Boxing is not an Olympic Sport!
Ethical Considerations

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Boerge M. Oftedal

Norges Idrettshøgskole

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1.0 Introduction

In this paper I will try to view some moral dilemmas that we can find in boxing as an Olympic sport. The focus will be on the moral dilemmas of knock out. My critique will be based on the philosophy of the Olympic Movement, written in the Olympic Charter. I will explain the moral criterion concerned with human welfare; to consider the welfare of others and to have some understanding of harm and benefit for other persons (Beauchamp, 1991). The methods are based on a literature study and the philosophical discussion of for and against a subject, in Latin called pro aut contra dicere (Thommessen and Wetlesen, 1996). The debate will include an analytical moral critique of boxing as an Olympic sport by examining or considering the moral criterion of human welfare. I will try to view the arguments for and against boxing as an Olympic sport, which will lead to a conclusion in the end. The research question is: Should boxing be an Olympic sport?

2.0 The Olympic ideal

In the Olympic Charter of The Olympic Movement, p. 9, I can read;

“1 Olympism is a philosophy of life, exalting and combining in a balanced whole the qualities of body, will and mind. Blending sport with culture and education, Olympism seeks to create a way of life based on the joy of effort, the educational value of good example and respect for universal fundamental ethical principles”.

“2 The goal of Olympism is to place sport at the service of the harmonious development of man, with a view to promoting a peaceful society concerned with the preservation of human dignity”. (IOC, 2006a)

It is possible to equalise the moral criterion about human welfare with the Olympic ideal; what is written above about Olympism as a philosophy of life has very much the same message as the moral criterion about human welfare. One way of how to study if knock out in Olympic boxing can be defended morally, can be to find out if (1) knock out can expose others to considerable pain and life threatening injuries and (2) if knock out opens the possibility for athletes to have the intention of harming their rivals to be rewarded. Is it
possible to unite the principles of the Olympic Charter with knock out in the Olympic sport of boxing?

3.0 Knock out in Olympic boxing – a moral dilemma

According to what is written about boxing in the Olympic Movement, according to IOC (2006b), boxing has been an Olympic sport since 1904 and ranks among the Olympic Games’ most illustrious sports. This author writes that the modern Games resumed in 1896. The committee thought boxing was too dangerous and they decided to omit boxing. The boxing sport was very popular in the United States and therefore the sport reappeared in 1904 in St. Lois. In 1912 at Stockholm it disappeared again because Sweden’s national law banned it. But in 1920 boxing returned to the Olympic Games to stay. Can we find a moral criterion that can challenge the practise of the modern Olympic Games of boxing?

Beauchamp (1991) writes that some philosophers have suggested a moral criterion which tells us that it is important for people to have some direct references of the welfare of others – to have the possibility to estimate harm and benefit for other persons. One part of developing common sense is concerned with learning practical ethics and how to separate bad moral from good moral. The moral criterion that focuses on welfare for others, tells us not to make unnecessary harm and try to do something good for other people. One tries to understand how people are coping with each others sufferings and pleasures.

With harm I understand that a human being at least should not hurt other people and/or not expose other human beings to bad actions. With pleasure I understand that a human being should have some understanding of factors that make other human beings happy and joyful. About practical ethics Audi (1995) writes:

“The practical nature of ethics lies mainly in the development of a certain kind of agent. The Nicomachean Ethics was written, Aristotle reminds us, “not in order to know what virtue is, but in order to become good.” One becomes good by becoming a good chooser and a good doer. This is not simply a matter of choosing and doing right actions but of choosing or doing them in the right way.” (p. 50).
One way of doing good actions is to practise sympathy, which is the ability to feel/show thoughtfulness for other people. Empathy is only pure knowledge of how other people feel, but when one is acting in a sympathetic way, with a caring intention, one is actually doing good actions to another person (Evenshaug and Hallen, 1991).

Intention of the athlete is important to determine if the action can be morally accepted or not. Audi’s (1995) gives this description of intention; (1) characterization of action, is when someone acts intentionally or with a certain intention; (2) a feature with a thought, is when one’s purpose is to act in a specific way now or in the future. It is interesting to discuss if the intention with knock out can be to make harm, as well as to find out if the intention of the athlete is focused on hurting the rival, or if the intention is to seek for the technical elegance of the Olympic sport of boxing.1

4.0 Boxing with knock out and human welfare

In the principles of the Olympic Charter (IOC, 2006a) it is written that Olympism seeks to create respect for universal fundamental ethical principles. Then one can wonder if it is possible to create respect for universal fundamental ethical principles, and at the same time allow boxing athletes to practice knock out.

In boxing the core of the competition is to hit and try to avoid getting hit by the competitor with more or less tough punches toward the body and/or the head (Wacquant, 1992). Here it is possible to raise questions if it exist some moral dilemmas that can criticize this kind of sport – where the athletes are allowed and actually are encouraged to hit his or her rivals as hard as possible. Davis (1993 - 94) writes that boxing is probably the only legal sport that allows and encourages athletes to harm each other. If this is so, how can the Olympic sport of boxing – that permits knock out - have respect for universal fundamental ethical principles?

Wacquant (1992) conducted a 3-year ethnography and participant observation study

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1 G. E. M. Anscombe has in Intention (1963) made a thorough philosophical discussion of different meanings of intention. In this paper I presuppose that the human being has an intention and I therefore stick to what Audi (1995) writes about this theme.
of a ghetto gym in Chicago. He describes that for many men this boxing gym was a way to have a life – to actually survive. He cites a 26 year old professional:

“I figure well, the bes’ thin’ for me to do is to chan’ my life style, 'cause I saw a lot of my frien’s git hurt an’ kill’ from the thin’s that we were doin’ an’ thin’s like that. I said, before I wan’ed [that] to happen to me, I ha’ to change my life an’ that idea [that I can’t go on] hangin’ on the streets an’ thin’s like that. It was on me. What did I wanna do in life? you know. The gym show that I coul’ do somethin’. The gym show me That I can be my own man. The gym show me that I can do other thin’s than the gang bang, use drugs, steal, rob people, stick people up, or jus’ bein’ in jail.” (p. 230-231).

On the other hand if the authorities of Chicago had turned this ghetto into a safer place to live, there probably wouldn’t be any need to practise full contact boxing, in order to experience some quality of life.

It is also possible to ask oneself if we produce harmonious athletes that promote a peaceful society and actions that preserve human dignity, when we at same time are open to boxing athletes practicing knock out.

The study of Wacquant (1992) tells us that the gym was a place that could protect the athletes from the “murdertown” outside and where it was possible to feel some human dignity. He writes: “By contrast to this hostile environment, and despite its severe dearth of resources, the Boys and Girls Club constitutes an island of stability and order where social relations forbidden on the outside become once again possible.” (p. 229).

On the other hand this author (1992) describes a plentitude of bloody noses and black eyes during his time at the gym, and every time a boxer steps into the ring to face a novice, he puts a fraction of his symbolic capital at stake. For an experienced boxer to do the slightest failing for a novice, brings immediate embarrassment to the fighter.

Øygarden (2000) think that the keywords of boxing culture are pain, loneliness and truth. Perhaps boxing is to learn about pain, injuries and loneliness and the knowledge gained from this might be of value in itself? If this knowledge is valuable to other people than boxers, we may say that boxing can be a part of human welfare. In this sense boxing
can give us a valuable piece of learning on how to cope with pain injuries and loneliness, which again can lead to a peaceful society and increased dignity. On the other hand we can wonder if we need boxing with knock out to learn how to cope with pain injuries and loneliness, and if this practice actually can lead to a more peaceful society.

In 1896 boxing was not on the program of the Olympic Games because the IOC found boxing to be too dangerous. Is boxing dangerous? Wacquant (1992) sites an experienced boxing coach: "Professional fighting is, you know, it’ll knock you outa your mind, you know. Rough game, you turn professional, it’s a rough game – it’s not a game. Amateur, you have your fun. Professional, they’re tryin’ to kill you.” (p. 234).

Research conducted at Johns Hopkins University (Hansen et.al., 2000, appendix nr. 6), concluded: "By comprehensive inquiry of amateur boxing, such a practice does not seem to expose the athlete to neurotic psychological damage.” (p. 1).

Even if boxing is a tough sport and many people might think it is very dangerous, research shows that this claim may not be true.

### 5.0 Intention of the Olympic boxer

The moral criterion about welfare of others is interesting if we want to find out why athletes like to take part in knock out sports and if it is right to take part in knock out sports. It is important to have some understanding of human welfare and the ethical message of the Olympic Charter. Is it so that many athletes voluntary show up at the gym to beat their friends yellow and blue?

Even if the intention of the athletes is not to beat each other up, the risk to give each other great pain is high and to knock each other out definitely is present. Then, we can ask if knock out in Olympic boxing is compatible with the principles of the Olympic charter? The principles are as such: doing something good or wishing other people and oneself experiences that feel good, valuable and meaningful. Is it possible to say that an intention of knock out can be characterized as a good intention?

The athletes should be aware of that the consequences of a knock out can be an experience filled with lots of pain and possibilities for life threatening injuries, i.e. permanent
brain damage.\(^2\) It is possible to say that many people can agree that if a boxing athlete feels good about giving an opponent a knock out, this should indicate that this boxing athlete has some problems to understand the moral criterion of human welfare. If the intention to give the opponent a knock out is to harm and to kill, what Kildea (1983) name as The Survival Mode, we can not accept the moral intention of the athlete. But if a knock out comes as a result of the rival - by an accident – submit towards the punch and literally “run into the punch”, then we might look at it in another way. Still, such a knock out will also involve great pain and harm, and again we can ask the question if this pain and harm can balance other good sides in the sport of boxing.

The Olympic boxer can acknowledge a good experience by the intention of “kicking the rivals ass”\(^3\) by giving him or her a knock out. The target is to overcome the opponent, and when the victory is done by knock out, it’s just perfect. He or she managed to avoid death and instead gave the opponent a ride to the hospital.

On the other hand one can ask the question if it is possible to look at knock out as experience of human welfare. Boxing is a tough sport where the athletes never know if they go home from the gym healthy and in a good shape. Wacquant (1992) writes: “But sparring is also a redoubtable test of strength, cunning and courage, if only because the possibility of serious injury can never be completely eliminated, in spite of all precautions.” (p. 241).

Athletes that consider themselves to the ethos of The Survival Mode can have the intention to kill the opponent. The boxing match is recognized as a tough battle where to brave athletes carry on the history of great pugilistic tradition (Holt, 1992). Fight to kill is what boxing is all about, and it is important to maintain the culture by its roots – to the Ancient times when the boxers could beat each other to death.

On the other hand one can argue that we now live in a world that has developed in different ways since the Ancient Olympic Games took place. Killing is not an action that civilized societies promote and it has very little to do with the moral criterion of human welfare.

But the intention to kill can be a human instinct that we should encourage and

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\(^2\) Garrett (2002) claims that no one is actually sure if Muhammed Ali really has Parkinson’s disease or if he because of the boxing has developed symptoms of Parkinson’s disease.

\(^3\) It’s an informal vocabulary of boxers.
practice more often – to be in touch with our need to feel and express masculinity and power. For a man to enter the ring is a special moment. To acknowledge that it really is accurate – according to the rules, and to the ethos of the sport – to strike the opponent as hard as possible to have the ultimate chance of knocking him down; the fantastic good feeling that runs through the body when the rival drop to the floor, like a dead fly after a fine smack. The man is down and you can praise your toughness and your strength.

It is possible to agree that it can be important for a human being to acknowledge its own power in different ways. The question is if it is necessary to practice knock out with the intention to kill to stimulate this need. The boxing gym is often provided with different kind of boxing pads and sacks that the athletes can hit. It should be better to throw the roughest punches on the sack instead on a fragile human head. This is supported both by The American Medical Association and The British Medical Association (Wester, 2000).

What about knock out as therapy? Isn’t it just perfect to hand over all your frustrations with great strikes to your opponent? Why burn inside with all the heavy stuff? Why not be gentle and share it with your fellow boxing partner? According to Nøkling (1996) it is quite normal to project our anger to others, so then the boxing ring should be a perfect arena to let the anger fly away.

Parry (1998) claim that boxing not only permits, but ultimately rewards the causing of grievous or actual bodily harm. It should be possible to find other forms for therapy than to try to beat each other to death. Nyhus (1972) says that if some one would like to serve as a therapist, one should have vocational training. Kittang (1997) writes that Freud insisted on finding the cause of the frustration to better treat the illness. Then one should not have the need to strike other human beings. Nøkling (ibid.) suggests that other contingencies to release frustrations are to run, to lift heavy weights or to cut some wood.

According to this author there are no participants in boxing – only winners and losers. He refers to Wacquant when he, identical to Wacquant, many times has said

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that he very seriously appreciated to choose a boxing career instead of a life as an academic researcher. About this he writes simply: “The words don’t hurt.” (p. 403).

It’s something about feeling alive. It’s about courage and a strong mentality. Boxing produces meaning. The punches hurt but in one way or another it feels good. One can not acknowledge the intimate of life the same way in an office as in a boxing ring. Øygarden (2000) chooses nevertheless to turn down the offer of having a life as a boxer; he claims that he does not have the physics and the strong mentality to master this rough sport. “If I had had a real choice between being a professional boxer and an academician, I had put my thesis on the shelf.” (p. 403).

6.0 Conclusion

I started to ask the question; should boxing be an Olympic sport? The Olympic Movement claims among other factors that “Olympism is a philosophy of life (…) based on the joy of effort, the educational value of good example and respect for universal fundamental ethical principles.” (IOC, 2006a).

Permitting knock out in Olympic boxing is morally unacceptable, because it encourages the athletes to harm each other. The intention of the boxing athletes can have the target of hurting the rival to win a competition, which according to the criterion about human welfare, which I equalise with the Olympic ideal, will be characterized as morally unacceptable.

In case an athlete has the intention of mastery and to experience deep flow, and this athlete by accident should give the opponent a knock out, I will characterize this as a misfortune. This can happen when the opponent by accident submits towards the punch when the punch is coming, and therefore gets hit harder than planned.

In martial art competitions where the intention is to reach an opponent with punches or kicks, where focus is an experience of mastery and/or harmony – and not to make harm – I will, according to the moral criterion about human welfare, for the time being, accept these kind of competitions. Here I think of martial art competitions in semi-contact and mild-contact where the athletes are focused on mastery, harmony, fair play and technical elegance.
In order to protect the athletes that have the intention of mastery and/or harmony where the focus is on fair play and technical elegance, together with preventing the development of athletes that have the intention of doing harm, I will for the time being have a critical attitude to knock out in martial arts.

Knock out as a medium to achieve victory in Olympic boxing fights not can be morally defended. Such a practice encourages athletes to harm each other, something that cannot be accepted according to the moral criterion about human welfare and the philosophy of the Olympic Movement. Boxing should not be an Olympic sport.

References


