As Sartre puts it;

...shame is only the original feeling of having my being *outside*, engaged in another being and as such without any defence, illuminated by the absolute light which emanates from a pure subject. Shame is the consciousness of being irremediably what I always was: 'in suspense' – that is, in the mode of the 'not-yet' or of the 'already-no-longer.' Pure shame is not a feeling of being this or that guilty object but in general of being *an* object; that is, of *recognizing myself* in this degraded, fixed, and dependent being which I am for the Other. Shame is the feeling of an *original fall*, not because of the fact that I may have committed this or that particular fault but simply that I have 'fallen' into the world in the midst of things and that I need the mediation of the Other in order to be what I am. (p312)

As such, taking a penalty in front of others, regardless of whether you succeed or miss, is to recognise that you are in their world; you are fixed as an object in the eyes of an Other.

In his play *Huis Clos*, Sartre famously coins the line 'Hell is other people'. If this is the case, then it is far removed from Simon's (2000) ideal of sport as 'a mutual quest for excellence through challenge' whereby, through competition and camaraderie, others help us achieve and perhaps even surpass our goals. For Sartre, his phrase alludes to the paradoxical relationship we have with others. On the one hand we are free and responsible for our creation and recreation; we determine our being, for we do not have to ascribe to predetermined roles. We have no destiny except the one that we are constantly choosing and changing for ourselves. Yet at the same time, our being is dependent on the existence of others. And these others are also free to choose their creation. So, one may ask, what happens when there is a conflict in choices; when one person's choice inevitably limits the choice of the Other? The answer for Sartre, at least it seems, is a fairly negative one. It is one which lays out an ongoing struggle for a dominance of freedom through a transcendence over the other.

Let me provide the following example to illustrate. A woman is playing a game of basketball and notices that one of her team-mates (an established and competent member of the team) avoids passing to her even when she is in a good position to receive the ball. As soon as she consciously recognises that her team mate is avoiding passing to her, she suffers from a radical reorganisation in her perspective. Her perspective changes from a *being-for-itself* (a subject) to a *being-in-itself* (an object) and her freedom feels constricted. She is no longer free to play the game in the way that she



wishes. She sees herself in the way that her team mate sees her - as a bad and ineffectual player - and this realisation and change in perspective leads to feelings of embarrassment and shame.

Sartre suggests that *being-with-others* is an environment whereby there is a continual battle for transcendence. For Sartre, emotions such as shame indicate a lost struggle and a fall into bad faith, for one accepts the Other's view of oneself as a *thing-in-itself* (that is, as a bad and ineffective player). In contrast, the team mate succeeds (for the time being at least) in the transcendence of the Other. She is not conscious of how the other sees her; she is simply playing the game as she wishes.

Now one may interject and say, but surely the competent player is limited in her choice of how to play by having the weak player on her team and not being able to use her in the way that would allow her to play a more successful game? The response to this would be that authenticity is not about being free to choose anything, for an unlimited freedom is no freedom at all. The point that Sartre is making is that the competent player remains a subject whereas the weak player is reduced to an object; and this is the perspective of both players. The weak player therefore, in accepting herself to be viewed as a thing-in-itself, whereby her essence is fixed, is guilty of being in bad-faith.

It is not even the case that the thing-in-itself has to be viewed negatively. For let us continue this example and say that the competent player shoots the winning basket. The crowd is cheering, her team-mates embrace her, and her coach congratulates her. She feels immense pride. This feeling of pride, the same as shame, is a manifestation of bad-faith. It is an indication that one has acquiesced to the perspectives of the Other and sees oneself as they do. It is to show that a radical reorganisation has taken place.

Here I come to some very early and disorderly thoughts that attempt to show where I think we can take these ideas next. One of the questions that I wanted to consider following the focus upon feelings of shame and pride was how the emotions of respect and contempt fitted into the relationship between the self and the Other.

Simon's definition of sport as 'a mutual quest for excellence through challenge' necessitates a respect between persons, all of whom stand equally as beings. Indeed, this phrase is often given to provide a moral justification for competition which would otherwise be viewed as something ethically dubious; pitting man against man and raising winners above losers. Viewing competition as a mutual quest for excellence avoids such a Nietzschean conception. It gives sport an ethically praiseworthy dimension.

And yet, this just seems to misrepresent many aspects of sport where hell really is other people. Avoiding being transcended and dominated by others and enabling one's creation and recreation through sport is a continual and exhausting struggle.

Let me return to our game of basketball. This time, our competent player does not score the winning basket. In fact, her team loses. As a consequence she regards her weaker team-mate with contempt. "If you weren't so useless" she thinks, "we wouldn't have lost".

Arguably, what is being demonstrated in this scenario is an even fiercer struggle for transcendence. For the competent player, the drain-hole is located at the spectators and coaches. Acknowledging



the game's loss is a recognition that she is liable to be viewed as an object in their eyes. So in an attempt to avoid this transcendence and the subsequent feeling of shame, she transfers her shame on to the weaker player. For contempt can be seen as a projective identification of shame whereby one avoids feelings of one's own shame by relocating it in another who is pressured to take ownership of it. Indeed, this is the view of Andrew Morrison (1989) in his book *Shame: The underside of narcissism*.

Feeling contempt for another is a desperate avoidance of a radical reorganisation whereby your world is altered to the perspective of another. It is an attempt to avoid falling into bad-faith. But arguably it illustrates one's eminent failure to resist such transcendence since it is borne out of desperation.

What of 'respect' then? This is where my thoughts are hazy and unclear. I initially considered respect to be the opposite of contempt but I'm not sure whether this is so. To respect something is to give it worthy regard for the type of being it is. Therefore, to respect another is to acknowledge it as a being that is free to choose its own possibilities. But I also think that respect for another entails a recognition of oneself as a being that can offer respect. Respect therefore requires the recognition of the self as a *being-for-itself* since a *being-in-itself* wouldn't be able to respect anything. This points me to the conclusion that respect for others is the recognition of another as a special kind of object. It is the point at which the battle for transcendence commences. Eventually the battle will be dominated by one or the other; one will be transcended and will be subject to a radical reorganisation. Respect will give way to feelings of shame and contempt.

I wish to conclude by bringing your attention to Albert Camus' work *The Outsider* which is arguably the illustration of an authentic man that resists the transcendence of others and is able to remain a *being-for-itself*. For those of you who are unaware of the story, it is about a man who resists the gaze and definition by others. He feels no shame nor pride for his actions, nor respect for others. Part of the story involves the narrator, Meursault, killing an Arab for which he is sentence to death, a sentence that is ultimately justified by an unrelated event; that of his lack of emotion at shown his mother's funeral. As Camus says in his Afterword,

A long time ago, I summed up *The Outsider* in a sentence which I realize is extremely paradoxical: 'In our society any man who doesn't cry at his mother's funeral is liable to be condemned to death.' I simply meant that the hero of the book is condemned because he doesn't play the game. In this sense, he is an outsider to the society in which he lives, wandering on the fringe, on the outskirts of life, solitary and sensual... you must ask yourself in what way Meursault doesn't play the game. The answer is simple: he refuses to lie... Far from lacking all sensibility, he is driven by a tenacious and therefore profound passion, the passion for an absolute and for truth. This truth is as yet a negative one, a truth born of living and feeling, but without which no triumph over the self or over the world will ever be possible. (p118-119)

It seems to me then, if we were able to subscribe to Sartre's account of authenticity and good-faith, we risk a death of sorts – a death brought about by our failure to subject ourselves to the will of



others. We end up as Camus's protagonist, Meursault; wholly rational and immune to the effects of others. But ironically his attempt to be authentic is seen by others as lacking in humanity, as such, it is not to be human – the very opposite of what Sartre says is an ontological fact.

The athlete who is successful in remaining a *being-for-itself*, and reduces others to an object in their world, risks Meursault's fate. She may be free and authentic in the Sartrean sense but she will have no friends. To echo Camus' words, 'She will be a poor and naked woman, in love with a sun which leaves no shadows.' It is a harsh, unrelenting and arduous existence.

Equally, let us say that we are free to live a life not under the gaze of others; we are not regarded by the other at all and we are left, as Sartre would wish, to our own devices – free to make our choices and define ourselves as we wish. However, this I would argue is worse. Sport requires being under the gaze of others, since without others, sport by oneself is impossible. Sartre (2004) himself recognised the paradox that *being-with-others* creates and he attempted to reconcile it in his later work *Critique of Dialectical Reason* where he applied Marxist theory to his ideas. Sartre's solution to this paradox was to suggest that we could freely choose to give up our freedom and our isolation in order to become a collective. This would enable us to live satisfactorily with others. Yet, this move appears to undermine many of Sartre's earlier ontological facts. For this reason, I remain dissatisfied with his solution.

So what then, are we to do? If we take accept Sartre's paradox of being with others, where are we led? As I said at the outset, I don't think Simon's phrase suitably encapsulates what it is to be with others in sport. There is a much darker but also essential part of competition. Perhaps Sartre's phrase 'Hell is other people' sums up much about sport that Simon's conception fails to acknowledge; we need others to enable sport to be one of our free choices. But at the same time these others limit our possibilities and our attempts at being authentic and in good-faith.

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