A PHILOSOPHY OF TENNIS

or, you Kant be serious

Thomas Rowland

With a Foreword by Charles Fischbein

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FOREWORD

Foreword

As I sit this morning writing this Foreword my gaze lifts through the window upon a scene that could only be described - and I claim no hyperbole here - as a classic catastrophe of British climatic proportions. Dank. Dreary. Raw. One despairs of synonyms. Murky clouds scuttle across the gloom, driven by the whirl of a relentless wind. The rain falls, not in a steady downpour but rather in sheets that rise and fall like dust storms on the desert. And it is cold. Not your standard Moscow-Bering Strait-Antarctic chill but an icy force that insinuates, that *eats* into everything it touches.As is typical of this part of Cornwall, my studio's walls were never constructed with the wisdom of resisting days like this. And I feel it. The tips of my fingers are growing numb as I touch the keys of my computer. My nose, as well. Worse, the mechanisms in my brain that usually provide me with ample literary facility have almost entirely frozen up. The words, the sentences ... come ... with ... difficulty.

It's a far cry from Ann Arbor three weeks ago. There on a gentle, sweet morning I sipped my coffee at an outdoor café, admiring the slanting sun's rays reflecting the brilliant yellows and reds of autumn's colors. In this magical setting I churned out an entire chapter of my own book even before noon.

I'm a firm believer that weather makes a difference. I would like to think that I am a constant - the same person, with the same brain circuits. But in Cornwall today I am nul. In the meteorologic glory of another time, I was a luminary.

Time and location make us different. And it is no different in literature - or any of the arts, for that matter. The book that you read last year was inspirational; you pick it up again today, and now it seems stale and insipid. When you saw the movie for the first time you were crying from laughter; the second time around it was moronic. The book, the movie, the piece of art, the play didn't change, but somehow the receptor - *you* - were altered.

The classic party line in literary criticism is that the "meaning" or the "interpretation" of a book is much less in the hands of the author than it is in the mind of the reader. Every reader, so the dictum goes, absorbs the book in light of his or own personal life experiences, and it is the book's narrative, serving as sort of a literary raw material, that is shaped by the reader - the recipient - into an interpretation in light of those experiences. There are as many "meanings" to a book, then, as there are its readers. It follows that the "value" of a piece of literature can be gauged not by the cunningness of its author but rather by its ability to allow each individual reader to construct meaning and gain personal insights from the work.

This is undoubtedly true. But I am continuously reminded that the "me" on the receiving end of this literary interplay is not constant, and that my reactions, my ability to fabricate a sense of personal meaning from a novel, or film, or piece of art, consequently can vary over time. What was meaningful once, may not be again. Or, for the better, new insights can be gained from re-assessing a work the second time around.

The first time I read *A Philosophy of Tennis,* I thought I had a pretty good handle on what this short work was all about. Rowland had used a common, everyday type of experience - the game of tennis - as a mechanism for exploring some time-honored philosophic dilemmas. And the point was that both tennis and life shared these questions - ethics, determinism, beauty, and so on. One could quickly draw an analogy with Robert Pirsig's *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance.* How we conduct our lives can be reflected in some pretty mundane activities. There's nobility in the every-day. Pay attention! That's what these works are saying.

That's a meaty enough message to sell a book, for certain. Book clubs everywhere thrive on such fare. But when I read Rowland's work for the second time in preparing to put together this Foreword, I began to appreciate some additional strata beneath that rather superficial interpretation. And these have given me a new sense of the book. A second reading. Maybe it was the weather. Or the coffee. But my interpretive apparatus was now beginning to see this book in a different light.

On "Doing Philosophy"

Just why should one concern themselves with philosophy and the difficult issues it raises? In our busy lives our time is consumed by the demands of very practical tasks. How will I get my son to soccer and my daughter to band practice at the same time? How can I deal with my parents' declining health? Where will I get the money for retirement? But, *by definition,* the answers to questions raised by philosophy are not answerable. They're uncertain: Is there a God? What is the meaning of our existence in the universe? Is there an objective reality, or is it just a construct defined by what our senses tell us? Does a spiritual mind exist, or are our brains just chemicals and electricity? Who has time to struggle with unanswerable questions like these?

Bertrand Russell thought a great deal about this objection to any value of philosophy for the common man. True, he wrote in his book *The Problems of Philosophy,* philosophy by its nature does not offer any definitive or provable answers to certain fundamental questions. It is, in fact, *defined* by such uncertainty. But it is in this very uncertainty, he said, that rests its value. Without recognizing uncertainties, of options, of variation in the way of conducting a life, he says, one is condemning oneself to leading a narrow existence "imprisoned in the prejudices derived from common sense, from the habitual beliefs of his age or his nation, and from the convictions which have grown up in his mind without the co-operation or consent of his deliberate reason."

"Philosophy is to be studied," wrote Russell, "not for the sake of any definitive answers to its questions, since no definitive answers can, as a rule, be known to be true, but rather for the sake of the questions themselves; because these questions enlarge our conception of what is possible, enrich intellectual imagination, and diminish dogmatic assurance which closes the mind."

Rowland would say that these issues of uncertainty, of "what is possible", are not necessarily confined to the grandiose God-universe-meaning type of questions but are equally applicable to the day-to-day issues and uncertainties that we confront in our daily lives. To be sure, we recognize that facing this type of uncertainty can be troublesome. We

normally seek refuge in comfort rather than disturbing existential questions. To "do philosophy" requires courage. And in drawing upon this courage we derive strength in a world that strives to minimize our individuality.

Of course, the value of this "self-examination" has been a mantra beginning with Socrates and proceeding through a long time line of philosophers to Nietzsche and Sartre.[2] These thinkers would propose that the "true" person must examine his or her life, understand fully its options, make conscious deliberate decisions - even when there is not a "correct" thing to do - based on his or her own experiences, and then take responsibility for these judgments. The biggest "default" we can make, they would say, is not asking the questions. In today's age of information with its engulfing technology, these same thinkers would undoubtedly experience escalating despair in the substitution of continuous electronic social contact as a means of self-identification rather than such personal self-reflection.

If one is looking for a role model on just how to "do philosophy" on an individual basis one can do no better than Michel Eyquem de Montaigne. Montaigne was not a philosopher, but rather a public official (he was once mayor of Bordeaux) who gave up his official duties to sequester himself and reflect upon the meanings of his experiences in life. And then he wrote these out in a series of essays for everybody to read. (Note, this was in the Sixteenth Century, well before Facebook and blogs and tweets.) These are truly remarkable and entertaining works to read, famous for their honesty (he often contradicted himself when he changed his mind on an issue) and stunningly encyclopedic (everything from his sex life to cannibalism to fear of death). (The reader whose interest is sparked to learn more about this fascinating thinker should read Sarah Bakewell's marvelous book *How to Live, or, a Life of Montaigne*.)

Montaigne's essays greatly influenced subsequent philosophical thought, and as one reads these, it's obvious that they bear as much relevance in contemporary times as they did four hundred years ago. How should one live his life? Some of Montaigne's conclusions may sound familiar: Question everything. Be convivial: live with others. Live temperately. Do something no one has done before. See the world. Let life be its own answer.

Being Like Montaigne

In this book, Rowland uses the game of tennis as a mechanism for examining quintessential philosophical dilemmas. But it is a quick trip - and he is inviting the reader to do this - for the reader to think about these issues just as Montaigne did in his own very personal life. (It should be noted that Montaigne himself was not a tennis player. In fact, his only connection with the game was a tragic one - his brother was killed when struck by a tennis ball.)

So, one of Rowland's messages here in this book is that for you, the individual, there are valuable rewards to "doing philosophy". You have the ability - dare one say the obligation - to actively, purposefully choose pathways in life. Considering philosophical issues can and should be applied to your own life. Take a couple of examples that Rowland uses in the pages that follow.

How much control do you have over events in your life? and *How should you respond when things turn bad, or turn good?* When you step onto the court to face an opponent, you feel confident. You twirl the racquet awaiting return of the opening serve. But let's add up just what you yourself are able to control. The skill of the opponent, the climatic conditions, the rules of the game, the structure of the racquet? No. Your ability to coordinate a shot, to time the arrival of the ball, to direct an appropriate level of muscular strength in striking it? No. That's all in your subconscious mind. Even your ability to focus, to "stay in the game" mentally often seems to out of your control from one match to the next. And, too, we all have experienced the vagaries of what, for want of a better term, I'll call fate. Some days you just can't miss, you're a world-beater. Other times you play like you've never learned the game at all, you're a chump. But why? Who knows? So, what's left? Strategy ("he's dominating by coming to the net, I need to lob"). That's about it.

So, how do you deal with this? Should you become frustrated because the opponent is banging away some incredible winning points? Or, when your overhead smash lands three feet long? No, because those events are out of your conscious control. But you do anyway. You get angry. You curse yourself and any of a number of higher deities. You

express a lack of will to go on living. And that's not fair, because you have to choose to focus on altering those factors that you can control. You can practice more. Take lessons. Think more on the court about effective strategy. Maybe choose a different opponent. Or (the customary response) purchase a new racquet. But *you* have to think about these issues and make conscious decisions.

It takes little imagination to translate this picture into how one conducts one's life. We all want to be successful and happy and fulfilled in how we live. But how much is under one's own personal control, and how much is not? How much can, or should a life be changed to achieve these goals? These are not simple questions for an individual to answer. But by not even recognizing options - specifically, options that can work - one forfeits the opportunity to achieve personal goals. And you *do* have a choice. During the adult years, you will awake in the morning about 15,000 times, with something like 15 hours of waking life in front of you. That's 15,000 times you have the opportunity to choose. To consider. To strategize. But you need recognize the factors that *for you* can be changed and those that can't.

What is the risk:benefit ratio in your daily decisions? Perhaps you're a lot like me. You play life pretty much close to the vest. You like routine, the familiar, the safe. You see your life as a steady course, with few deviations, few mistakes - and few moments of exhilarating success. Maybe you've got a friend who's just the opposite. He's always taken chances, swinging for the fences. In his wild decisions he often makes mistakes, sometimes costly ones. But money, stability, home, family don't mean much to him. He's always seeking the thrill. At the end of his life he wants it on his grave stone - "What a ride!" In the sense of being a "true" human being, which is the "right" path? One might guess that my friend and I both have had second thoughts at some moments late at night about the style of living we've elected. If it's any consolation, you can pick your own philosopher who will take your side, since they couldn't agree on this either. Aristotle, for instance, was big on virtue (itself a self-imposed limitation of personal freedom) as the key pathway to happiness, while others, like Heidegger and Nietzsche have seen self-expression, electing the road not taken, as the means towards a rewarding life.

Maybe the reader is saying here "No, this isn't right. I really don't have a personal choice of a 'style' of life. This has all been dictated by the expectations of the culture in which I grew up and the 'values' instilled in my by my parents, teachers, and Sunday School lessons. I can't change this any more than I could exchange a limb." Okay, but to take that stance is a decision you have to make.

What are the limits of what's fair? I suspect that a response to this question posed to a population of individuals would be pretty much the same - it is not just or fair to deny the rights of others nor to perform acts that infringe on their well-being. But it doesn't take much reflection to recognize that, in fact, human behavior is driven largely by concern for self, and that "being unfair" by at least some definition is commonplace in our daily lives. We play favorites. We ignore inequities that play for our own benefit. What would you do in the following situations? Having finished a meal at a very over-priced restaurant, you notice on the bill that your rude waiter for the evening forgot to include your cup of coffee? As coach of a Little League baseball team, you are the only person to notice that the nine-year old youngster on your team who just hit the game-winning home run in the final inning failed to touch third base on his trip around the diamond. The running shoes you've been coveting - and which were made in a third world country with substandard wages and working conditions - are now on sale for 25% off. With no traffic in sight, you are sitting at a red light.

No big deal? Is there a slippery slope here? Yes or no? Where on the slope do you sit? It's your decision. That's the lesson between the lines of this book.

In the chapters of this book that follow one encounters an eclectic mélange of characters and events. There's a fist fight in the stands of Roland Garros over Roger Federer's choice (or non-choice) of shots. And a questioning Socrates who meets up for a Saturday afternoon tennis match with an unsuspecting opponent. We meet a meek director of a home for tennis losers. Some important philosophical issues are addressed here that bear on our daily existence, seen through the lens of the game of tennis. Rowland presents them, too, in a misleading cloak of humor, obeying a classic dictum that *castigat ridend mores* (it corrects more by laughter).

What is the Meaning of Sport?

On an entirely different level, this book stimulates us to consider a fascinating question. Why do we play sports? Certainly, tennis is a game, and games are fun. But one would have to admit that this answer doesn't really strike to the core of the question. Maybe it has to do with quest for victory? But, no, it's easy to win at tennis. Just pick an inferior opponent. We must elect to play a sport like tennis for more profound reasons. Is there a philosophical meaning, one could reasonably ask, the essence, behind all this? What are we "achieving" in a couple of sets of tennis competition? And what, if anything, does this have to do with how we behave at the office, or our homes, in daily living?

I had the opportunity to sit and talk with Rowland regarding this very issue at Angelo's, an iconic breakfast restaurant in Ann Arbor, before I left last month. (He was obviously enamored with this spot, and I suspect the rumor is probably true that he keeps a framed copy of their menu on the wall of his study.)

"I certainly have no answer to that question" he said. "The reader will have to decide for him- or herself. But I will say that I'm a biologist at heart, and I can't help examining and interpreting human behavior through a Darwinian lens. The veneer of 'civilized society' is a thin one, and aggression, hunger, self-preservation, sexual drive, and so forth are not so far beneath the surface. It is not unreasonable to seek a 'meaning' of tennis in this context". It will be interesting for the reader to recall this perspective while wending through the pages of this book.

I then took the role of devil's advocate and asked him how he would respond to those who criticize an altruistic view of a philosophical approach to life. "Look," these nay sayers would contend, "if 'doing philosophy' offers a more fulfilled, enriched life, why is that philosophers themselves throughout the centuries have so terribly failed in their own personal lives? What do we see? Mental illness, failed attempts (or not none at all) to establish close human relationships, political chicanery, philandering, sexually-transmitted disease, paranoia, abandoned children, hypochondria, misogyny, isolation, self-doubt, sadomasochism, etc. Altogether not a happy lot."

Rowland smiled at this. "It's an old question, isn't it? I would say to such critics that perhaps we don't know which way the arrow of causality goes. Because of their early life experiences - in many cases quite wretched - were these thinkers *enabled* to create systems of thought and understanding? Or did the process of reaching to the frontiers of human imagination and thought *cause* them to come off the rails?"

"So, which is it?" I queried.

He shrugged his shoulders. "Just another uncertainty of philosophy." Again, he grinned. "You want answers, too?"

Picking a Major

My father once wisely advised me that to gain fame and fortune in life I should never major in college in any subject that began with the letter "P". (So, philosophy, yes, but also paleontology, physics, political science, phrenology, parasitology, psychology, etc.) I have, in turn, counseled my children in the same fashion. But that doesn't mean one shouldn't examine philosophical issues as a means of making difficult choices in life. Rowland's book, taken on many different levels, reminds us that this "P" is a valuable tool. In the chapters that follow, there are a good many intriguing questions, yet, in the true philosophical manner, the answers are elusive. The best advice for the reader is to take heart and take a stand. Whatever the weather.

Charles Fischbein
(Cornwall-on-Trent)

Readings

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Johnson P. Socrates. A man for our times. New York. Penguin Books, 2011.
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PROLOGUE

Two weeks ago, Mr. B. called me into his office and requested that I write an opening, or prologue, for a book entitled A Philosophy of Tennis. He said the subject should be "A History of Tennis". Or maybe, if I preferred, "A Short History of Tennis". He told me that I should try to make it interesting. Here's what I've written so far.

A Very Short History of Tennis

I

February, 1556. The Abbey de Charlevoix, somewhere in the Vaucluse, south-eastern France. The small but fervent crowd is intent on *les joueurs au tennis* as they battle it out for the Crown Tennis championship beneath the abbey's vaulted ceilings. The local favorite Friar de Robinet is up against his long-time adversary Brother D'Aisselle, the hope of the Dijon Monastery faithful. The net is strung loosely over the hard rock floor; the players strike the ball, cork covered with leather stripping, with short curved racquets. The good Friar is up a break 3-2 in the first set and now leads by a score of 45-love. [The arithmetic scoring progression of 0-15-30-45 in Crown Tennis of 1556 made good Euclidian sense and was designated from the hands of a clock. Then, in a single catastrophic moment in 1564, all was changed. Historical scholars relate the story, probably apocryphal, that the son of the scorekeeper, a squirrelly lad named Hugo with acne and few friends, borrowed one of his father's 5's for a school science project (something to do with prime numbers, for which he was afforded a B+, the judges considering it "innovative, but lacking in illustrations"). So, at the next match, when it came time for Hugo's father to post a score of 45, alas, no 5 could be found. Being resourceful, he substituted a zero, and henceforth 40 was it.]

We are indebted to the French for a good deal of tennis terminology, too. Most people are in agreement that the Brother's score, being love, is derived from the French "l'oeuf", which means a goose egg. The word "tennis" itself probably originates from the French "tenez!" (meaning "brace yourself!"), which the server would shout out before striking the ball. "Deuce" comes from "á deux", meaning that the next player to win two points in succession will take the game. (In Crown Tennis, our two

monks would have also declared a "deuce set" at 5-5, indicating that the next player to win two games in a row has the set.) The derivation of "Out!" is clearly from the French word "aout", which means the month of August, when the French all leave on vacation. That is, no one is "in". The origin of other colorful tennis terms, such as "bathroom break" are more obscure.

Anyway, the match has now progressed to the final point. The Friar serves underhand (no one will serve overhead for about 300 years, this being to the benefit of the good Friar, who is suffering from a nagging rotator cuff injury). The ball, barely crossing over the net, lands with a thud. Point, game, set, and match go to the local favorite. "*Zut!* These balls," says the pious Brother, "are really dead."

II

August, 1831, Stoke-On-Trent, England.

"Drats!" Portnoy was little aware that with this simple expletive he would set forth a revolution that would alter the course of tennis play forever. He was not by nature, as would later be assumed, a chronic complainer. But after being stuck for four straight weekends playing croquet with his sister Martha and her obnoxious husband Alfred, whose boasting he could barely tolerate and who owed him fifty quid, he'd had it. "I am BORED!" he said. "We need something new, something with more zest, something with more of a cardiovascular workout, for God's sake!"

"But, dear husband," cooed his good wife Sasha, "we tried tennis last week, but the grass was just too high. There went your topspin, and your white pants got all grass stained, and you went into the house in a pout." Of course, Portnoy remembered it well. He had spent the entire morning cutting back the weeds with his sickle, to no avail. The ball just wouldn't bounce.

Public sentiment sided with Portnoy. Who in their right mind could expect to play lawn tennis lacking a closely-cropped lawn? Indeed, the problem was not lost on the dues-paying members of the Stoke-

on-Trent Lawn Tennis and Cricket Club, where a resolution to reduce the club's name to The Cricket Club was narrowly-defeated by a vote of 45-44 when the lead proponent for change, a certain Hector Harrison-Smythe, passed away from an underdetermined illness while on a ski trip to Mt. Blanc with his son.

The serendipity of that outcome cannot be overstated, for not soon afterwards a solution to the difficulty was at hand, not far away in the village of Stroud, in Gloucestershire. There an engineer named Edwin Beard Budding invented the lawn mower. Sadly, history tells us little of this event. From the few extant clues, though, scholars, working diligently with little rest and consuming only small bits of suet and weak tea, have pieced together a story that goes something like this. Times were slow in that part of England, and one Sunday, for pure excitement, Budding cajoled his wife Louise into joining him for the weekly guided tour of the local cloth mill. (It probably was this same day, in fact, that Louise, questioning her future with Edwin, initiated an ill-fated affair with Geoffroy, the bartender's son, who, it must be admitted, was hardly a catch.)

While touring the plant, Edwin watched with considerable interest a series of blades cutting through a carpet, and the rest is history. "Why not," he cried out loud, "attach these blades to a cylinder, and we can then roll that over the lawn to cut the grass!" The story gets vague at this point, but there's something about a turning point in the season for Manchester United. Budding was, you see, a soccer fan and hardly knew a back hand slice from a foot fault. In Manchester the pitch was neatly cropped. Up in Scotland, excited people at St. Andrews carefully measured their putts. Portnoy escaped his disagreeable family and was rarely seen except at the newly-named Stoke-on-Trent Lawn Tennis Club, perfecting his topspin.

III

January, 1839. Lamentably, the tennis ball has not been served well by history. Early on, its rubber shell would become brittle and shatter in

cold weather, thereby signaling the death knell of the Anchorage Open. Or, in warmer climes it would just melt into a gooey mess - thus a similar fate for the Caribe Hilton Invitational. But in 1839, Charles Goodyear solved all that. He had just been released from a prison in Connecticut, serving time for debt, where, instead of making license plates, he worked on solving the problem of the vagaries of rubber. One fine day, Goodyear accidentally spilled some rubber mixed with sulfur on a hot stove. Lo and behold, he found that the rubber was now strong and totally resistant to changes in temperature. The modern day tennis ball had arrived (not to mention rubber condoms, intra-uterine devices, and contraceptive diaphragms).

"Eureka!" he exclaimed. "This is the place! Arnie, come here, I want you. That's certainly a small step for a man, a giant step for mankind!" The Arnie in question was his assistant Arnold Fitzroy, better known early on as Arnie the Swindler, who was in the next room copying down verbatim all of Goodyear's exclamations, which he sold on the black market to interested parties in the future at inflated prices.

Goodyear had other problems, too. Maladroit, with poor fine motor control and unable to save money, he suffered greatly beginning in early childhood from fear of both heights and crowds, sort of a combined agora-acrophobia. It has recently been exposed in a kiss-and-tell autobiography by his first girlfriend, actually Arnie Fitzroy's sickly sister Amelia, that all this began with a series of repeated nightmares at age 4 years in which he was menaced by a large motorized airship, filled with helium and bearing his name, hovering noiselessly over the Rose Bowl in Pasadena.

IV

July 21, 1877. When, in the year 2017, tennis-playing travelers were requesting destination dates for their time travel machine, this one was the most sought-after. Why? It was the beginning of Wimbledon. Not actually the first year, but the second, which was much more interesting and smacked of new innovations not yet heard of. As the weary

voyageurs stepped off the time machine bus (there had been a 5-hour layover in Detroit), they were greeted with the finding that their seats were directly facing the sun. This caused them to noisily petition the tour leader, a rather inscrutable Mr. Doty, that a) visors must be provided, and b) this couldn't be England, anyway, because the sun was shining. Reassured on these matters, they filed into their seats.

Ah, there he was, warming up. Spencer Gore. Handsome, resplendent in his white trousers and matching pullover, he had won the initial Wimbledon title the year before, accomplished with a, shall we say, unusual - maybe even illegal - strategy. This was his peculiar volleying technique, which involved leaning over and striking his opponent's ball before it crossed the net. Now he was being challenged for the title by a Frank Hadow, who had just returned from his regular job of planting tea in Ceylon.

Hadow was obviously ready. He took the first two sets, 7-5, 6-1, but then tired as thing started looking grim in the third. Suddenly, though, he found new life. Cleverly, he began to sail the ball high above Gore's head. On that momentous summer afternoon in sunny England, never to be forgotten, Hadow had invented the lob. "Smash it! Smash it!" screamed the 2017 visitors. But, unfortunately, Gore could provide no such response and was, indeed, quite defenseless. What the time travelers didn't know was that no one had yet learned how to hit an overhead smash.

Third set (9-7) and match went to the lobber. Afterwards, Hadow returned to Ceylon, never to compete at Wimbledon again, while Gore went back to his favorite sport, cricket, commenting that, as for tennis, "the monotony of the game as compared to others would choke him off."

Reading

Barret J. Wimbledon. The official history of the championships. London: Collins Willow, 2001, p.113.