

## Philosophy in Review



# Stephen Mumford, "Football: The Philosophy Behind the Game."

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**Stephen Mumford.** *Football: The Philosophy Behind the Game.* Polity 2019. 140 pp. \$45.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9781509535316); \$12.95 USD (Paperback ISBN 9781509535323).

The French philosopher and writer Albert Camus was once asked by a friend which he preferred, football or the theatre—Camus is said to have replied ‘Football, without hesitation.’

Football is a fascinating and beautiful game and by far the most popular sport in the world. At first sight it seems so simple. There is a field, there are two teams each of which has eleven players, there is one referee, a ball, two goals, and the team that gets the most balls in the other goal wins. But behind this veil of simplicity football matters. People get emotional watching it, and the outcome of a game matters to people in a sometimes very emotional way as well. What Mumford is aiming for in this book is to explain why a simple game of football can have these effects on people. ‘How can football acquire such a grip on us? What explains its deep fascination? This is what I aim to investigate and I will do so with a philosophical approach’ (6).

The philosophical issues that are raised in this book have to do with beauty, wholes, space, chance, and victory. And each of these different issues make us realize that the apparent simplicity of the game of football is a delusion. Instead, football is a multilayered and multifaceted game.

Football is the beautiful game. Everyone who adores football will agree on that. But what exactly is it that makes it beautiful? In the chapter on Beauty Mumford explores what aesthetic categories are suited to explain why we experience this feeling of beauty when watching a game of football. The most obvious ones are ‘speed, power, balance and dexterity’ (33). But does this make football a form of art, as is sometimes suggested? Mumford thinks not because to him ‘art is a status bestowed upon certain forms of practice by a set of institutions, and it is clear that they have not bestowed that status on football’ (43). What remains is the question whether or not the creation of beauty is part of a game of football.

Another philosophical theme Mumford introduces, in the chapter on Wholes, is emergence and how this is useful in understanding what a football team is. ‘An emergent phenomenon is one that belongs to a whole and is different from all the properties of the parts of that whole and from the properties that come merely from the addition or aggregation of the parts’ (55–6). It is the notion of emergence that explains why a team composed of eleven individually great players don’t necessarily make a great team, but a team of eleven, maybe less individually great players, because of the group dynamics of matching styles, perhaps is a great team.

Among other things, the chapter on Space gives us a very clear insight that it is not only the space where the players are present that is important, but that the unoccupied empty space is perhaps equally, or even more, important for the development of a game than the occupied space. ‘[W]e see that such empty space plays an even more vital role in goal scoring. It is not just that the striker needs to find space in which to shoot, but the ball actually crossing the line depends essentially on it too’ (79).

‘Anything can happen in football’ (84). In the chapter on Chance Mumford explains why this is a desirable aspect of the game. The fact that anything can happen means that every team has in principle a chance to win. The stronger teams, the teams that win most of their games, have of course the best players for winning an individual game. But as Mumford rightly notices, ‘there is no necessity in the strongest team winning... but a tendency means more than that it has the mere possibility of winning’ (99). And since it is no necessity, anything can happen in football.

Victory, the theme of the last chapter, is about winning and losing. Victory is, in Mumford’s words, the dynamic of football. ‘[I]t is what each team wants, hopes for and does what it can to

maximize the chances of getting' (109). Victory is, however, not the aim of football. There are plenty of legitimate circumstances where winning a game is not the aim of playing.

After all this we are in a position to answer the question of whether football is about creating art and beauty or about getting results. The answer is that '[t]he aim of football is not to create art' (116) because '[v]ictory is what we want' (116) and 'if your aim is to create beauty ... you cease to play football' (117). Thus 'our inevitable conclusion, then, is that beauty is produced in football when it is not the aim. It is instead when the team wants to win that it creates aesthetic value in its play' (118).

Mumford ends the book with the following words: 'My hope is that a reader who has come this far will be looking at their next game even more closely than usual and thinking their own thoughts about the nature of this wondrous creation of the human spirit' (122). The application of philosophical concepts is not 'an unnecessarily obscure and metaphysical way of describing such a simple game as football' (76). Instead it can help us to understand the complexity and multi-layeredness of the game. Everybody with an interest in sport in general and football in particular should read this book. It deserves to be read.

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