

David Baggett, ed.

Tennis and Philosophy: What is the Racket All About?

Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press 2010.

296 pages

US\$35.00 (cloth ISBN 978-0-8131-2574-9)

In the past decade it has become nearly impossible to ignore the explosion in anthologies devoted to combinations of philosophy and popular culture. One finds these anthologies displayed in surprisingly prominent places in commercial bookstores, and the broad range of topics addressed makes it likely that even the most hardened of ivory tower elitists will at some point stop and think, ‘Ooooh, the philosophy of [x]!’ Indeed, it is amusing how often one finds philosophers speaking dismissingly of such books until the moment they discover an edition devoted to their own interests. Setting the vice of such inconsistency aside, it is reasonable for academics to harbor mixed feelings about the rise of philosophy and popular culture anthologies. On the one hand, one ought to be pleased to see themes worthy of philosophical investigation show up in popular culture, and one ought to enjoy seeing philosophy being made available to a wider audience. On the other hand, it is not unreasonable to doubt the level of academic rigor in anthologies designed for audiences whose attention spans are conditioned by popular culture, and consequently one ought to worry about a potential lack of rigor to perpetuate mistaken views about the nature of philosophical inquiry. Ideally, one hopes for each collection to make complex themes accessible without sacrificing too much philosophical sophistication along the way.

With this standard of evaluation in mind, *Tennis and Philosophy* provides mixed results but, on the whole, offers a relatively thoughtful survey of the philosophical issues related to the game of tennis. It is certainly a pleasant read, and the editors have chosen an appropriately varied range of topics, e.g. conceptual difficulties related to evaluating the greatness of players, the ethics of authoritarian tennis parents, etc. That the numerous dimensions of the game are so well represented is admirable, and, more specifically, the essays reflect exactly the kind of issues that tennis fans are prone to compulsively debate, e.g. the greatness of Federer, the ethics of McEnroe’s tantrums, etc. Thus, the anthology succeeds admirably at giving tennis players an opportunity to enjoy written analysis of their favorite topics of conversation.

For academic philosophers, however, the essays in *Tennis and Philosophy* often serve only to summarize antecedently plausible observations without adding much in the way of analytic insight. To be sure, there are many details found in the essays that will be of interest to academics interested in the sport, e.g. that Rod Laver won all four grand slam tournaments *before and after* his six years of ineligibility as a professional, that Jan Silva’s parents enrolled him in a tennis academy at *age four*, and that Arthur Ashe came to recognize that he felt a bond of friendship with John McEnroe despite a Davis Cup encounter in which he felt unsure if he could keep from strangling him mid-match. The problem is that many of these details tend to invite the reader to put down the anthology and pick up a classic of tennis lore like Ashe’s memoir, *Days of Grace* (with Arnold Rampersad, New York: Knopf 1993), Brad Gilbert’s infamous *Winning Ugly* (with Steve

Jamison, New York: Simon & Schuster 1993), or even *The Bud Collins History of Tennis* (New York: New Chapter 2008). Moreover, some of the especially memorable points of analysis that rise above these details come in the form of authors citing the late David Foster Wallace (whose celebrated 'Federer as a Religious Experience' is reprinted as the first essay in the book, though it is available without subscription at the New York Times website: www.nytimes.com). This again leads philosophers to consider putting down *Tennis and Philosophy* and either picking up Wallace's collections of non-fiction essays (*A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again: Essays and Arguments*, Boston: Little, Brown and Co. 1997; and *Consider the Lobster and Other Essays*, New York: Little, Brown and Co. 2005), or mustering the courage to take on his 1,000+ page *Infinite Jest* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co. 1996), in which tennis has a recurring role.

The problem is exacerbated by the special challenge of analyzing a sport instead of a film or television series. When a film is analyzed, there may be underlying themes addressed that academics will not have identified on their own. For a sport like tennis, it is that much more difficult to offer a collection of essays that presents thought-provoking analysis not already familiar to those with both an interest in the sport and a background in academic philosophy. For example, David Baggett's essay 'Why Roger Federer is the Best' is a perfectly adequate introduction to problems of comparison related to issues like vagueness, incommensurability and deviant logic, but it will not offer novel insights to anyone with philosophical training. Similarly, Kevin Kinghorn's 'Authoritarian Tennis Parents' argues for the intriguing thesis that rigidly controlling a child's schedule is not inherently detrimental to the child living a good life, but anyone trained in philosophy will notice a conspicuous lack of argument supporting Kinghorn's claim that a good life is constituted by 'continual, positive experiences of connecting with others' (95).

In fact, I suspect that several of the essays in *Tennis and Philosophy* will not offer new insights even to those not trained in philosophy. Mark R. Huston's thesis in 'Why are all Tennis Films Bad?' is essentially that tennis is harder to represent visually than a sport like boxing. This is not a very bold thesis. In 'Excuses, Excuses' Kevin Kinghorn uses tennis as a backdrop to argue that people sometimes deceive themselves and blame others to avoid uncomfortable truths. One need not be a trained philosopher or a cynic to find this observation banal. The upshot of David Detmer's 'You Cannot Be Serious' is that angry outbursts like those made famous by John McEnroe are not morally justifiable, and Tommy Valentini's 'Love-Love' is the academic equivalent of a fatherly sermon on the idea that winning isn't everything. Most readers will not be shocked. The essays are pleasant enough to read, but they risk giving the impression that philosophers spend their time rearticulating common wisdom rather than advancing knowledge.

You may think that I expect too much from broadly accessible material, but some of the essays in *Tennis and Philosophy* stand out as both clearly written and capable of prompting critical reflection. Mark W. Foreman's 'Stabbing Seles', for example, offers a thought-provoking discussion of the necessary and sufficient conditions required for a sport like tennis to count as a game. Drawing on Bernard Suits' underappreciated work *The Grasshopper: Games, Life and Utopia*, Foreman notes that (*pace* Wittgenstein) a game can be defined as 'the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles'. He

then uses this definition to present an analysis of the essential values in tennis and what is required for fans to show respect for these values. The essay is intellectually stimulating but retains a compelling narrative pull because its thesis is presented in the context of Günther Pache's horrifying attack on Monica Seles. Foreman convincingly argues that Pache's attack violated more than just Seles' individual rights—it violated the core values of tennis itself.

Another standout essay in the collection is 'The 'Kournikova Phenomenon'' by Helen Ditourask. In this essay, Ditourask presents an engaging and persuasive case for the fact that problems related to the sexual objectification of women in tennis are further complicated by racist conceptions of beauty and athletic physicality. In fact, as the quote from sportscaster Sid Rosenberg that Venus and Serena Williams had 'a better chance posing for *National Geographic* than *Playboy*' indicates, this racism can exert itself as more than just *subtle* influences in our cultural assumptions about women in sport. The essay is thoughtful and accessible, and the topic is clearly important. The only deficiency of the paper is its brevity. One would like to read more about the possibility for aesthetic appreciation of beauty being compatible with appreciation of sporting talent, and it would be useful to see this possibility compared to the recent objectification of male players like Rafael Nadal, who is often ogled for his biceps, and other Spanish players like Feliciano Lopez and Fernando Verdasco, who often appear shirtless in photo shoots.

Similarly, Jeanine Weekes Schroer's essay on Arthur Ashe provides an excellent summary of the problems associated with racial identification and the admirable ways in which Ashe struggled to overcome the trappings of race on his own terms. Again, if one can point to a problem in the essay it is only that it is engrossing enough for the reader to want more. In particular, a more detailed explanation of why biological conceptions of race are inadequate would be helpful to readers not already familiar with the convincing literature on this topic. Of course, Schroer's essay could also have been improved by more diligent copy-editing. The irony of referring to James Blake as 'James Black' (221) in an essay dealing with race is even more glaring than the anthology's own editor misspelling the name Novak Djokovic in his essay (42). (On that note, I cannot help but question the decision to include a quote from the Andre Agassi autobiography, *Open*, at the front of the anthology, without also requiring Kevin Kinghorn to refrain from making pronouncements in his essays that reveal a lack of familiarity with the revelations of this widely read book [83, 90, 105, 106]).

In short, *Tennis and Philosophy* is certainly an imperfect collection, but it is one that will likely be enjoyable enough for non-philosophers that it can be recommended as a kind of popular culture outreach that will hopefully create added interest in philosophy without misrepresenting its status as an academic discipline.

Scott Woodcock
University of Victoria