

Article

The Virtue of Violence in Sport

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Abstract

This paper explores the ethical dimensions of violence in sporting contexts, proposing that violence can be a virtue when characterized by controlled physicality. While society often views violence negatively, the paper argues that within rule-governed sports, certain forms of violence are morally permissible, strategically valuable, and essential to upholding the integrity of the game. Drawing on Suitsian terms and Kantian ethics, the paper develops a theory of lusory violence, distinguishing it from uncontrolled physicality or unmitigated violence. By examining the roles of enforcers in hockey, the development of MMA, and the ethics of sport jiu-jitsu, the paper suggests that violence is acceptable within a lusory framework only when it is purposive, strategically relevant, and constrained by rules that prioritize technical skill over raw damage. Ultimately, the paper argues that the ability to modulate violent behaviour represents a form of moral development, framing virtuous violence as a necessary tool for maintaining natural justice and personal excellence within specific sporting environments. Yet, virtuous violence is subordinate to technique, justice, and other defining elements of sports.

Keywords: street justice; strategic aggression; controlled physicality; lusory aggression; lusory restraint; natural justice; virtuous violence; lusory violence; uncontrolled physicality; the principle of deterrence; the principle of mirroring; the principle of perfect reciprocity; the principle of technical dominance; the principle of selective generosity; the principle of economy of effort

1. Introduction

Although some people are enthusiastic about violence in sport, outside the sporting context, it is more often than not framed in a less-than-positive light. It raises concerns, to say the least. The term “violence” is associated not only with physical actions but also with words and gestures. Instances of violence seem to grab our attention, and with sport, they are met with mixed feelings. Indeed, violence in sport is subject to some level of judgment, and the term “violence” often implies something destructive and/or harmful, i.e., its morally bad. Combative sports, especially boxing and mixed martial arts (MMA)¹ are assessed as violent, while swimming and rowing, for the most part, would not be construed that way. There are others that fall somewhere in the middle, involving a perceived level of violence, such as tackling sports like rugby or American football. To the uninitiated onlooker, sports can seem more or less violent, but the lived experiences of sports are rather different.

In kickboxing, striking is central to the sport, but an especially vicious kick may raise concerns. The same is true in American football. Tackling is part of the game, but a forceful tackle may stand out, perhaps because it’s perceived as more dangerous or unnecessary, or simply appears that way to an official, making it seem to border on problematic behaviour.



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Still, the players themselves may not view their activity as inherently violent, which can seem odd to some fans and spectators who have not played the sport. Although onlookers can judge activities as generally violent or non-violent, the uninitiated do so from the outside, not from the experience of the sport itself. The assessment of violence and non-violence, however, may seem to be the other way around to an athlete. A well-placed kick can disable an opponent with only minor or temporary harm, whereas a rough slam to the ground can be more violent. One might make the distinction here between *harm-intended violence* and *harm-producing but unintended violence*, but still, both “harm” and “violence” can be understood differently from one context to another or from different frames of reference.

Let’s consider, for example, Kyrgios playing at Wimbledon against Nadal. Kyrgios hit a fast, hard ball directly at Nadal, who responded with a stern look. Nadal managed to defend himself with his racket and deflect the ball. After Kyrgios said he didn’t need to apologise and justified his actions based on Nadal’s success and earnings, as if his financial achievements justified the abuse. Nadal later stated that the shot was “dangerous.” In addition to Kyrgios’ insulting, deflecting behaviour and his lack of moral accountability, his justification reveals something about his intentions. His violence is not part of relevant gameplay and may even reflect his character, highlighting his grievances and concerns about broader society. If taken at his word, it is ideologically motivated violence which breaks with the conventions of tennis somehow. By way of comparison, in volleyball, drilling the ball at one’s opponent is considered part of the game at higher levels, and there is no penalty or stoppage for face shots, which are generally accepted. Furthermore, there is a difference between the simple appearance of violence and its actual meaning, essence, or definition, though this varies with context. However, there’s something about the intention behind the action that gives pause to think about whether it was harm-intended violence or harm-producing but unintended violence.

Which perspective is privileged? Of course, we should consider the views of those outside a sport, including their opinions and beliefs about it. If they raise specific concerns about a particular sport or sports in general, calling them violent, or note that a certain sport would not be good for them or their children due to the violence or perceived vices, we should take their views into account. However, at the end of the day, we also need to make decisions about our own bodies. To each their own. Internally, sports organizers are concerned with both the level and types of violence in the activities they oversee, especially those deemed needless, dangerous, or undermining to the sport itself. Surely, violence is regulated, and not just anything goes in sport. There are rules and consequences, and the law can also get involved if things go too far. Interestingly, however, the law does not get involved that often despite the pervasive aggression and assumed violence in sport. This could mean several things. Perhaps the law should intervene, but it does not. Or, as I would prefer to think, athletes and sports organizations do a decent job of managing their own.

Still, questions can be raised. What is the moral status of violence in sport? What are the ethics of violence in sport? What forms of violence are permissible in sport? Beyond these questions are related ones: How might violence hold value in sport? Can violence be viewed as a virtue? The latter questions are the focus of the discussion below. I assume the permissibility of violence in certain sports, but what interests me are the possible virtuous forms. A positive answer challenges the idea that violence is amoral and helps identify some of its ethical dimensions in sport.

In what follows, a concept of “virtuous violence” is developed that is distinct from common associations with destruction and is rooted in an ethical framework of utility in a sporting context through the concept of “controlled physicality”². This is not unrestrained or uncontrolled force, but rather a modulated physical action that meets certain standards.

It is purposeful and strategic. So, it aligns with a sport's specific objectives and tactics. It is rule-bound. So, it operates within a framework of formal rules and a game's unwritten ethos, values, or conventions. It is consensual. So, it depends on informed consent, which participants waive in exchange for pursuing sporting excellence.

Under the Kantian view, it's not as if Kant supports violence (*gewalt*); rather, he considers the refusal to use coercive force to uphold the law a failure of duty. By employing force to end barbarism and maintain a republic, the state performs a virtuous function—it creates the proper conditions necessary for human morality to flourish. The virtuous element lies in the purpose or goal of the force—defending the rights of every citizen—rather than in the act of violence itself [4]. This framework is useful for guiding a theory of violence in sport, especially virtuous violence.

The argument presented here for virtuous violence extends beyond its purpose and points to the source within the individual who acts violently to achieve certain ends, or even whether they act violently at all. Acting virtuously, in this context, is understood—based on the view developed here—as a character trait that is stable, deeply ingrained in the person, and generally guides their actions. Additionally, the ends to which the agent directs violence effectively demonstrate mastery of virtues, or so I will argue. The purpose is virtuous, but it is directed towards good ends because of the agent. The capacity for violence, or its absence, is itself revealing. Players may respond violently or not to similar circumstances, which, I will suggest, reflects a context-dependent judgment about the application of violence.

2. What's the Angle on Violence?

Samantha Brennan and I wrote a paper titled “The Virtue of Aggression in Sport” [3]. In this paper, we tease apart the notions of aggression, violence, anger, and assertiveness. Sections 2–4 rehearse some of the key points from the theory of aggression and articulate them to the theory of violence here. The work on aggression touches on the issue of violence as part of an aggressive strategy, so the former theory serves as a basis for a deeper discussion of violence in this paper. I am, however, narrowly interested in forms of physical violence associated with certain aggressive strategies in specific contexts. The topic of violence is too broad to be captured in one account. For instance, violence need not stem from aggression at all. Instead, it can stem from a calm or calculated demeanour. Ramsay [5] argues that “. . .harm and violence are not the same thing. Violence often causes physical harm, but not always. And physical harm can occur without violence.” Also, just as the theory leaves open the connection to biological theories of aggression, the account of violence developed below will do the same.

To begin with, we propose a phenomenology of aggression, translated into Suitsian terms and generalized to Olympic sports and perhaps many allied activities. In short, we think aggression is commonplace in sport. An accompanying assumption is that all sports involve a baseline level of aggression acceptable within that sport. So, there is something both broadly true about aggression and contextually grounded. Aggression involves crossing lines or breaching norms, but it's best understood within a sport. It's the same with violence, and so this is also my starting point here with a theory of violence for sport. Generally, we develop a conception of aggression through sport, which we regard as a paradigmatic case of a rule-governed context with positive moral value and virtue. Yet, we seek to renew an aggression of goodness, care, and responsibility to respect the value of human life and to avoid needless harm. The same assumption will hold for the account of violence in sport developed here.

The phenomenological approach also helps us uncover some of the invariant features of aggression. These include self-control, such as self-restraint, and participants' moral

development. This suggests that competitiveness is honed and conditioned more generally. I believe this can also be the case with violence. The use of violence can be more or less timely and situationally relevant. There can be a correct time and place for it, and what's unattractive is violence done poorly, even with the right intentions. I take the aesthetic framing of violence as a useful indicator of the underlying ethics of violence, at least in the cases of violence that interest me below—the view from within sport.

As well, our paper goes beyond personal experiences. We note that Jim Parry, who's done important work on aggression in sport, has suggested that psychologists conflate aggression and violence by defining aggression as "direct physical contact accompanied by the intent to do bodily harm" [3]. Baron and Richardson, in their book "Human Aggression," define it as "any form of behaviour directed towards the goal of harming or injuring another live being who is motivated to avoid such treatment" [3]. In contrast, our proposal links aggression to competitiveness, sportsmanship, and restraint, as well as to intentions and actions aligned with the goals of sport. We use the example of aggressive racket sports, played without any necessary violence. There is plenty of aggressive play in these activities, and some violent language, but not much physical violence beyond the occasional broken racket, sacrificed in the diffusion of frustration and self-expression. Perhaps, too, for entertainment value, drama, or the obvious display of power. Even though aggression and violence can be teased apart conceptually, they can also be closely associated. Sometimes, because there is already aggressive play, things can turn violent.

There is also a kind of street justice at work in sport, whereby aggressive actions, although against the rules and possibly even the ethos of a game, still seem understandable and perhaps even permissible. We account for this by recognizing that aggressive behaviour in some sports exceeds baseline levels of aggression. In combative sports, if one's opponent plays too roughly, one may exercise a tit-for-tat strategy and return the favour in kind. One's willingness to escalate aggression or violence may signal that there are rules guiding such play, rather than that anything goes.

In contextualizing aggression, we note that it takes various forms, including gestural, verbal, and physical expressions, but these forms are not always accorded equal weight across sports. One can compare the trash talk in MMA with acceptable language in rugby. Each context carries its own implied norms. What matters in our reflection is how aggressive approaches and the value placed on aggression or violence relate to a sport's goal through specific tactics and strategies. Thus, strategic aggression or violence in rule-governed sporting contexts constrains our proposals. There are implied standards by which aggression or violence will be gauged.

3. The Virtue of Aggression in Sport

The context of aggression can be understood in terms of the rules that make certain forms of aggression permissible. For instance, checking in hockey is similar to a tackle in rugby. It's allowed under the rules, subject to conditions for its use. Likewise, aggression can also be considered permissible through the ethos of a sport. When a hockey player breaks hard to the outside, a typical response is a hard check into the boards. There are at least two sources that sanction aggressive play—the rules and the ethos. Accompanying this is the key proposal: The notion of "controlled physicality," which we define as a positive virtue in sports.

Consider a large rugby player who modulates their physicality when running into other players. Smaller players would not receive the same knockdown power as a larger player would. This is how controlled physicality is used in rugby. Moreover, our theory of aggression draws on Suits and Kantian ethics. We state that, "Aggressive play is valuable because it is an exercise in Kantian self-restraint. This is a reference to Kant's view that

“It is not sufficient to do that which should be morally good that it conforms to the law; it must be done for the sake of the law” [3]. We add that, “It is only when inclination pushes in the other direction, and we still manage to do the right thing because it is right, that our action has moral worth” [3]. Someone at the mercy of their disposition is not acting from practice with self-control and is not virtuous. This is not the case, we argue, for a person who regularly plays a physically aggressive sport. So, the positive virtue of aggression in sports is controlled physicality, which we connect to the value of restraint.

In Suitsian terms, one could say that lusory aggression is the controlled physicality players adopt when they enter a game and accept its rules to achieve its goal. Accompanying this notion is lusory restraint or the absence of aggression that exceeds lusory aggression. Put another way, controlled physicality is an unnecessary obstacle. What about aggression that exceeds the rules and the ethos, yet still seems understandable?

Aggression involves crossing certain lines, i.e., breaking norms in specific contexts. There is already a baseline of aggression in sports, which is beyond the baseline in much of society, and sometimes players seem to cross additional boundaries. There can be a rational reason for this action. As noted above, an inappropriate action could be met with a similarly inappropriate one, on the grounds of natural justice. This proposal can also be applied to the study of violence. If violence is met with violence, and it arguably exceeds both the rules and the ethos of a sport, there can still be a rational morality at work in these tit-for-tat strategies; the retaliation, even if violent, can be viewed as a reaction to the absence of controlled physicality. The harder thesis, however, is to justify violence where the referee lacks line of sight to the breach of rules, and players may justifiably act violently. Or, trickier yet, even if officials have a clear line of sight, players still have just cause to be violent.

In sum, sportsmanship—the fair treatment of others—connects to the understanding of appropriate and inappropriate aggression through the notions of lusory aggression and lusory restraint, where controlled physicality is the virtue cultivated by developing one’s morality and the ability to modulate aggression within one’s sport. Participation in sport requires entering a space with a baseline of aggression beyond societal norms, which can escalate, including intensifying aggressive play to restore normal play, responding to incursions beyond the norms, or ruthlessly pursuing the goal of the game. Adding to this, violence may be part of an aggressive strategy, but when players lack controlled physicality, the violence, too, is not modulated in this same sense. Similarly, aggression may lack a strategic purpose; thus, non-strategic violence will likewise lack the associated virtues.

4. Towards a Theory of Violence

Although we do not argue directly for the virtue of violence, we discuss its positive role in certain sports. For example, enforcers in hockey serve as a form of coercion that helps focus gameplay³. Players may be better off adhering to the game’s rules and ethos or risk becoming targets of enforcement. But to understand how violence can be considered a virtue, we need to examine how it relates to the goals of a given sport. Vices can transform into virtues in rule-governed environments, even when that involves violence. Enforcement through violence helps reveal which team has the better or more relevant skills. If players are targeted as part of a strategy to reduce a competitor’s options—the narrowing of possibilities—enforcers can intervene with violence to restore normal gameplay and allow the more skill-defining aspects to be displayed. For comparison, narrowing an opponent’s possibilities to dominate them is part of combat, but using this as a strategy in hockey reduces the expression of the more important skills on display.

Note, however, that this proposal is subject to conditions, as is the theory of aggression. I am not endorsing uninhibited violence, and not just any form of violence will do.

Whatever it amounts to, it cannot exceed the minimum standards of behaviour set by the state's laws. Just because laws make an exception for sports does not mean there are no broader obligations. So, the need for controlled physicality comes into even greater focus here. Still, one needs to consider the legal permissibility of violence and the need to consent to aggression and violence.

In developing the theory of aggression, we note that consenting to violence is necessary but may not be sufficient for moral permissibility. In Canada, for example, consent is not sufficient to secure legal permissibility: "Canadian law confirms the existing common law that one cannot consent to assault causing bodily harm. . .[but] the exception made for sports is clear. . . [and, over] the years, a series of criteria have been developed to determine whether a particular act of violence falls under normal play or assault. . .This view asks what players might have been assumed to reasonably consent to." For example, we state that "All of the players in the NHL, and the NFL, are adults, and they will know the risks of playing hockey and football. Much of the violent checking/hitting that goes on in the NHL/NFL is part of normal play. Consent to injury seems even clearer in combat sports. . . [where] one has consented to aggression, violence, or even worse, disability or death." We clarify that, ". . .the moral value of aggression and violence [is] a separate question from the legality of violence in support of it. Although the argument can be made that violence is permitted in some cases without the law getting involved, we only need the much weaker thesis that violence is morally permissible when consent has been given."

There are different types of justifications for moral permissibility. Generally, striking people contradicts one's right not to be harmed, but that right can be waived in sport. One way to argue this is to appeal to the *choice theory of rights* within a broader *theory of rights* that supports an internal justification^{4,5}. A boxer could think boxing isn't that rough, but for many others, it's just too much. I assume, too, that decision-makers are reasonably aware of the risks involved. The external justification (e.g., entertainment, military applications, human development) offers further insight⁶. The world is not all sunshine and rainbows. People need to train to protect themselves and others. Some people need to learn to read situations for danger and walk away rather than run. Generally, it's useful to learn how not to be fearful, how to be prepared, and how to avoid confrontation and stay safe. It's not that one must strike others; one can also stop others from doing so by knowing how it works, through intuitions developed through experience. People don't just start fights in martial arts or combative sports; they are prepared for them. One can't learn all this without throwing and receiving some punches in a controlled setting. Learning can be about safety and protection or de-escalation. This broader need overrides the normally forbidden constraint on striking others. Naturally, some practitioners will go on to apply their skills in formal contests against other combatants, thereby benefiting society. One thing that has been made clear from MMA is that boxing combined with wrestling is a useful skill set for self-defence.

There is support for the moral permissibility of hitting others. The law says it's okay in sport, or in certain sports, anyway, but the moral argument goes further, especially in the right context. I also want to argue that striking or hitting is a good thing. The term "hitting" may carry an implied judgment, and so it may be difficult to separate it from certain connotations. The question is: Is "hitting" the sort of term that carries certain normative judgments? The term "murder," for instance, is like this: There are acceptable killings but no acceptable murders. Further below, the same question will be raised and articulated for the term "violence."

Consent can also be linked to the structure or the broader organization of agents. It is not always the case that violence occurs on the sports field. In our paper, we note that military pilots can bomb, happily or unhappily, simply by following orders. Likewise,

enforcers in hockey, who can be more like combatants than hockey players, may be following orders when they attack other players. There are also forms of violence, such as rage, that are not well-connected to agency or goals, such as brawling. There may be little or no place for this. Yet brawls can serve broader social purposes. A hockey brawl could be seen as reinforcing regionalism beyond the game, although, as a formal strategy, it will, in most cases, be remote from normal gameplay. Still, brawls can be connected to strategies. Hockey players train for combat on the ice, even if they can misdirect those resources into brawls. One could argue that hockey players lack controlled physicality when they elect to brawl, though they may display virtue when they fight one another by limiting the level of violence.

Still, a brawl may be a form of retaliation for some other injustice on the ice, or it may be seen as a tipping point in response to a buildup of offences. In sports, escalations or violent play may be a response to incursions beyond acceptable norms. In this sense, violence and threats of violence could serve a purpose. This can also occur within the team's social structure, where the team elects to enforce norms through brawling. It is possible in principle, though real-world examples may lack sufficient substance. Hockey players seem to have a low threshold, in some contexts, for incursions past the lines and may be quick to resort to violence.

5. The Psychology of Violence

When combined with the theory of aggression above, the book "Virtuous Violence" offers another useful perspective for constructing a theory of violence in sport [11]. According to this theory, the psychology of violence can be a virtue when grounded in an ethical framework. The problem, however, is that the notion of a "theory of morality" is so broad that actions like revenge killing can be construed as virtuous if they are explained in terms of, and even justified by, a particular social-cultural context or when instantiated in an individual's moral framework. This will not work for the purposes of sport. For instance, there may be contextual moral justification for violence that everyone in a community condones or regards as understandable, but it may still be a moral crime, or a crime in some other sense, in which case the latter view carries greater weight.

The broad psychological view is too imprecise for current needs in sport, and philosophers are more interested in whether something is valuable or virtuous in principle, especially according to the tenets of academic philosophy taught in, I assume, the bulk of Westernized universities, which is the intended audience here. Also, a society beyond this one may simply get things wrong when subjected to closer critique or analysis, just as a team or individual may hold incorrect ideas about violence that, at the time, seemed correct. However, without complicating things by reframing the issue of violence in sport within a Westernized ethical ideology, aspects of the psychological theory remain useful to a point within the proposed theory of violence for sport.

What's serviceable is the idea that violence can be used to establish or maintain social relationships, as we do in sports. Also, violence is aimed at fulfilling the constitutive phases of relationship models that we all subscribe to. In this approach, the psychology of violence is treated as a universal feature of human psychology, but I adapt it to sport, where competitors have a special relationship with their teammates, the competition, their sporting community, and themselves. There are also constitutive elements (e.g., rules) in the domain of sport that the intended theory of violence ranges over, as well as a shared ethical framework across these sports and within a specific sport. Along these lines, one can assume that players tend to (and should) build and maintain their social practices rather than deconstruct and undermine them. This is where violence may find a defensible moral purpose, or so I think⁷. One's own teammates may even accept violence directed at

their own players if one has made grievous errors and crossed too many lines. Acceptable violence is not a one-way street. Moreover, there are at least two ways in which violence may be serviceable and morally acceptable in certain contexts. The first involves authority and enforcement, and the other honour-and-shame culture. Let's examine both.

First, enforcers in hockey assert their dominance and help maintain discipline on the ice; they keep physical play in check while defending their team, thereby reinforcing informal authority and adjudicating excessive physicality. When other players lack self-control or self-restraint and cannot self-manage their physicality, someone else will intervene and assume responsibility for them. Doing nothing could be an injustice, and standing up for others is a meta-relation that supports team cohesion: It's like bonding over a common enemy, but it is more relevant in the context of a team. Violence, in this sense, may be viewed with gratitude given these harsh sporting conditions. Second, martial artists and other combatants have a reputation to uphold as fierce and capable fighters—not all, but some. People are sometimes drawn to martial arts for self-defence or because they are bullied. They want to feel safe or overcome the fight-or-flight response. Generally, fighters prefer to fight other trained combatants. They fight to establish status, dominance and superiority, or to settle disputes, defend their reputation, or defend their community's reputation. Violence can be viewed as admirable in the pursuit of these social ends.

Nothing stated above makes a clear case for violence as a virtue, but in the context of the theory of aggression, it may be viewed as such, or that's the direction the argument takes below. However, the theory assumes a baseline of aggression in certain (though not necessarily all) sports and further proposes the concept of "lines being crossed" to track escalations in aggression. As it stands, this will not suffice as a theory of violence. An argument, like the one we put forward, in favour of escalations of aggressive play when there is already a baseline of aggression is less problematic than arguing for violence where there is not supposed to be, or for the escalation of aggressive play to violent play, where violence is already on shaky moral grounds. A theory of violence needs to be more narrowly stated and clearly linked to strategies.

6. A Theory of Violence for Sport

Let's explore the main concerns in building a theory of violence in sport. One natural concern is the "why" of it: Why condone or allow violence at all in sport? The short answer is that aggression is part of our biology, and we need to find a purpose for it. Perhaps anyone is capable of violence, and there are empirical findings that point to the nature of both aggression and violence^{8,9}. If that is a good enough reason to direct violence, then one can ask: What are the acceptable expressions of violence in sport? In Suitsian terms, what is the definition of "lusory violence"? The answer developed below articulates the notion of "controlled physicality" in rule-based contexts, with strategic purposes, and with a concern for an aggression of goodness, care, and responsibility to respect the value of human life and to avoid needless harm. This is one way to articulate the meaning, value, or purpose of violence in sport.

There are at least two ways to construe this proposal. In the theory of aggression, emphasis was placed on the athlete's virtue in modulating their aggressive play. The other side of this concerns the rules that guide aggressive play. I will further examine the relationships between these two features of the theory of aggression and consider the possibility of violent play in the same context that both shapes and is a source of that violence. It's not as if hockey players, for example, have true grievances with one another outside of sport that are best settled through violence, or that it's not relevant to settle them that way. Generally, I don't think this is the case. The violence also arises from within the activity. It concerns how players play and the level of aggression the rules promote.

Another caveat is that a theory endorsing violence would be less generalizable than a theory of aggression, which has a broader scope. One can expect aggression to be part of normal gameplay, even if it is unproductive much of the time, but accepting the pervasiveness of unproductive violence would seem to shift the meaning, value, or purpose of an activity too far from the traditional notion of “sport.” It would shift the conventional framework of the activity, and I suspect many philosophers of sport would no longer view it as a sport, or at least not as a good sport. Of course, there will be exceptions, so let’s examine some of those possibilities, too.

The suggestion that sport does not presently involve a baseline of violence is tenable. Violence is not normally baked into a sport’s structure¹⁰, but when it is perceived to be, it raises serious concerns for contemporary moral societies and their preferences regarding violence, even if the violence is skillful. From this critical view, something can still be a sport yet not be a good one. It may also be difficult to separate the term “violence” from certain connotations. Is “violence” the sort of term that has normative judgments built into it? Is the term “violence” like the term “murder”—a word that contains a judgment? We need to know this because sport philosophy employs these terms within its theoretical framework. Formally, we can also ask: Is lusory violence somehow necessarily tied to the lusory means in some sports? Let’s compare some physical activities to clarify and better contextualize this point and its implications for sport.

The historical practice of pankration, practiced by the Ancient Greeks, could be considered a borderline case of sport, if it is not simply a sport. It involved extensive violent play and few rules. However, the skills on display were also part of those communities’ lives, and we would be best to compare them to modern-day military games aimed at survival (e.g., training and combat simulation). The early days of MMA, however, were not about survival, and the initial marketing was similar to WWE, which borders on theatre. From a strictly combative perspective, MMA initially focused on comparing martial disciplines to determine which was more effective in a controlled street-fighting context. One of the key lessons learned was that Brazilian jiu-jitsu was an equalizer. Royce Gracie was effective and became world-famous for defeating bigger, more powerful opponents with superior technique. This would, in turn, have broader social value, and there may be an argument that the martial arts community, which includes military personnel, needed to see that raw form of comparison and contrast in a sometimes fairly violent display. The sport of jiu-jitsu has flourished globally since its debut in the UFC. However, the feats of strength that defined early MMA would soon develop into a sport.

In contrast, Pankration existed, among other reasons, for survival, while the modern-day extension of those skills—MMA—is closer to human flourishing. Most of us don’t learn martial arts to engage in warfare or street fighting, whereas most pancratiasts were preparing for war. This distinction relates to many contemporary games that feature a combative element, as they are linked to warfare and survival and incorporate authority, enforcement, and honour-and-shame culture. Although Brennan and I don’t address it directly, the latter aligns with the theory of aggression.

Just as the subsequent sport of MMA is connected to its purer martial predecessor, pankration, exploring the idea in reverse reveals something about the acceptable levels of violence in the sports we celebrate today. For instance, much of the aggressive play, especially in more evenly matched rugby or football games, can easily fail to advance the ball. Still, the aggression remains tied to strategy. If tomorrow, organizers introduced a level of violence intended to be a regular feature of rugby (e.g., a rule requiring full-force tackling), thereby shifting the notion of “rugby” to a definably violent sport, it would surely raise questions about its status. It may be part of the new rule structure, but it would still conflict with rugby’s unwritten ethos, which emphasizes controlled physicality. It would

also raise concerns similar to those raised about certain forms of tackling in American football. High-impact collisions are more common in the latter.

Instead, rugby, like MMA, involves moments of violence, but compared with the early days of UFC, there is far less potential for unmitigated violence¹¹. In the past, for example, a groin kick was a valid tactic under certain no-holds-barred rules, whereas mandatory safety equipment and the gradual banning of certain tactics effectively cleaned up MMA, making it more like a sport and therefore more palatable and marketable. In effect, however, MMA did not necessarily become less martial overall because of these limitations on the expression of violence. Surely, the existence of rules and categories shapes the possibilities within a sport, thereby clarifying the lusory means while also allowing certain excellences and displays of greater skill. Generally, the quality of fights has improved over time in both MMA and, more narrowly, UFC, as the range and depth of skills have increased. Fighters are more in control and far more strategic. Increasingly, there is little or no room for brawling (unmitigated violence), and referees will stop fights if players are not putting in a fair defence in certain positions where they are more vulnerable to injury or death (e.g., defending against ground-and-pound). Although it remains true that any player could win the fight, displays of aggression are now more focused and purposeful. Brawling tactics that are too easily employed to win are largely eliminated (e.g., stomps, elbows from side control, slamming, and so on). These tactics, although effective, are dangerous, bloody, and needless. The reward is no longer raw violence. MMA fighters need to get back to training after a defeat, and many also have day jobs. Moreover, they are not training for war and survival but rather developing themselves to overcome personal obstacles and achieve personal excellence.

In effect, fighters rely on more skillful expressions of striking, wrestling, and grappling to contend with one another. Although the acceptable baseline of aggression will be high, displays of violence are largely confined to those relevant to a more sophisticated and specific lusory means. More often now, especially in the UFC, fights go the distance, and the winner is determined by the scorecard. Beyond accidents from bad technique, such as broken arms or legs or being choked unconscious, more serious injuries often result from a fighter's decision and a failure to tap out or use their bodies more carefully. A knockout is often unforeseen in MMA (i.e., a flash knockout), though it can be partly mitigated by sitting down and attacking from the ground (as a grappler) or retreating, which are not necessarily seen as less aggressive play. Some of the violence can be mitigated, and there is no real dishonour in a wrestler keeping their distance and not going toe-to-toe with a superior striker. In fact, it's smart. This is how they may find openings for a takedown. Generally, the aggressive play has become more sophisticated.

In boxing, by contrast, ongoing retreat or disengagement is nearly synonymous with a lack of aggression; however, the skills tested differ from those in MMA. Compared with boxing, one of the neighbouring sports to MMA, displays of violence have become more focused and purposeful. Still, the larger octagon in MMA allows more room to retreat if one's boxing or other skills fall short, while a smaller square boxing ring allows the superior boxer to intercept and corner their opponent in the purer sport of boxing. Likewise, compared to Muay Thai or Burmese boxing, which, in the latter case, allows headbutts, MMA emphasizes broader possibilities and greater versatility. A striker's advantages over a wrestler can be somewhat negated by a successful takedown and ground control, whereas sports such as boxing tend to require standing and absorbing punishment.

As noted above, violence in sport is more acceptable when it is purposive, strategic, and constrained by rules that prioritize skill over raw damage. As an activity develops, it can move away from unmitigated violence toward more controlled forms of physicality, in which athletes' virtues and technical abilities are the primary focus. Thus, the notion

of “controlled physicality” as a goal of combat sports offers a way to frame violence and to better understand its best meaning, value, or purpose. The goal, by way of contrast, is not to develop blunt brawlers but athletes with finesse. By comparison, uncontrolled physicality and the inability to modulate aggressive play, in whatever form, could still indicate that aggressive play is part of a strategy. It’s just aggressive play that lacks a certain virtue, such as finesse. However, a player’s grievous inability to modulate their violent play would raise questions about a sport’s status and whether the violence can be discouraged or ruled out, especially if it were widespread. A sport that allowed itself to slip into normalised violent play would risk the activity itself, as noted above in the example of rugby.

Still, the distinction between violence and virtuous violence in sport remains unclear. Above, I have outlined the proposal for why we might allow sport violence under certain conditions and contexts. If violence is carried out properly, one might be willing to call it virtuous. This is a difficult step for some to take, because, as I noted from the get-go, the association with violence tends to evoke disparaging thoughts. In many social circles, it would be seen as rather crude to endorse violence in sport or otherwise. So, is there anything even the most skeptical among us could agree on? Let’s then also consider some other forms of violence in sport.

The history of sport offers many examples to draw from. The *piaffe* is a highly difficult skill and the pinnacle of horse training, requiring a horse to trot in place with great engagement, suppleness, and balance. It also has its roots in military combat, where it was used to keep a horse warm and ready while standing in place or to stomp a fallen enemy. A gruesome history, no doubt, but beautiful, nonetheless. Golfers and tennis players strike their clubs and rackets on the ground, and fans are divided in their interpretations: some see it as passion, others as a lack of professionalism, and still others as a privilege. Still, Andrey Agassi’s rebellious bad-boy attitude and obscenities more often than not made him a crowd favourite. Sport is laden with opportunities for violence, which is built into the context. Still, we have moved past the age of an extreme honour-and-shame culture, which may require enforcing one’s status with honour-bound duels.

Violence is evident on the bigger stage of sport, too. The studs-up challenge, in which soccer players tackle another player wearing cleats, is, for the most part, a violent strategy. If it merits the label “excessive force,” it’s an automatic red card. If it serves no purpose beyond a desperate strategy, it lacks controlled physicality. In hockey, licking another player can also be part of a violent strategy to incite a reaction and get under the skin of one’s opponent, but it would receive only a minor no-play penalty for unsportsmanlike conduct. The hockey community has a high tolerance for violence. In fencing, a *flunge* is an aggressive running attack that is permissible, but striking with the flat of the blade to deliberately cause pain is penalized as “deliberate brutality.” The idea of acceptable violence varies somewhat by context, but what matters in this analysis is that none of the latter demonstrates virtue. They’re just different forms of violent strategy, and uncontrolled physicality means players cannot modulate their aggressive play. An inability to modulate violent behaviour indicates a lack of virtue; it may also point to vices and to less-skillful play. Players who are prone to violence (dispositional violence) lack virtue and may have less experience with controlled physicality.

The easy argument is that instances of violence involve vices, and many examples will be found in sport, no doubt¹². The notion of uncontrolled physicality supports this, but what does virtuous violence look like? Normally, we think of violence as morally justified in defence against violence directed at us. Once violence has been used, it can become acceptable in that situation. People cease viewing it as extreme and come to regard it as a legitimate tool. Sometimes, too, an attack is a good defence. Also, if you don’t set

boundaries, you may be the victim of an attack in certain sports. If anyone can come into your space and harm you, it becomes a hunting ground for even cowards to show power. But, in many circumstances, violence can silence violence. This proposal sheds some light on the use of enforcers in hockey and helps justify their resorting to violence to assert authority, enforce rules and boundaries, and maintain the team's constitutive elements. One can also find these pre-emptive or retaliatory forms of violence in combat sports.

Combatants know what an acceptable level of aggressive play is in their sport, but sometimes others will test the boundaries violently, which may be met with an equal level of violence. In some cases, both sides will be penalized, but the point is that restoring normal play and its value can sometimes be achieved through violence. Just as with aggression, tit-for-tat strategies help revive appropriate levels of aggressive play or make the maximum level more discoverable. This is a kind of blow-for-blow reciprocal strategy involving mirroring and a willingness to escalate. A player signals their ability to play dirty too. Alternatively, if others want to stop playing the sport, they're prepared for that, too: This is the sporting equivalent of "Let's take this outside," but it's about signalling one's readiness and willingness to violently defend oneself. It's a broader display, but it serves to focus players. In rare cases, the violence spills over, becomes personal, and ceases to be a strategic instrument. But that happens in many sports too. Nonetheless, sometimes meeting violence with violence is a check on a greater level of violence, and I think it is much less like a destructive act and more like a constructive one. This violence is about maintaining the sport.

There is a warrior element in many sports, more or less evident, and it can also involve an honour-and-shame culture. It's more directly expressed in combative sports, but it can be expressed as either a virtue or a vice. For instance, not tapping out is a problem in MMA and jiu-jitsu, where some athletes would rather be injured or rendered unconscious than submit to their opponent or appear weak or unwilling to go the full distance. It's as if a do-or-die rationality is at play, but in sport, this is unnecessary. The stakes are nowhere near those of military combat, and even there, giving up one's safety or even one's life would not be done so willingly. There is an unhealthy way that honour and shame are expressed, but there are also virtues to be found. It's easy enough to think of how violence can be a moral failure.

Taking one for the team may be seen as a virtue, even if it involves risky behaviour to benefit others, sometimes putting oneself in harm's way. Whether violence is involved depends on the circumstances. Violently defending teammates can, so to speak, draw unwanted attention. Hockey players who aren't designated enforcers may sometimes confront other players when they believe it is morally necessary, but this can also attract the attention of more aggressive enforcers. In either case, these are considered rational escalations. However, not standing up for them (or risking oneself for them) might be viewed as shameful, as virtue is connected to maintaining the relationship that supports team cohesion. Similarly, a wrestler might accept certain risks with their own body and tolerate potential violence to benefit their team under points-scoring systems that rank teams rather than individual players. Therefore, unlike unnecessary self-sacrifice, some forms can be considered potentially virtuous. So, violence does not necessarily involve moral failure.

7. Lessons from Martial Arts

I have yet to fully make the case for violence as a virtue¹³. I have said something that speaks to its necessity in some sense. But I think the argument goes something like this: Some sports cross so many boundaries that athletes need to be prepared to take strong action against further crossings. But there are good and bad ways of doing that. Learning

how to use controlled physicality to redraw that line, even violently, seems more like a virtue than something merely valuable. In hockey, players formally train in violent tactics and strategies to constantly maintain the lines or even fight for advantages, but in certain martial arts, things are done less formally. If someone does something too rough in a martial arts class or in actual competition, one might just do it right back. One could go harder, and maybe one does. It depends on who and how far they went. In certain martial arts, there are many ways to cross social boundaries, which perhaps explains why necessary responses are less formalised, yet there can still be consensus.

It may be due to familiarity with jiu-jitsu or to unfamiliarity with many other sports, which leads me to regard this as a good example of how the virtue of violence works as a concept. First, there are many boundaries crossed in grappling sports. It's done in close proximity, and there are lots of eager white belts looking to make a name for themselves, as well as new learners. Also, people walk in off the street and randomly challenge others. There are lots of opportunities to go too far. After drilling some techniques, students roll with another student, i.e., they train, which occurs all at once without much supervision. This is the context in which you need to learn how to handle yourself on the mats, but it's also a space where one needs to learn the virtue of temperance.

As a jiu-jitsu practitioner, you need to act and respond appropriately, including dealing sensibly with aggression and even violence. To stick with the sport, you need to learn to set boundaries, especially with those who have a reputation for rough play, though you may seek them out for a challenge. You learn how to react to uncontrolled aggression and how to just carry on because it's a rough sport. You need to recognize uncontrolled aggression as an epistemic shortage—someone not knowing they're going too hard—from accidental elbows to deliberate violence or behaviours that approach dangerous play. Normally, finesse develops over time, but it's rough going at the get-go. The situation is initially defined by uncontrolled physicality and the learning of boundaries, including, for some, hard lessons. In this context, players learn to police and enforce one another and to defend themselves violently when necessary¹⁴. Players will learn about strategic violence, too: They will learn how to take risks with their own bodies by defending or escaping, or by launching high-risk attacks that may cause injury to others.

In competition, if players choose to test themselves that way, the stakes will be higher. The received wisdom, "Cry in the dojo, laugh in the battlefield," comes to mind. Players will apply lessons from their training, including how to handle more aggressive play or violent competitors. Others will push the boundaries, and there may even be rivalry between players or teams. When things go too far, the referees may interject. Still, they don't have a line of sight to everything in a grappling match, and they, too, get tired. Human error is always a factor. They may also permit certain forms of aggression that are against the rules, but during final matches, some of those rules may be relaxed to improve flow and ultimately determine whose jiu-jitsu is better. This is part of combat sports. So, one needs to be prepared to hold their own just in case. More advanced practitioners may be approached to participate in a superfight pitting two combatants against each other, including rivals from different styles or schools. Regular training, however, is often less intense, but it still carries risks when people of different belts or categories train together. A specific ongoing issue is the uncontrolled physicality of new participants.

New players don't necessarily go to a jiu-jitsu class to take it easy. The sport has a certain reputation, attracts a particular audience, and, like any combative sport, many participants adopt an implied combative mindset. In these conditions, new players may feel vulnerable. A common problem in schools is that uncontrolled physicality can cause pain or injury that some players are motivated to avoid. For instance, facial marks (battle scars and injuries) don't look great in their day jobs and may be seen as a sign of aggression.

Additionally, it's a sensitive part of the body and a personal space with specific meaning. Plus, there are rules against certain parts of the body, but new players may still rub their Gi (the kimono) across another person's face when they are in a superior position. Still, some people won't care too much about the possible injury or its appearance, but if one does, they can stop and remind others. Yet the other person may continue unabated, and there are various ways to address it, depending on how they do it, why they do it, and related factors. There is no single standard response, but there is a range of plausible and correct responses.

For example, one might put themselves in that bottom position just to practice a technique. This is a common practice in training. Players don't just play to win. Rather, they train to learn. Assuming someone has put themselves in a deficit position, and someone else is running their elbows or forearms across their face, one possible reaction is to stop or to voice one's grievances. This occurs, but as noted, the uncontrolled physicality of grappling is pervasive at the outset of the journey. It's just that someone may not know where to place their hands, or they may just want to be rough. Often, when there is rough play, reactions go beyond words. One learns to react with physical purpose and action. This would be similar to how the problem of escalation is handled in actual competition. Once a credible threat is established, the goal is to prevent future conflict by demonstrating that the cost of aggression and violence will outweigh the rewards.

One can use *the principle of deterrence*, which is the prevention through the threat of escalation¹⁵. Verbal warnings provide opportunities to maintain the boundaries and for others to self-correct before consequences ensue. Kindness, here, involves choices by the better athlete working from the bottom, who imposes a cost on cooperation. Another strategy is to use *the principle of mirroring*, which involves social and physical symmetry to correct behaviour¹⁶. The more advanced player may match the energy of the bullish player, but by controlling the chaos and mirroring their excessive behaviours back to them, they show that they are literally hurting themselves. In the more extreme, *the principle of perfect reciprocity* involves reversing the situation and/or doing exactly what they did to you. If they don't like that, they must admit what they did was wrong. A third strategy is *the principle of technical dominance*, which establishes authority through demonstrated skill¹⁷. This is often applied when someone first enters a dojo. The suggestion here is that learning begins when the ego is neutralized. Often, it is communicated that one's ego should be left at the edge of the mats. Failing to do so means that training becomes a lesson. More experienced practitioners will trap new players by responding to aggression with superior techniques, such as sophisticated counters. It shows that emotional aggression can make one vulnerable. The connected adage is "The best fighter is never angry"¹⁸. Another strategy to address aggression and violence is *the principle of selective generosity*, in which kindness may be used as a reward for good behaviour¹⁹. When your partner is technical and respectful, *the principle of economy of effort* applies; when the other player is overly grindy, the offer is withdrawn²⁰. So, rewards occur within the bounds of technical play, and the flow stops when the grind breaks the convention.

When you combine these, you create a self-correcting safety system with proportional, rational responses that are appropriate and can be adjusted as needed. One can begin with generosity (allowing others to work), then progress to mirroring (matching energy) or deterrence (warnings), but sometimes one needs to jump right to dominance to reset, regain control, and return to learning or fair competition. Eventually, one learns how to play rough, but nobly and with respect for boundaries, which represents value and virtue beyond the borders of a dojo, because the virtue of temperance is a generalizable lesson from martial arts, and it's something that crosses regions and borders across the globe. One of the interesting things about judo, as a global sport, is that the practice is the same

everywhere you go. There is a universal aspect to the experience of judo, and sport jiu-jitsu has its roots in the latter.

8. From Martial Arts to Sports

Are any of these principles explicitly taught in martial arts? They aren't formal instructions in new sports like sport jiu-jitsu or MMA; instead, players learn to develop one or a few responses through experience and interaction. It's difficult to teach explicit instructions as if there were some kind of user manual in jiu-jitsu or MMA. Rather, players go out there, try the sport, and encounter others and certain obstacles. They learn to respond based on their experiences and feelings, and to reflect on those moments. They might seek help from others in the school or perhaps the instructor. I believe this is how it plays out in other activities as well. You simply play the sport, see how it works for you, and then either find solutions or react naturally to others' aggression or violence. Over time, one can develop temperance and a sense of proportion, shaped by the situation and personal experiences, in a social practice that fosters the best or better reactions. So, I don't think most jiu-jitsu practitioners hold these principles explicitly; rather, they are implicit. They explain to others, in their own words, how to deal with aggression and violence, often describing others' actions as too rough, nasty, dirty, and so on. Even so, they might take delight in teaching others how to deal with rough play.

Generally, this framework applies to many sports situations. As mentioned earlier, direct physical violence might be met with equally aggressive or violent play, but it's also interesting how equipment or the features of non-contact sports can enable forms of parallel violence. In baseball, when pitchers throw the ball to unsettle the batter or even hit them, which is referred to as "beating," they may retaliate by charging the mound. Because the ball is very hard and the pitcher can throw with significant speed, even a near miss could be seen as crossing the line. An aggressive pitch is viewed differently from a potentially violent one because of the threat it conveys. Still, batters who charge the mound don't usually carry their bat and helmet when they confront the pitcher. They approach unarmed. Historically, the bodyline tactic in cricket aimed to hit or intimidate batters into making mistakes, but a batter might respond by mirroring and bowling equally dangerous balls when it's their turn.

In racket sports, notably tennis, players may deliberately and forcefully hit the ball directly at their opponent. If a player drills an opponent unnecessarily, the victim might respond strategically in the next rally to reset boundaries, and/or they may protest with violent language to their opponent and/or the referee. In golf, a player might hit into the group in front if they feel the pace of play is too slow, using the ball to signal frustration. The confrontation that follows on the green is a parallel to the baseball mound charge—a reprimand to deter future breaches of safety and etiquette.

In cycling, because of the risks of falling involving speed, close riding, lock-in pedals, no padding, etc., dangerous maneuvers are one way to gain an advantage, but they also threaten and unsettle other riders, who can mirror the behaviour. Outside of cycling, NASCAR is even more self-policing, with tit-for-tat wrecking happening both during races and in future events. Those who drive in a dirty or dangerous way could face consequences from their peers²¹. Even swimming can turn violent, manifesting as lane aggression and profanity in the scarcity of pool resources, though this is less of an issue with improved physical control²². Rowing has a bullying problem, both at the top and among athletes.

9. Conclusions

Ultimately, the moral status of certain forms of violence in sport is defined not by its capacity for destruction but by its characterization as controlled physicality within

a rule-governed context. Violence becomes permissible through participants' informed consent and a Kantian framework of self-restraint, in which athletes find moral worth in following the rules of the game despite intense physical inclinations. It is strategically valuable as a tool for natural justice and deterrence; by employing tit-for-tat strategies or enforcers to neutralize those who undermine the game's ethos, violence helps restore the environment necessary for technical skill to flourish. Violence becomes a virtue when it is used as a purposive tool for moral development—exemplified by the athlete's ability to modulate behaviour through principles such as technical dominance, mirroring, and selective generosity. In this sense, virtuous violence is a constructive force that maintains the integrity and constitutive elements of a sport while encouraging personal excellence and respect for boundaries.

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Notes

- ¹ In contrast to Martínková and Parry [1], who argue that MMA is not a martial art, and to Malanowski and Baima [2], who argue that it is, I assume that MMA is both a martial art and a sport, and that it can also be practised exclusively as one or the other. The UFC and other MMA leagues (e.g., Bellator, PFL, One League) are assumed to be sports: I am not arguing that they fit the Suitsian definition of “sport,” but I assume they have an adequate game element combined with physical skills. MMA schools or gyms, on the other hand, are normally businesses offering either non-competitive self-defence or fitness classes, but they also develop skills for competition, including boxing, jiu-jitsu, kickboxing, and wrestling. In most instances, customers will have the opportunity to test their skills in the controlled environment of the school as players of those games. Thus, they are playing a sport in some sense. They will likely learn how to compete in each activity, and they may combine these skills in sparring. Although players will not officially keep score, there are winners in sparring matches, which are like scrimmage play in team sports. Elsewhere, this may be referred to as “pre-sport,” but players in school settings do keep track of their wins and losses informally. Many of them will compete with one another in the school or gym setting and there are hierarchies.
- ² This paper contains additional and independent criterion to clarify this term. By specifying virtuous violence's moral character, it is derived from the same underlying virtues that justify controlled physicality, namely self-restraint, purposiveness, respect for boundaries, and the maintenance of lusory order developed by Brennan and Knott [3].
- ³ There is a distinction between types of fights in hockey because the intentions differ. An enforcer acting on the coach's orders or within a moral framework may be different from the more flash-flights or spontaneous ones. Zakhem “...presents arguments that support the view that fighting in the NHL can be virtuous...if certain conditions are met. These conditions require that fighting as a practice helps to provide an education in the virtues, is reasonably safe, is good for the community of participants, and is part of a morally sensitive and progressive tradition and organizational structure.” He adds that “...while fighting in the NHL can be morally justified, recognizing and instilling the virtues of a good fight would require some rather significant...changes to the game” [6].
- ⁴ Dixon [7] asserts that consent cannot morally justify MMA because the injury is inherent, making the activity akin to selling oneself into slavery, which is not permitted under his interpretation of Kantianism. In contrast, Kershner and Kelly [8] argue that MMA is

not necessarily morally wrong and that it is permissible in their assessment. They argue that there is no infringement of anyone's moral rights and no side constraint that "... is a restriction that makes an act wrong even if it were to maximize the good."

- 5 Ramsay [9] connects MMA to concerns in boxing, such as fighters' knowledge of risks, broader economic coercion, and the possibility of long-term brain damage. Adding to this concern, newcomers may be naïve about their opportunities for success in MMA. It is one thing to argue for the principled account of consent, but another to argue for the broader notion of "well-informed consent." There is much less remuneration and fewer subsequent career prospects following the investment in becoming a mixed martial artist compared with many other sports.
- 6 Turp [10] notes that by "Drawing on Wolf's hybrid account of meaning in life [one can] ... argue that boxing can be a meaningful pursuit insofar as it fosters positive self-transformation and interpersonal connection."
- 7 In the book titled "All Part of the Game: Violence & Australian Sport," Hemphill [12] states that "...the incidence, acceptability [sic] and management of violence in sport is largely dependent on the historical-cultural contexts within which sports are organised, participated in, reported on and policed." Still, one can adopt a broad notion of "violence," but the benefit of a more nuanced, context-informed approach is worth acknowledging here. The public and academics too will frame boxing, for example, as a "violent sport." In English [13], several thinkers analyse boxing under that assumption. It will not always seem that way to boxers. For some, it's just boxing, and the term "boxing" does not necessarily carry the additional connotation of "violence." This paper does not settle the matter, but I am not assuming that boxing is an inherently violent sport. On some definitions of "violence," it will seem that way, but I think a more careful approach would weigh such views against how the social practice itself would best characterise itself.
- 8 In "Two types of aggression in human evolution," Wrangham [14] notes, "Two major types of aggression, proactive and reactive, are associated with contrasting expression, eliciting factors, neural pathways, development, and function. The distinction is useful for understanding the nature and evolution of human aggression. Compared with many primates, humans have a high propensity for proactive aggression, a trait shared with chimpanzees but not bonobos. By contrast, humans have a low propensity for reactive aggression compared with chimpanzees, and in this respect humans are more bonobo-like."
- 9 In, "Natural born killers: The genetic origins of extreme violence," Ferguson and Beaver [15] note, "The origin of human violence has been an issue of considerable concern and debate for centuries. ... Violence is just one outcome that has been central to the "nature versus nurture" debate. Given technical limitations and predominating scientific views, much of the research produced on violence during the latter 20th century focused on social, family, and cultural influences on violence. More recent research has indicated that violent behavior has significant biological, genetic, and evolutionary origins as well. Several studies have identified gene polymorphisms that increase the risk for violent behavior. Increasingly, the evolutionary origins of violent behavior are being explored."
- 10 It's plausible that some will view the new or undeveloped sports such as slap fighting (a form of palm strike fighting) and run nation (a ramming sport) as simply defined by violent play. So, they would be viewed as inherently violent. Instead, I think they both require and promote forms of controlled physicality, and not just anything goes. In slap fighting, one can't strike the eyes of their opponent, the throat, or slap their neck to harm or intimidate them before you slap them according to the rules. However, if a player did something like this intentionally, other players don't react violently. They keep their composure, and they react through the rules when it's their turn. In a sport like this, where the starting point is so far beyond normal society and even MMA or boxing, in terms of how many lines get crossed and social norms set aside, I suspect the players would need to have certain virtues or attributes to even tolerate the activity.
- 11 The earliest years of the UFC were the least safe for athletes, owing to the absence of weight classes, limited rules, and the lack of mandatory gloves. The no-holds-barred approach meant fights were often decided by severe injuries or exhaustion rather than by strategic technical stoppage. Dixon's Kantian argument that MMA is intrinsically immoral are better connected with the early developments of MMA, I assume. For Dixon [7], striking, kicking, and applying submissions amount to profound objectification by violating the opponent's physical boundaries, treating them merely as a means to victory rather than as an end in themselves. The intrinsic immorality, Dixon argues, lies in the intent to cause physical harm and injury in MMA, which is so dehumanizing that it is intrinsically wrong, regardless of the consent given by participants. Dixon also argues that MMA fighters fail to respect their opponents' humanity (their dignity and rights) by treating them as steppingstones to victory. He compares the violence in MMA to a street fight, arguing that it violates the Kantian duty to respect people as autonomous and rational beings. For example, Rickson Gracie's do-or-die mentality was rooted in a *vale tudo* (anything goes) era, and he openly accepted the possibility of death and held an acceptance and no-tap mentality. Since then, both of his activities—jiu-jitsu and MMA—have largely moved away from being more martial disciplines to being more sport-like.
- 12 Dixon [16] maintains that "The ethos of sport strongly condemns much violence, in particular deliberate attempts to injure opponents by violating the rules of the game," but he makes an exception for self-defence, as Zakheim [6] states. Yet, combative sports are linked to the lineage of Olympic sports, which for many, involve aggression and violence.
- 13 Sport is not the way to virtue but martial arts are, according to Bäck [17]. Sport creates vices, he suggests. Although I don't agree with this sentiment, and the account of controlled physicality used here argues the opposite, the topic of martial arts raises

the issue of consent, aggression, and violence that allow for a discussion of the moral issues at stake. We all have reason to be concerned about violence (but especially violence and harm combined), but I think martial arts offer a simple enough context for how violence can play a positive role in sport through controlled physicality.

- 14 In “The Virtues of Vengeance,” Peter French [18] offers a defense of vengeance which is not a blind, irrational impulse, but a moral virtue rooted in self-respect and the restoration of a victim’s honour. French argues that when someone is seriously wronged, the injury isn’t just physical or financial—it is a blow to their status as a person who deserves respect.
- 15 In reconstructing a theory of deterrence, Linderborg writes, “In ancient Greece, like in other pre-modern societies, criminals were viewed as disruptors of both social order and divine will, and were hence subject to harsh punishments. However, ancient Greek thinkers also valued notions such as reconciliation, virtue and righteousness within their theories of punishment.” [19].
- 16 Saunders notes how mirroring is related to talionic punishment (like-for-like) [20]. This involves not just returning evil for evil or good for good, but also mirroring the exact nature, method, or circumstances of the original act.
- 17 Parry notes, “Aristotle refers to *technê* or craft as itself also *epistêmê* or knowledge because it is a practice grounded in an ‘account’—something involving theoretical understanding. Stoics develop the idea that virtue is a kind of *technê* or craft of life.” [21]. A deliberate display of superior know-how, in martial arts, helps foster order and a conducive learning environment.
- 18 This standard teaching is attributed to the ancient Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu [22]. Still, French [18] argues that a victim should be moved to anger. For French, the lack of anger in the face of a “great wrong” is a failure of character and a sign that one does not value their own personhood. Generally, combative sports are better done without anger or emotional states that blur one’s clear thinking and proper reactions, but that said, there are perhaps fighters who do fight angry and are better for it.
- 19 One can interpret a form of selective generosity in Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, specifically Book IV, Chapter 1, where he discusses the virtue of liberality or generosity (*eleutheriotes*). In this text, Aristotle defines the generous person not as one who gives to everyone, but as one who gives to the right people, in the right amounts, at the right time: Aristotle notes, “Liberality, then, being a mean with regard to giving and taking of wealth, the liberal man will both give and spend the right amounts and on the right objects, alike in small things and in great, and that with pleasure; he will also take the right amounts and from the right sources. For, the virtue being a mean with regard to both, he will do both as he ought; since this sort of taking accompanies proper giving, and that which is not of this sort is contrary to it, and accordingly the giving and taking that accompany each other are present together in the same man, while the contrary kinds evidently are not” [23].
- 20 Edmond Burke states, “Economy is a distributive virtue, and consists not in saving, but in selection. Parsimony requires no providence, no sagacity, no powers of combination, no comparison,” [24]. Burke views economy as an active skill. Being “distributive” means it’s about the art of allocating resources to the right places.
- 21 Kraut notes that, “Aristotle sees in ethical activity an attraction that is comparable to the beauty of well-crafted artifacts, including such artifacts as poetry, music, and drama” [25].
- 22 Counterfactual analysis could be a useful tool for deconstructing sports violence because it moves beyond simply describing what happened to explore the specific levers that caused the event. For a discussion on the possible value of a counterfactual analysis in sport, see Knott [26].

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