

External examiner's PhD report

Oppression versus Empowerment: A Philosophical Analysis of Female Participation in Sport
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This is a very well-argued and well-written thesis, exploring the important and timely issues of women's involvement in sport, and the role that sport can play in enabling (and inhibiting) women's empowerment.

The thesis is structured in six parts, with an additional introduction (including an overview of the thesis and its methodology), six substantial parts, and a conclusion.

The first part of the thesis focuses on motor sport, on the grounds that the sport is such that men should have no biological advantage in competing against women (and is thus in principle a 'unisex sport'), and yet men dominate the sport. This leads to a significant discussion of the place of women within (motor) sport, both as token female figures and as role models. The discussion thereby begins to open up questions as to the way in which sport in general, and sporting participation, can at once empower and oppress women. This part also has implications for the understanding of other unisex sports, not least equestrianism, but also for understanding the place of charismatic athlete's (here Danice Patrick) in the promotion of women's sport.

The second part of the thesis turns to the question of oppression, its nature and enactment. This part is the theoretical heart of the thesis, and offers a nuanced account of oppression and Otherness (and Beauvoir's understanding of the terms). It pursues important reflections on the cultural, economic, and legal structures that contribute to women's oppression, and thus the need to distinguish between individual and group oppression. The part also looks importantly to women's complicity in their own oppression, and thus the importance of the existentialist concept of 'bad faith'. This further raises questions about free-will (and thus the relationship of Beauvoir's feminism to existentialism and Sartrean philosophy), and about biological essentialism and the social construction of 'woman'.

The third part is the most substantial, exploring the nature of empowerment and oppression in (women's) Basketball, Netball, and Korfbal. The choice of the three sports is justified well, in terms of their various commitment to women's sport and to unisport, thereby highlighting different approaches to sex segregation in sport, and opening up the space, concretely (not least in respect to the potential place of netball in the Olympics), to explore the justice and injustice of different approaches (through the theorisation of 'persuasive sex segregation' and 'conservational sex segregation'). The grounding conception of male-apposite and female-apposite sport is interesting, and worth further interrogation (not least in terms of any potential essentialism the dichotomy might imply). The arguments throughout the part are complex and very carefully nuanced, and the author does well to articulate different themes clearly and precisely. It offers an ambitious and very effective series of analyses. The part raises important questions about the gendered and political nature of the rules of sport (not least in enabling or restricting the movements of the athlete's body), and thus points to deeper questions around the ontology of sport (and its concern with a sport's constitutive rules). This raises questions as to sport's potential in realising women's 'bodily transcendence', and appeals to a precise use of technical terminology (not least Young's concept of 'discontinuous unity' and Chisholm 'crux' and 'flow'). In considering sport as a safe space (again in a critical and nuanced analysis), important links are drawn from women's oppression to the oppression of other groups (including that of the LGBT+ community). The role of the 'recogniser', validating women's participation and achievement, is analysed well. As with part one, there are important implications throughout the part for understanding the diverse pressures exerted on women's sport, through culture, the economy, and the role of charismatic figures (and the author's reflections on Caitlin Clark would be interesting to hear) in promoting or inhibiting women's sport,

and thus the place of women's sport, both as an institution influenced by and mirroring wider society, and as having the potential to influence and shape that society.

The fourth part focuses on menstrual tracking, and the implications that any such programme would have for the freedom of the woman athlete – recognising the potential for misuse that data would have in the hands of a series of agents (from coaches through to the gambling industry). This discussion leads to the formulation of a number of important policy recommendations. As such, the part represents an exemplary application of core ethical (and bioethical) arguments to sport. It raises questions about the scope of athlete autonomy and freedom, and the place of the athlete within broader legal and economic systems – and thus the need for the athlete to negotiate these systems.

The fifth part of the thesis develops the theory of empowerment through consideration of roller derby, combat sport, and motor sport. As such it offers an effective rounding off of the theoretical components of the thesis, nicely echoing issues raised in part two (with complementary and deliberately overlapping case studies). Not least here, there is further consideration of Beauvoir's relationship to Sartre, for example in considering the way in which Beauvoir's philosophy necessarily moves away from the rather abstract and dogmatic individualism of Sartre's individualistic existentialism, towards a recognition of the role of the collective (and thus to the importance of understanding sport as a collective activity). The issue of bodily empowerment leads, insightfully, to the question as to whether sports participation enables a feminist self-consciousness for the woman athlete.

The final substantial part offers a series of well thought out and systematically articulated policy recommendations. While there may be some scope for further reflection on the practicality of all these recommendations and their relationship to existing legal frameworks, at their core they offer an important challenge to sports organisations, and should be treated as such.

There are three key themes that I would like to discuss further with the author, at least as a start to any conversation over such a rich and stimulating thesis:

1) The choice of Beauvoir as the key theorist for the thesis. The author acknowledges a number of valid criticisms of Beauvoir, not least in the light of subsequent developments in feminist theory, and so poses a question as to why Beauvoir uniquely appropriate as the core theorist for the thesis. In exploring this question, there is scope to further explore: (a) Beauvoir's theory of oppression and Otherness, but also the place that her use of phenomenology might be playing in the thesis (and its relationship to standpoint theory that is noted in the introduction); (b) Beauvoir's relationship to Sartre's existentialism – especially in terms of the understanding of the freedom and social embeddedness of the athlete; (c) and finally the tension between biology and culture – or put otherwise essentialism and (social) constructionism in Beauvoir's philosophy, and its implications for the thesis.

2) The significance that a consideration of the age of an athlete might have for the thesis. The thesis – as is characteristic of the philosophy of sport – tends to focus on younger (and elite) athletes, and indeed on athletes participating in spectator sports. The consideration of older athletes might raise questions about biological differences between athletes and its relevance to participation and inter-sex competition. In looking away from elite or high-level sport, it may be possible to identify examples of what are in practice unisex sports, but made so due to the age of the athletes (considering here perhaps sports such as bowls and croquette, and even badminton, played by older athletes). This might draw on Beauvoir's own writing on ageing.

3) The ontology of sport is an implicit and important resource upon which the thesis draws, and it may be interesting to make this aspect more explicit. This would involve a consideration of the constitutive nature of the rules of sport, and thus the way in which changes to a sports rules will change the precise ludic goals, and thus the physical and mental challenges, that the sport poses. Imagined changes in a sport's rules thus might, amongst other things, highlight and clarify the notion of male- and female-apposite sports. The thesis offers the concept of 'artificial sport' (p. 60), and this should be further interrogated in this context (not least as the idea of a 'non-artificial sport' remains obscure).

In summary, this is a thesis of a high quality. It is well researched, with a substantial and relevant bibliography that demonstrates a solid understanding of, and engagement with, the field. It is well and richly argued, making an original contribution to the philosophy of sport, and articulating important policy recommendations for sports' governing bodies. The presentation is of a high quality (and I noticed only a very few typos, which I list below).

I strongly recommend the thesis for defence.



Dr Andrew Edgar
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Typos to be corrected:

p. v: 'the findings are applied the female sport' should be 'the findings are applied to the female sport'

p. 16: the phrase 'but in the same interview she admitted that in commercials she enjoys being more feminine allows her to be a 2balanced person'" seems ill-phrased and could usefully be revised.

p. 27: 'As a result of this, Beauvoir's arguments surrounding women's oppression is not as clear-cut and methodical as a philosophical text, and is woven into often longwinded prose' should be 'As a result of this, Beauvoir's arguments surrounding women's oppression are not as clear-cut and methodical as a philosophical text, and are woven into often longwinded prose'.

p. 39 (footnote 19): "'one must not think that the simple juxtaposition of the right to vote and a job amounts to total liberation; work today is not freedom' is missing the closing quotation mark,

p. 59: 'a natural element which result in a' should be 'a natural element which results in a'

p. 71: ' due to various reasons such mismanagement' should be ' due to various reasons such as mismanagement'

p. 71 footnote 30: 'two 20 minute halves which the NCAA women play in four 10 minute' should be 'two 20 minute halves while the NCAA women play in four 10 minute'

p. 88: 'value of equality, The IOC' should be 'value of equality, the IOC'