

Essay

Physical Philosophy: Martial Arts as Embodied Wisdom

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Abstract: While defining martial arts is not prerequisite to philosophizing about them, such a definition is desirable, helping us resolve disputes about the status of hard cases. At one extreme, Martínková and Parry argue that martial arts are distinguished from both close combat (as unsystematic) and combat sports (as competitive), and from warrior arts (as lethal) and martial paths (as spiritual). At the other extreme, mixed martial arts pundits and Bruce Lee speak of combat sports generally as martial arts. I argue that the fine-grained taxonomy proposed by Martínková and Parry can be usefully supplemented by a broader definition, specifically the following: martial arts are systematic fighting styles and practices as ways of embodying wisdom. A possible difficulty here is that such views face the charge of overemphasizing the “philosophical” aspect of martial arts. My definition can, however, avoid this apparent problem. If martial arts essentially aim to embody wisdom, this applies no less to the (strategic) practical wisdom of *The Art of War* than to the (ethical) practical wisdom of the *Tao Te Ching*. In an extended sense, then, any systematic fighting style, including combat sports, may count as a martial art insofar as it embodies wisdom by improving practical fighting skills.

Keywords: martial arts; embodiment; wisdom; definition

1. Introduction

Martial arts present something of a problem to the sport philosopher. On the one hand, theorists such as Barry Allen [1] insist on an absolute distinction between the two activities: “The major difference between martial arts and sport is that martial arts have an external value independent of practice, as instruments of violence” (p. 245)¹ On the other hand, various martial arts such as karate have competitions with all the earmarks of sport, and certain activities—both taekwondo and judo, notably—are modern martial arts that have become Olympic sports. It may be unclear how we should understand tai chi vis-à-vis martial arts classification [2] (p. 9n2) or fighting systems such as krav maga. In the prominent subculture of mixed martial arts, it is more or less assumed that all combat sports—at least those allowed in the “mix”—including boxing and wrestling are, in fact, martial arts. Though many martial arts traditionalists, in step with Allen’s perspective [1], would reject this equivalence, Bruce Lee, one of the forerunners of mixed martial arts, agrees that “[t]he martial arts include boxing” [3] (p. 7).

In this regard, Martínková and Parry [4] have proposed a useful classification system for what they call “martial activities”, which includes martial arts among related practices, and provides a theoretical basis for sorting out some of the difficulties abovementioned and others. I argue that Martínková and Parry’s fine-grained taxonomy may be usefully supplemented by a broader definition of martial arts. My definition is that martial arts are systematic fighting styles and practices as ways of embodying wisdom. One possible difficulty here is that theories such as Martínková and Parry’s along with mine face the charge of overemphasizing the “philosophical” aspect of martial arts [5] (p. 145). However, my definition can handle this apparent difficulty. If martial arts essentially aim to embody wisdom, this applies no less to the (strategic) practical wisdom of *The Art of War* than to the (ethical) practical wisdom of the *Tao Te Ching*. In an extended reading of my definition, any



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2. Against Anti-Essentialism

In earlier eras in philosophy, one would not be pressed to justify offering a theoretical definition, because, since Plato's time at least, grasping the essence of such categories had been deemed a central task of philosophy, and theoretical definitions held promise of expressing that knowledge of essences. More recently, however, largely under the influence of the later Wittgenstein [6], there has been deep skepticism about such efforts, even though Wittgenstein himself was less opposed to theoretical definitions than is often supposed. Notwithstanding, the anti-essentialist suspicions inspired by Wittgenstein are (1) that adequate theoretical definitions of such terms are not possible; (2) that adequate theoretical definitions of such terms are not necessary; and (3) that adequate theoretical definitions of such terms are not helpful. I will address each of these concerns.

First, I admit that adequate theoretical definitions of key terms are unnecessary for doing substantive philosophy. In the anthology *Philosophy and the Martial Arts: Engagement* [2], for instance, editors Priest and Young are clear: "One important philosophical question about the martial arts is how to characterise them. This is a hard and non-trivial question. Should Tai Chi be included? Should war-gaming?... But we do not need to address [that hard question] here. We will finesse it by sticking to some paradigm cases" (p. 9n2). Sticking to paradigm cases, on this view, relieves the burden of characterizing the general term through means such as a working or theoretical definition. However, note that certain questions of scope, such as whether tai chi belongs in or outside the martial arts category, are left unanswered. Therefore, although definitions are unnecessary for carrying out some theoretical projects, that does not mean that they are not necessary or at least useful for doing other work, such as helping to decide the scope and limits of the relevant category.

In addressing skepticism about both the possibility and the utility of adequate theoretical definitions of such terms, I point to the illustrative case of Bernard Suits's classic definition of games [7]: "To play a game is to attempt to achieve a specific state of affairs . . . using only means permitted by the rules . . . where the rules prohibit more in favour of less efficient means . . . and where the rules are accepted just because they make possible such activity" (pp. 54–55). It is interesting to note that this is precisely the example of games that Wittgenstein uses to illustrate the alleged indefinability of certain general terms [6] (§§ 55–56). What is notable here is not that Suits necessarily refutes Wittgenstein, but rather that in the wake of Wittgenstein-inspired resistance to theoretical definitions, Suits proposed a definition of games that has become standard in the philosophy of sport literature. It is not that there are no critics of Suits, but rather that this definition is plausible, and the question of its theoretical adequacy remains a subject of ongoing attention in the sport philosophy literature. It is not simply dismissed on anti-essentialist grounds. Either way, the theory is a useful foundation for addressing various problems in the field, such as the question of whether videogames can count as sports [8].

By analogy, I conclude that the attempt to provide a theoretical definition of martial arts is not necessarily misguided and may in fact yield important results. In particular, besides understanding what lies at the heart of martial arts, I am interested in resolving the potential martial art status of the following cases, which are hard cases in the absence of such a general characterization:

1. Tai chi. The movements of this meditative practice are derived from martial arts, and it is indeed sometimes practiced as a martial art; in its most common form, however, it does not seem to be one.
2. Krav maga, Russian systema, and other fighting and combat systems. These are systematic fighting styles that seem to have the earmarks of martial arts (e.g., black belts in krav maga) yet are often excluded from the martial arts class.

3. Boxing (and other Western combat sports). Such sports are often held to be different from martial arts yet somehow exist in the same arena, as in mixed martial arts and unrestricted fighting.
4. Taekwondo (and judo). Where many intuitions suggest than an activity may count either as a martial art or a combat sport but not both, taekwondo and judo seem to fall into both categories.
5. Sport versions of traditional martial arts such as karate are similar to taekwondo and judo, except that there may be more controversy about whether they are appropriate expressions of their respective arts.
6. Corrupt or “dark” arts. If we consider especially fictional examples—such as the Cobra Kai dojo in *The Karate Kid* or the Sith in *Star Wars*—it is unclear whether these count as genuine if immoral martial arts or false because they are immoral.

One of the desiderata of a theoretical definition of martial arts, or any other systematic categorization, for that matter, is to help us sort out such cases, hopefully in a way that is both intuitive and theoretically sound.

3. Martial Categories

As a first step to addressing these hard cases, consider Martínková and Parry’s account of martial categories, in which various “martial activities” are distinguished by purpose [4] (pp. 148–155). This classification scheme comprises five main categories and six minor categories, though I will only focus on the former:

- *Close combat* has a primarily practical purpose as learned by law enforcement and military personnel, focusing on useful techniques for exercising physical control and lethal force. Given this pragmatic purpose, there need be no systematicity of technique or moral purpose involved [4] (pp. 148–150).
- *Warrior arts* have a primarily ethical purpose. The arts practiced by the samurai in medieval Japan, though similar to close combat, require a systematic approach to fighting as a means of exercising virtue and upholding honor in particular, as required by the *Bushido* code [4] (pp. 150–151).
- *Martial arts* have as a primary purpose that of self-cultivation. Disciplined study of a particular tradition, such as karate, focuses on self-discipline as a means of self-realization. Skills may be useful for self-defense but are mostly unarmed and non-lethal [4] (pp. 151–153).
- *Martial paths* have a primarily spiritual purpose. Think here of the Shaolin monk practicing kung fu as a means of spiritual development. The fighting style here is a means for the further meditative practice of Zen Buddhism, a useful but perhaps not strictly necessary means to that end [4] (pp. 153–154).
- *Combat sports* have a primarily competitive purpose. Here we find boxing, wrestling, fencing, as well as sport versions of more “traditional” martial arts such as fencing, taekwondo, judo, sport karate, Brazilian jiu jitsu, among others, along with the hybrid sport of mixed martial arts [4] (pp. 154–155).

This classification scheme has much to recommend it, especially when considering activities in which there is an evident single primary purpose. In particular, Martínková and Parry’s account helps us reach a verdict on many of our hard cases above. Tai chi, for instance, does not even make the list of major martial activities but is rather classified as “martial therapy” and relegated to the list of minor martial activities [4] (p. 156). By implication, fighting systems such as krav maga, despite having certain trappings of martial arts or warrior arts, remain in the close combat category. Boxing and other Western combat sports shunt neatly into the martial sport category, along with sport versions of Asian martial arts from Olympic taekwondo to sport karate, in contrast to more traditional practices and aspects of such practices less focused on competition. Morally corrupt instances of genuine martial arts or independent immoral practices resembling martial arts or warrior arts will fall at best into one of the two combat categories: combat sport or close

combat. Thus, Cobra Kai and the Sith religion are not genuine martial or warrior arts but instances of combat sport and close combat, respectively.

To sum up, then, Martínková and Parry's account straightforwardly excludes all the hard cases from the martial arts class, which suggests that it might be too narrow in failing to capture certain nuances. However intuitive many of their verdicts may be, Martínková and Parry's system leaves some key questions unanswered. Tai chi in its best-known form may count as a kind of martial therapy, but does this mean that it should not be practiced as a martial art or that, when it is, it is "weaponized" martial therapy? That seems to get things backwards in that the therapeutic practice is derived from the fighting practice rather than vice versa. As for fighting systems such as krav maga, it seems too quick to simply slot them into the close combat category. Are we reluctant to call these martial arts because of a bias toward fighting styles originating in the Far East? What of the formal similarities between "martial art" and "combat sport" versions of karate, or the fact that some forms of taekwondo and judo seem to count equally as combat sports and martial arts in Martínková and Parry's narrow sense? Finally, are there not important commonalities between warrior arts, martial paths, and martial arts—and potentially also combat sports and close combat—apart from being different kinds of nominally "martial" activities?

4. Martial Arts Defined

To answer some of these questions and begin to motivate my definition of martial arts, let us suppose that Martínková and Parry are right to exclude both close combat and combat sports generally from the martial arts class. Focusing on warrior arts, martial arts in the narrow sense, and martial paths, there are several common threads worth noting. First, as fighting styles, all three are systematic. They are not simply a piecemeal collection of techniques but are meant to be holistic approaches to fighting, both internally coherent and comprehensive in scope. Indeed, the lack of systematicity in varieties of close combat and combat sports provides an important reason to distinguish these activities from martial arts. To be clear, the point is not that close combat and combat sports cannot be approached systematically. Indeed, they often are, especially at high levels. However, as types of activity they need not be approached systematically, which is a key point of distinction between them and warrior arts, martial arts, and martial paths as distinguished by Martínková and Parry. Even a systematic approach to training for fighting in close combat and combat sports fails to imply a systematic approach *to* fighting in those domains.

Consider a samurai warrior, a modern karateka, and a shaolin monk as respective exemplars of warrior arts, martial arts, and martial paths in Martínková and Parry's sense. Along with systematic approaches to fighting, all three exhibit elements of a particular style, and to stress the importance of specific practices. Along with learning the physical techniques of the relevant way of fighting, certain other activities will often be considered important parts of the practice: choreographed movement patterns (e.g., kata), general physical conditioning, sparring, meditation (often concomitant with physical practice), among others. Finally, note that the samurai, karateka, and monk all seek to embody something significant through the discipline of their practice: for the samurai virtue, honor in particular; for the karateka, self-realization and self-understanding; for the monk, a Zen state of "no-mind" on the path to enlightenment (satori). These examples admittedly have a degree of artificial separation. Zen Buddhism influenced the samurai, karateka may be as interested in exhibiting virtue, etc. The point, however, is that even when these types are considered separately, there is an important further commonality because virtue, self-understanding, and "no-mind" exhibit different types of wisdom.

My proposal draws on the elements identified above, defining martial arts in a broad sense that includes Martínková and Parry's narrow sense of martial arts along with what they consider to be not strictly martial arts but rather warrior arts and martial paths. My definition is that martial arts are systematic fighting styles and practices as ways of embodying wisdom² Since one may participate in close combat and combat sports without practicing them systematically or as ways of embodying wisdom, as general types, they

will not be counted as martial arts. (As I discuss in the next section, however, in some cases, they may in fact so count.) This definition also respects the intuition, grounded in the commonalities mentioned above, that some ethical warriors and those who seek enlightenment through martial practice may be no less deserving of the label “martial artist” than those we may find more paradigmatic in the current cultural climate.

One of the strengths of this proposal is that it coheres with other extant research on martial arts. If martial arts at their best contribute to psychological well-being, as argued for instance by Croom [10], Allen [11], and Young [12], this may be accounted for at least in part because of their broad purpose of embodying wisdom, even if perspectives vary widely on questions either of what constitutes wisdom or the best way to realize it through the discipline(s) of martial arts [13]. It respects the distinction between a martial art as a *do* (way) over and above a *jutsu* (technique) [13,14], that there is, in other words, a crucial philosophical element in the martial arts [13,15], whether aspects of Confucian courtesy, Daoist wu-wei (“no-action”), or Zen Buddhist “no-mind”, and so forth. Indeed, the technique of the *jutsu* is meant to embody the wisdom of the *do*. The proposal also respects the intuition that an approach to fighting technique proper to the martial arts is systematic, disciplined, and in a palpable sense, an artform, an outlet for true creative self-expression for the martial artist [3].

In addition to such theoretical consilience, further support for my proposal may be found in principled and, I believe, largely intuitive interpretations of the hard cases under discussion. Where tai chi is not practiced as a fighting style it is not a martial art; however, where it is, it is. Fighting systems, as such, will not count as martial arts unless they can be shown to embody wisdom in some as-yet unspecified sense, likewise systematic approaches to combat sports. There is little reason to deny certain forms of taekwondo and judo as both martial arts and combat sports, especially where sparring in training and competition is held to be a crucial part of the practice. Whether sport versions of martial arts such as karate are deemed legitimate applications or illegitimate degradations of the art will depend on the internal decision making within those respective practices by those empowered to do so by the institutions overseeing them. As for corrupt or “dark” arts, their martial art status will remain unclear until we can decide whether their teachings constitute some form of wisdom, however twisted, merely pragmatic, or even immoral it might be. Is a corrupt philosophy still a philosophy? This deep and in some ways paradoxical question will be addressed below in response to a serious potential objection to my definition.

5. Objection and Reply

Despite Allen’s view that sports in general are, in contrast to the martial arts, useless in the real world [11] (p. 132), this does not seem to apply in cases of combat sports such as boxing that have real-world utility as fighting techniques. This point presages a significant objection to theories such as Martínková and Parry’s and mine distinguishing martial arts from combat sports. As Moenig [5] puts it, such “superficial classifications, distinctions, and attitudes are likely the results of an inadequate understanding of the nature and history of martial arts and combat. In reality, any activity that serves to improve battle or fighting skills is, by definition, a form of ‘martial art’” (p. 145, citing [16]). This claim may be seen as polemical and somewhat hyperbolic. Learning one single effective technique will improve one’s fighting skills but falls well short of a general and systematic approach required of even a fighting system let alone a martial art. By itself, of course, this complaint does not block the attack.

To appreciate the objection from another angle, consider Jigoro Kano’s [14] contrast between judo and “the jujutsu of the past, which was only a martial art” (p. 74). From this perspective, which respects the *do/jutsu* distinction, the *do* is presented not as necessary for martial arthood but supererogatory, above and beyond the technical *jutsu* presumed to count as sufficient. Another way to frame the objection, therefore, is as a charge of misguided thinking that martial arts require anything beyond an effective, systematic

approach to fighting. We may champion martial arts that do more, as Kano does with judo, but that—so the objection goes—is more than martial arts require.

My definition of martial arts as ways of embodying wisdom certainly suggests a narrow reading that would exclude fighting systems and combat sports from the martial arts class. However, to put my reply succinctly, if martial arts aim to embody wisdom, this applies no less to the (strategic) practical wisdom of *The Art of War* than to the (ethical) practical wisdom of the *Tao Te Ching*. Take the principle “No first strike” [17] (p. 160) or “Win by not fighting”, which one finds both in the *Tao Te Ching* [18] (v68) and *The Art of War* [19] (ch3). These principles blend prudential and ethical thinking in such a way that it is hard to disentangle the two. It is precisely this sort of wise counsel that is inherent in what we think of as martial arts. This is not to say that martial arts wisdom is necessarily practical (*phronesis*) as opposed to theoretical (*sophia*). A Zen Buddhist’s or Daoist’s understanding of themselves or nature as embodied in martial arts has both theoretical and practical dimensions. However, the wisdom embodied in martial arts, or “the philosophy of martial arts”, as Lloyd puts it, “may have nothing to do with morality at all” [15] (p. 84). We may balk at the notion that “even at their most modern and most brutal martial arts are still forms of spiritual asceticism” [15] (p. 84). But if such discipline falls short of what we should call spirituality, that does not mean that it fails to count as a genuine philosophy of fighting, however pragmatic its focus and amoral its status. An amoral philosophy is still a philosophy, a dark wisdom still wisdom.

In an extended reading of my definition, then, any systematic fighting style—including combat sports and fighting systems—may count as a martial art insofar as it embodies wisdom by improving practical fighting skills. The implication is not that close combat and combat sports generally count as martial arts, however. First, one can engage in close combat and combat sports, and preparing for such engagement, without doing so systematically. Boxers, for instance, may be bruisers rather than approaching the sweet science “scientifically”, as Muhammad Ali claimed to have done. Likewise, there will be some combat sports the practical utility of which is fairly minimal in today’s society. Fencing is an example here, since it is no longer customary, as in times past, to walk around armed with a sword. Just how effective a putative martial art is in improving practical fighting skills will remain an empirical matter, and one no doubt that will continue to generate significant controversy.

6. Conclusions

I have argued that martial arts should be defined as systematic fighting styles and practices as ways of embodying wisdom. This definition complements Martínková and Parry’s limited category of martial arts and broadens it to include what they consider warrior arts and martial paths. In response to the potential objection that such definitions of martial arts are too demanding, that systematic fighting styles are sufficient for martial art status, I have argued that an extended reading of my definition avoids this objection, and, in particular, that the purpose of embodying wisdom applies no less to the practical (strategic) wisdom of a systematic *jutsu* than to the practical (ethical) wisdom of a *do*. This definitional flexibility is a theoretical strength rather than a weakness. On both the basic and extended readings of my proposed definition, the resulting verdicts on hard cases are both intuitive and principled. We may be right to prefer the narrow reading, just as we should prefer that kind of martial art. However, a “merely” systematic approach to fighting—whether in close combat or combat sport—can be assimilated appropriately to the martial arts class even if it disappoints our hopes for what martial arts should be. A martial art stripped of such higher wisdom has its own meta-philosophy about what wisdom remains on a practical level when stripped for battle. However, perhaps the crucial issue is not categorical but qualitative. The quality of a martial art will depend on the quality of the wisdom it embodies.

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Notes

- ¹ We may be motivated to characterize the external value of martial arts not in terms of violence, as Allen does, but rather in more positive or neutral terms such as self-defense or fighting prowess.
- ² This definition first appeared in an earlier essay [9], where it was assumed rather than argued for.

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