



## Book Reviews

**Kevin Krein**

### **Philosophy and Nature Sports**

**Routledge, London**  
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The philosophy of sport is a relatively new philosophical field that has slowly developed over the last fifty years, bringing a truly original and inspiring topic into philosophical focus. However, the field is still developing in many ways, and there are some completely neglected areas of inquiry in the philosophy of sport, especially those that do not relate to competition, which historically has been a necessary component of traditional sport. Thus, there is a wide horizon of sporting innovations that do not fit into the traditional framework of conceptualizing sport. For example, there are the so-called alternative sports, lifestyle sports, and nature sports. While the first two emerged as opposites to traditional or mainstream sports, the last are in a completely different position. Nature sports such as mountaineering, climbing and surfing have a respectable history, a long tradition and their own sports culture with a particular ethos. Given that more and more people are getting out into nature in these epidemiologically turbulent times, the need for a clear philosophical analysis of what constitutes nature sports – as sport – is becoming increasingly apparent. Kevin Krein has taken it upon himself to fill this gap and has produced an exceptionally clear and intellectually stimulating account of nature sports.

From the very beginning of the book, any reader, and especially philosophers of sport who play or have been involved in any form of sport, will be drawn into the realm of nature sports by the author's pleasant and candid biographical notes on the context of the writing of this book. The passion of these lines clearly demonstrates and reminds us once again that

there is no true philosophy of sport unless one is directly involved in the sport itself. As a passionate skier, mountaineer and climber on the one hand, and an academic philosopher on the other, he was keen to combine both worlds by formulating a sound account of nature sports, including their structure, essence and associated values.

In Chapter 1, entitled “What are nature sports”, Krein gives a well-rounded account of nature sports. He argues that in traditional sports, other competitors have primary roles, whereas in nature sports, natural features have primary roles. Therefore, he defines nature sports as “those sports in which a particular natural feature, or combination of natural features, plays at least one of the primary roles that human competitors or partners play in traditional sports” (p. 5). He then explains what is meant by “primary roles” – the first constitutive component of any sport. In traditional sports, there are no athletic activities without other athletes, and they have primary roles for that sport. While you can play tennis with your opponent without an audience, there is no tennis match without an opponent. You can also change venues for a soccer match, but there is no match without an opposing team. Krein argues that in nature sports, such primary roles are exclusively natural features. Traditional sports are about interaction with other human players; nature sports are about interaction with natural features. In nature sports, the athlete tries to find a match with “an appropriate natural feature” to “create a beautiful and dramatic interaction” (p. 8). In nature sports, the athlete can interact with several natural features (e.g., water and wind in windsurfing), and they are more fluid than in traditional sports and can change in different contexts (e.g., waves in surfing can easily go from partners to a dangerous, even deadly, opponent in a different context), so they do not fit into the classic categorization (teammate – opponent) which exists in traditional sports.

The other crucial term is “natural feature” and Krein avoids precise definitions, taking

a pragmatic approach as the only prudential, pointing out that in the “broadest terms, a natural feature is any part of the natural world that is easily identifiable” (p. 10). He underlines that those things named in various maps, guidebooks, or more detailed descriptions can all be considered “natural features” because in order to name them, “a particular part of nature must be recognizable enough that if it is named and its location indicated, a person previously unfamiliar with it can identify it” (p. 10). This might be mountains and plateaus in mountaineering, ridges and routes in rock climbing, lakes and rivers in paddling, and so on. He does not think we need a precise metaphysical account of these features, but it is fairly clear, especially from the perspective of nature sports athletes, what features are considered to be in a particular sporting activity. The bigger problem is the adjective “natural”, because we need to somehow differentiate between alpine ski racing as a traditional competitive sport and backcountry skiing as a paradigmatic nature sport. He gives account for such differentiation in the next chapter, but before that he makes three very important considerations. First, nature sport depends on the environment itself. It does not need an opponent: a backcountry skier, for example, can simply go alone to a mountain slope, climb up, ski down, and go home with the full realization of his sporting activity. The point is that he interacts in a particular way (by skiing) with a particular natural feature (a snowy slope). The additional point is that these environments are constantly changing, the natural features are unpredictable – for example, the weather conditions during mountaineering. Second, Krein makes a very subtle observation about place and the role of technology in nature sports. He clearly shows that although technology sometimes stands between humans and nature, it does not follow that the use of less technology is always more authentic to nature sport activities. For some nature sports, certain technologies and equipment are necessary to practice the sport: there is no backcountry skiing without skis, just as there is no surfing without a surfboard. It would be ridiculous to say that instead of skiing, we need to walk through the snow, or instead of surfing, we need to swim on the waves to have an authentic nature sport experience, because it would not be the same sport. Interaction is crucial. Third, nature sports do not require formal competition like we see in traditional sports. Moreover, as much as we try to compare ourselves to others in some nature sports, and as much as we try to create the conditions for competition in a nature sport, we are not so much involved in nature sports as we are in creating a new kind of traditional sport (e.g.,

competitions in rock climbing have done just that: finally changing the mere environment – an indoor gym instead of a natural rock face!).

In the second chapter, entitled “The nature of nature sports” Krein engages in philosophical inquiry into what is “natural” about the natural features that are the focus of nature sports. He devotes much energy to the two “lines of arguments according to which nature does not exist”, calling them the “human influence argument” and the “social construction of nature argument”, because he believes that if some of them are true, “there are no nature sports: what we think of as nature sports are just sports” (p. 22). Although neither argument is probably necessary to explain nature sports, Krein thoroughly examines both lines and provides counterarguments. For him, some authors such as McKibben or Vogel go too far in arguing that we cannot even speak of nature anymore because of human influence (e.g., everything on Earth is influenced by human-caused global warming, so there is no nature as such, that is not influenced by humans). Krein proposes a different approach, using Plumwood’s distinction between separation and hyperseparation to show that there is some kind of separate existence of nature despite the interdependent relationships between nature and humans. He goes further by showing that there are independent criteria for considering nature separate and independent for humans – it is about the impossibility of controlling natural features, such as the temperature on the summit of Denali. The key to intense experiences in nature sports, and the key value in many of them, is precisely “that one is interacting with powerful *independent* forces”.

The second line, the social construction of nature argument, takes up even more space in Krein’s assessments. He presents at length Cronon’s argument that wilderness is socially constructed, particularly in American culture where it is based on the concept of the sublime and the mythology of the American frontier. Krein shows that this line is in no conflict with the presented account of nature sports. He goes even further following Kant and Goodman to show that even in a constructivist account there is much to be said about the independence of nature. He shows that using Kant’s critical framework for conceptualizing experience of nature and Goodman’s concept of worldmaking we can talk about nature as we talk about anything else: we necessarily construct and understand the world around us “through complex beliefs, theories, and systems of knowledge” (p. 40). Before concluding this chapter, Krein critically considers Crist’s objection to the social construction of nature, arguing that it “is unclear what could

be said about something that remained outside of any theoretical context, or was free of any interpretation within our cognitive framework” (p. 45). Krein ends by pointing out that nature sports, as practices, in a special way mediate our conceptions of nature and its features, without implying that they are not real or independent. On the contrary, their “presence and independence is profoundly felt” and we “should value nature sports because they offer us ways of understanding and relating to nature that other practices do not” (p. 46).

“Categorizing nature sports” is the title of the third chapter. Here Krein analytically examines the appropriate conceptual framing (and naming) of the sports he describes as nature sports. He presents and evaluates Reinhart’s remarks on *alternative* vs. mainstream sports, abandoning this concept as relevant to capturing the meaning of nature sports. He then does the same with Wheaton’s concept of *lifestyle* sports, noting that there are many interesting features of so-called lifestyle sports that can overlap with many elements of nature sports, but nature sports are a much broader category. He also points out that nature sports are too often associated with what is commonly called *extreme* sports, and shows that this is completely inappropriate and actually wrong – most nature sports activities are actually not extreme at all. Krein acknowledges that the most interesting analysis has been provided by Leslie Howe, and he presents her account. Howe distinguishes between urban-based and nature-based sports, and under the latter category, she further differentiates nature-instrumental and nature-directed sports. Most interesting for Howe and for Krein is the last category, which according to Howe can be divided into nature-specific and nature-oriented sports. Nature-specific sports “emphasize the sport experience”, and nature-oriented sports “focus more on aesthetic experiences of the natural environment than on the technical expertise or physical accomplishments involved” (p. 57). Krein acknowledges the importance of Howe’s analytical work, but argues that while there is much overlap between his concept of nature sports and Howe’s concept of nature-directed sport, he believes that it is more about nature-specific than nature-oriented sports. He shows very convincingly that not every presence in nature is also nature sport. In fact, the sporting elements of nature sports and interaction are key to conceptually distinguishing different activities in nature. Krein cautions that not every recreational or leisure activity in nature is a sport and that the “distinction between nature sports and wilderness activities [...] is often overlooked by philosophers, popular media, and the outdoor community” (p. 58). He gives

several conceptual, historical, and cultural reasons for maintaining such distinctions. Krein’s view is conceptually and philosophically very compelling, but it should be noted that Howe makes some very important points about the place and importance of aesthetic experience in many outdoor activities, including nature sports. Krein will provide a more detailed response in the next chapter about why this might be a completely wrong view of nature sports as sports.

While the first three chapters lay the foundation for Krein’s account of nature sports, the remainder of the book deals with reflections on specific topics closely related to nature sports. The chapter titled “Nature sports, intensity, and the sublime” begins where the previous chapter ended. Following the previous discussion, Krein attempts to provide a response to Leslie Howe, who argues “that nature-directed sports [...] are more likely to yield a responsible and more complete relationship to nature if they take the form of nature-oriented sports rather than nature-specific sports”. Krein starts from the explanation of the sources of intensity in nature sports. While in traditional sports the intensity is in the competition itself, in the effort to defeat the opponent, in nature sports we find the sporting intensity in the interaction with natural features. They are not necessarily competitive, but they are compelling nonetheless. The interaction with natural feature is compelling, and the intensity of that experience makes nature sports even more compelling. Nature sports are intense because they require an unusual level of physical and mental skill, physical striving with the whole body, focus, and often courage. All of this leads to a “compressed experience” (p. 72), and because they are mentally and physically demanding, it is for participants in nature sports as “life happens in an exaggerated way. This intensity is one of the most compelling things about all sports” (p. 73). Krein believes that we should talk about intensity in nature sports in the way mentioned and not try to find it in the experience of the sublime. After a brief explanation of the Kantian account of the sublime, he shows that instead of sublime, as Howe argues, it is better to seek intensity in the interaction with the powerful natural features which usually drives athletes to complete focus which leads to the state of flow. This state of being complete in the interaction itself is the better way to understand the intensity of the activity itself than the distanced and from the activity separated source of the sublime experience one gathers as an observer. Krein masterfully points out that nature sports are about being at one with the interaction itself, striving for such a focus that can bring us into

a state of flow. The experience of the sublime could be, but is not a necessary component of nature sports. Later in the chapter, Krein argues that his account does not imply athletic or aesthetic elitism in nature sports. On the contrary, he shows that intensity depends on the match between participant and the natural feature, and that this very intensity is the reason why even beginners become enthusiastic about nature sports.

The next two chapters deal with two important philosophical questions, mainly related to profound ethical considerations related to the social aspect or culture of nature sports. As the title suggests, “Ski bums, surf bums, climbing bums: Philosophical issues in the sport bum lifestyle”, the fifth chapter is devoted to the analysis of the phenomenon of sport bums in nature sports. Actually, this phenomenon is closely related to nature sports and in many ways it has been considered as an ideal of an authentic life and a meaningful lifestyle through total dedication to sport activities such as skiing, surfing or climbing. Krein gives numerous examples of all three of these cultures, but most of the space is taken up by an analysis of Frederick Kohner’s novel *Gidget* as an example of the surf bum lifestyle. He undertakes a subtle social, cultural, and philosophical analysis of postwar America, attempting to find a source for the appearance of sport bums and the influence of nature sports ideology and the values proclaimed. Despite the possible explanations for such a lifestyle as a kind of reaction to some social deviations and a way to find meaning in hard times, Krein raises serious questions about the justification of such a lifestyle, asking whether it is ethical and whether it is just to be a kind of free-rider and do what you enjoy and what you find meaningful, taking all the benefits of society without having obligations to it. However, Krein concludes by suggesting that this phenomenon can be interpreted as a unique and authentic way of responding to societal pressures and can yield important philosophical insights about the essential values of a fulfilling life.

In the following chapter, Krein talks about the “Constructing gender in nature sports” by continuing the analysis of nature sports communities and their cultures. He shows that sport as a way of worldmaking provided a clear expression of gender expectations and that most nature sports were exclusively reserved for men. He further analyzes Kohner’s *Gidget* in this vein, showing in a kind of cultural analysis based on firm historical circumstances, widespread discourse in sport communities, and practices among surfers, that nature sports provide a site for affirming masculinity for all those who have failed to

do so in mainstream cultural patterns. Krein suggests that in this sense, nature sports could be seen as a kind of alternative masculinity that is probably most visible in the history of surfing and climbing. He concludes the chapter with some indications that a new wind is blowing in nature sports communities, that women are more visible and more respected, and he builds on these indications with the hope that nature sports in particular might offer “cultural spaces in which we can rethink gender roles” (p. 126).

“Reflections on risk” is the title of the seventh chapter and it is probably one of the most interesting chapters for a wider audience. Krein begins by arguing that risk has primarily a personal aspect and that the conceptualization of risk comes from the individual himself. He briefly demonstrates how widespread the overemphasis of risk as a purely psychological fact is in many discourses, including in nature sports. The core of his argument is to show that nature sports are not risk-seeking activities, but activities with high-risk tolerance. Furthermore, he argues that “nature sports athletes put extensive effort into limiting the risk to which they are exposed” (p. 135). He disagrees with the thesis that participation in high-risk nature sports adds value simply because risk is included. On the contrary, the virtues in confronting risky situations are usually counterproductive in everyday life. The attraction of nature sports despite some risk lies elsewhere: most athletes do not seek an external reward (fame, recognition, economic gain), but rather “the attraction of interacting athletically with natural features justifies the risk involved in doing so” (p. 139). The point lies in the nature of this interaction, which involves natural features which are always more powerful than any human opponent. Such interaction enables intensive intimate, and palpable relationship with nature, and it also provides the opportunity to experience a dramatic and beautiful sporting interaction with natural features. It is a fact, however, that as an athlete gains a higher level of competence in nature sports, his or her athletic appetite and level of risk also increase, but this is precisely the purpose of athletic activity as such and cannot be excluded from the nature of nature sports.

Krein also makes two very important philosophical observations about risk in nature sports. First, he acknowledges that ethical considerations toward ourselves and our loved ones matter. We have obligations to ourselves – we do not seek injury or death, but we also have obligations to others and we should take those seriously in the sense that we cannot completely ignore the potential fatal consequences to our family members and friends. Krein argues, however, that participation in

nature sports is not incompatible with these obligations because it is by no means irrational or unethical, considering that for some people “high-risk sports contribute to living a fulfilling life” (p. 141). Second, it clearly demonstrates the mainstream social ideology that work is a thing worth taking risks for. In fact, many high-risk occupations are highly regarded (e.g., military service and police work), and leisure activities are seen as not worth taking risks. He reiterates Aristotelian thought on the importance and value of leisure, according to which the meaning of life lies in leisure and not in work, because the latter is a necessary means to achieve the former. Krein explains the change in ideology during the modern era that completely reversed Aristotelian values, and he concludes that this “different attitude toward work and leisure helps explain why it is very difficult for athletes and philosophers of sport, who see leisure as the path to perfection, to communicate the value of dangerous sport to those who don’t already see risk sports as worthwhile activities” (p. 145). At this point, Krein arrived at the basics of the argument for the intrinsic values of sports as such – because they are intrinsically motivated activities performed for their own sake.

An intrinsic or rather inherent value of (nature) sport is the aesthetic experience, which is the subject of the last chapter. Krein demonstrates the aesthetic dimension of nature sports in a very elegant way: He takes Cordner’s account of graceful movement and adapts it by adding the aspect of first-person experience in nature sports and not just sticking to the observer perspective. He does this by using Berleant’s idea of the aesthetics of engagement as a kind of new paradigm, in contrast to the traditional aesthetics of disinterestness, which is predominantly based on Kant’s aesthetics. Krein argues that the point is not to observe some movements and contemplate about them, but that nature sports are about being involved in the movement, about being activity itself. In nature sports, “we must be aware of the ways we experience our environment in direct contact with us and of our kinesthetic and proprioceptive senses”, moreover, we involve all the senses at the same time, “giving one a multisensory experience” (p. 153) Krein believes that interaction with natural feature and aesthetic experience occur simultaneously; they are aspects of the same thing. Here is the difference from traditional and environmental aesthetics – it is about striving for harmony and unity with the environment: “Through nature sports, athletes are brought into a certain type of unity with natural features.” (p. 156). Although there will be some discrepancies between self-perceptions of athletic activities

and the perceptions of observers, “we should also recognize that within nature sports cultures there is substantial agreement concerning the types of movement that are judged to look and feel graceful” (p. 157). Finally, Krein also reminds us that other forms of aesthetic experience should be considered because it is “the aesthetic experience of the natural environment” (p. 159) that is an important component of nature sports and one of the reasons why they are so compelling.

In the “Conclusion” Krein summarizes the central ideas of all the chapters, synthesizes the main theses, and provides an answer to the central question of the entire book, namely: why nature sports are so compelling? His answer, in a nutshell, is that “nature sports are challenging and rewarding as sports. They give us the opportunity to experience nature in complex, intimate, and interactive ways. They give participants opportunities to consider, experiment with, and adopt alternative value systems and worldviews. And finally, they offer life paths that can be rewarding and fulfilling” (p. 166). The final paragraph is authentically and appropriately rounded out by the author’s personal plans for backcountry skiing and climbing immediately after completing the book.

Kevin Krein’s book is amazing in several ways. First, it is undoubtedly a highly welcome and so long-awaited monographic account of sport outside the framework of traditional sports. For the philosophy of sport, this is a tremendous contribution and a springboard for all further research in this direction. Not only is it an account of some sports that generally do not fit traditional patterns, but for those of us who are deeply involved in nature sports and philosophy of sport, it is an intellectual stimulus to pursue accounts of sports that are not necessarily competitive. Krein has shown a way to do that, with a rarely seen analytical precision on the one hand and a passionate, inviting manner on the other. Second, for anyone involved in the nature sports, it is a sharp, thoughtful, and provocative contribution that cannot leave anyone indifferent. Regardless of whether we agree with Krein or not, his arguments are clear, well-formed, and sophisticated. It is one of those books that can really shake some individual value systems by pointing out clear implications and possible consequences of some theses or approaches. For these reasons, this book will be very enlightening for many of us who are deeply involved in nature sports. Third, despite the author’s modest claims about the conclusiveness of some of the arguments and his presentation in terms of reflections, it is precisely this approach, which prevails in the second part of the book, that gives the book an unusual

breadth and makes it useful for many purposes, not only in academic philosophy (e.g., there are some masterful reflections on nature sports in terms of aesthetics), but also for professional use in various kinds of outdoor studies or at the basic level of the functioning of many nature sports. Suffice it to say that such a book belongs in the personal library of any intellectually engaged mountaineer, climber, or surfer, to name just a few of the nature sports. In addition, it is indispensable literature for professional training in some of these sports, as it improves the understanding of these sports in many ways, and thus can be a valuable manual for the preparation of various levels of sports education (e.g., mountaineering schools, seminars, and courses).

I am sure that Krein's book makes a crucial contribution for all three aspects mentioned. It is a fundamental reference for any further analysis of the philosophy of nature sports, an indispensable guide for the personal development of nature sport athletes, and an essential textbook for professionals in the field of nature sports and outdoor education.

**Igor Eterović**

**Stefano Gualeni, Daniel Vella**

**Virtual Existentialism**

**Meaning and Subjectivity in  
Virtual Worlds**

**Palgrave Pivot – Springer Nature  
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The second decade of the 21st century was a time when game studies flourished across a broad thematic spectrum and disciplines, a noticeable number of dedicated institutions and projects grew and established themselves, and some leading scholars' names peaked the disseminatory charts, altogether steadily beginning to keep pace with the exponential growth of the industry of virtual worlds that took a leading role in contemporary human life, most notably video games. Gualeni & Vella's study is one of the latest more complexly dedicated contributions of the decade, and I find it to be a landmark example of (1) how philosophical game studies can and perhaps should be

conducted, and (2) how the results should be presented. The first point relates to the content of the study and is the focus of this review. I want to discuss the second point beforehand, however, because I feel obliged to emphasise the near-mathematical beauty of the methods used to create and present the study, especially given the way it implements functionality in text-based informing.

The book has 153 pages and its size follows the principle of the Palgrave Pivot project, a Springer-affiliated publishing arm that promotes novel studies between about 25 and 50 thousand words. The "introductory" section starts with a "Foreword" by Olli Tapio Leino, "Contents" and list of figures used in the book. They are followed by the author's introduction that contextualises the discourse, provides a brief summary of all chapters, and ends with a glossary of key terms that appear throughout the study (with no noted variations on their meaning). The study chapters are organised like research articles: they begin with an abstract and keywords, end with a summary of conclusions, notes, and a list of literature referenced in the chapter, but each text has an introduction that reminds us of what we have read previously, how it relates to the current chapter, and what the chapter will explore, and repeats definitions or conclusions throughout the text where the authors find a reminder might be good. The book ends with a concluding chapter that encapsulates the key findings of each chapter and basically complements each chapter's abstract. It is impressively well-organised and shows that much thought was put into its construction for the purpose of benefiting the reader.

Additionally, the underlying method revolves around finding a key notion from a philosopher that touches on the issues of interest to the authors and weaving the arguments around it with broad interdisciplinary support to reveal the essence of the chosen problem. The notions are first justified, then introduced, applied, and their discursive position rechecked with each new discussion. Given the almost surreal abundance of philosophical ideas available today, this method works quite well and oddly buffers the need to insist on commentary articles. For example, when Gualeni & Vella use Sartre's texts to discuss a problem, they provide little additional commentary from other philosophers who have discussed Sartre's work, and they do not discuss workpieces in terms of the original language in which they were written, in this case French. From the core standpoint of philosophy, this should not go unnoticed. However, the authors make the case very clearly and the terms are not taken lightly. It is evident from the approach that they aimed to find