

## Ants Work, Grasshoppers Play: Sporting Life in Ancient Greek Utopian Thought

Bernard Suits' fantastic book *The Grasshopper: Games, Life and Utopia* (1978) is not widely read outside the field of philosophy of sport, yet its main narrative, featuring a philosophizing insect modeled explicitly both on the famous layabout of Aesop's fables and on Plato's Socrates, has many important insights to offer an audience of classicists. In the book's playful frame tale, the Grasshopper defends to his Grasshopper-students his life's philosophy that it is better to play than to work. The dialogue figures as an *apologia* at the end of the Grasshopper's life: he awaits death brought on by winter as the penalty for his frivolous lifestyle. Arguing through riddles and parables, he concludes that game-playing, defined precisely as an activity that lacks utilitarian goals, would be the essential utopian activity — in fact, the *only* imaginable activity — since in Grasshopper's vision of Utopia, all needs are provided for, and accordingly everyone can be perfectly happy without working (cf. also the discussions of Hurka 2006 and Kagan 2009). *The Grasshopper* thus not only imitates Plato's dialogues about the end of Socrates' life, it also adopts and adapts ideas about society and human nature from the *Republic* and the *Laws*.

In this paper I argue that *The Grasshopper*, though patterned on ancient literary forms, primarily expresses modern values that are largely incompatible with, but simultaneously revealing of, ancient Greek ideals. Chief among these incompatibilities are the Grasshopper's concerns for perfect social justice and psychological/spiritual fulfillment in Utopia. Whereas to the modern mind an ideal existence may, as Grasshopper suggests, consist of perfect autonomy and leisure, early Greek writers on utopia (esp. Plato and Plutarch; cf. Manuel and Manuel 1979: 93-99) focused on the interdependence and collectivity of *polis* members, and they theorized how best to elicit maximum public good from each citizen. A few ancient passages allude

cursorily to the possibility of a life of complete autonomy (Pl. *Rep.* 369b-c) or maximum leisure (Plut. *Lyc.* 24), but in the former case the concept is ignored as unsatisfying, and in the latter the life of *scholē* relies firmly on the backs of a compliant slave population — hardly a modern value.

Despite some fundamental differences as these, the notion of sport as a utopian activity is productive for thinking about the role of sports and other activities in the *polis*. For example, the search for an ancient sport that adheres to Suit's definition of game-playing reveals that practically no ancient writer conceived of sports as essentially non-utilitarian: from Pindar to Plato to Philostratus, sport is never seen as something to be done merely for its own sake. Instead athletic training, competition and victory must be directed toward the good of the state. In this latter sense, for many ancient writers sporting activities are compatible with utopianism, albeit for entirely different reasons than for Grasshopper. (Rare exceptions to the rule of non-utilitarianism, such as the games of the blissful Phaeacians in *Odyssey* 8, evidently reinforce this interpretation.)

If, as I argue, the worldviews of Socrates and Grasshopper are so different, the question remains as to why Suits adopted the Platonic formal model for his investigation of games. I believe the answer is at least partly to be found in the Platonic dialogues themselves. In contrast to all the other ancient pastimes that seemingly do not fit Grasshopper's definition of game-playing, the dialogue form itself comes closest to the non-utilitarian ideal. While philosophy may be used for practical purposes — creating the ideal city, for example — it is primarily done for its own sake. To borrow terms from Grasshopper's argument, "professional" philosophical players like the sophists fall short of the ideal of "amateur" philosophy. Further, the dialogues themselves work much like games: participants must approach dialectic with a suitable attitude

(what Grasshopper calls the “lusory attitude,” 38) and they must follow some basic constitutive rules of behavior which allow the “game” of philosophy to proceed (44-47; cf. Pl. *Gorg.* 486-488). In sum, the Socratic notion of philosophy pursued for its own sake — the Grasshopper’s own chosen way of life — approaches the utopian ideal, but this ideal proves, for both Socrates and the Grasshopper, a beautiful but deadly and sadly impracticable model of life.

#### Works Cited

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