

GOING DEEP

Baseball and Philosophy

KIERAN SETIYA

Among the iconic images that memorialize one of the greatest moments in baseball history—Bill Mazeroski’s walk-off home run to win the 1960 World Series for the Pittsburgh Pirates—I have a special fondness for George Silk’s photograph for *Life* magazine. It shows a crowd of fans cheering over a blurry Forbes Field from the balcony of the preposterous gothic skyscraper known as the Cathedral of Learning. Built by the University of Pittsburgh, the Cathedral houses the Philosophy Department, in which I taught for thirteen years. I like to imagine the philosophers of 1960 watching baseball from its office windows, as I would have done myself had Forbes Field not been replaced in 1970 by the concrete cylinder of Three Rivers Stadium, itself replaced by beautiful PNC Park in 2001.

It is not just imaginary philosophers who love baseball, and it is not just me. The great John Rawls, who revolutionized political philosophy, believed that “baseball is the best of all games” and once recounted reasons why.¹ In 1982, Chicago philosopher Ted Cohen expressed his love for the game by claiming to have found a contradiction in the rules.² He petitioned the league to resolve the matter, without immediate success. But the rules were silently changed, removing the apparent inconsistency, in 2010.³ Mark

Halfon, who teaches philosophy at Nassau Community College, has written two books about baseball, *Can A Dead Man Strike Out?* and *Tales from the Deadball Era*.⁴ And now Mark Kingwell, a philosopher at the University of Toronto, has published *Fail Better*, which concludes, “Baseball is . . . the most philosophical of games.” Finding improbable depths in the game of baseball has become an intellectual performance art. This review is my contribution.

Baseball is the most philosophical of games because, like philosophy at its best, it harmonizes meaning with meticulous analysis. There is no opposition between wonder at the double play, the home run, or the perfect game and the statistical dissection now known as “sabermetrics” (after SABR, the Society for American Baseball Research).⁵ In fact, it is the arithmetic and geometry of the game that best disclose its truth. The highest aspiration of philosophy is to be both rigorous and humanistic, to place analytical thought in the service of human values. Baseball shows us that it can be done.

This is not what Kingwell claims in his wide-ranging book, a collection of philosophically inflected essays about the game. He writes well about his own experience as a player, his accidental baseball-card collection, the addictive qualities of watching games on television, and the magic of listening to them on the radio. But when he turns to the meaning of baseball, his principal theme is failure.

Most obvious: failure at the plate. Everyone knows that if you fail seven times out of ten to get on base with a hit—walks and struck-batsmen don’t count, nor do sacrifices (bunt or fly)—you are a potential Hall of Fame hitter.

The idea that baseball is a game of failure is sufficiently commonplace now that you might think it has been around forever. It

hasn't. As far as I can make out, the canonical source is MLB commissioner Fay Vincent's 1991 address, "Education and Baseball": "Baseball teaches us, or has taught most of us, how to deal with failure. We learn at a very young age that failure is the norm in baseball and, precisely because we have failed, we hold in high regard those who fail less often—those who hit safely in one out of three chances and become star players."⁶

This thought was famously echoed in the opening monologue of Ken Burns's incomparable documentary series, *Baseball*: "And yet the men who fail seven times out of ten are considered the game's greatest heroes."⁷ Pitcher R. A. Dickey makes the same point in his preface to Stacey May Fowles's new memoir, *Baseball Life Advice*: "In what other profession can you fail seven out of ten times and be a Hall of Famer!"

Commonplace or not, the idea is almost entirely wrong. To begin with, walks and hit-by-pitches count. Plate discipline is among the most valuable, reliable, and replicable skills a hitter can have. At most, you could say, the best hitters in the game fail six times out of ten, with an on-base average of .400. But even that is a grave distortion. It depends on the unit of analysis. What if we switch from the at-bat to baseball's atom, the individual pitch? In Major League Baseball, about 39 percent of pitches are thrown for balls: a win for the hitter, a loss for the pitcher. By my calculation, just over 6 percent of pitches end up base hits; the rest are foul balls, strikes, or outs.⁸ So, on a given pitch, the *average* hitter, never mind the best, succeeds just over 45 percent of the time. Good hitters do better than that.

In any case, why look at things solely from the batter's point of view? Why doesn't Kingwell focus on the pitcher, and the seven at-bats in every ten in which the batter is out, declaring baseball a game of routine success? His approach reminds me of a friend who was so bored by his son's Little League games that he rooted for

whoever was at the plate. (I wish I had been there to protest that every hit extends the game: he should have been rooting for the other team. I wish even more I could communicate to him baseball's transformation of boredom into the stillness of unbearable suspense.)

These arguments illustrate my point: you can't divine the spiritual significance of baseball without grasping its mathematics. If you get the math wrong, you miss the meaning. Leonardo da Vinci studied anatomy in order to paint the human figure. The interpreter of baseball must study sabermetrics.

Kingwell is made anxious by this idea: "Can the free spirit of the game survive the noted fan obsession with the rigidity of statistics and the 'money ball' approach, all of which seem to reduce poetry to mathematics?" What will happen when baseball is "disenchanted" in Max Weber's sense, when "we can in principle *control everything by means of calculation*."⁹ What about the "intangibles"—grit, clutch hitting, "knowing how to win"—that are baseball's equivalent of magic?

It is true that baseball superstitions fade in the cold light of sabermetrics. The clutch hitter is a myth, debunked by meticulous studies, and hot streaks are statistical noise. But the disenchantment of scientific understanding does not entail disenchantment of another kind: loss of value or significance. Baseball means as much or more to the incorrigible stat-head as it does to anyone else.

No one should doubt that Keith Law—an ESPN analyst whose book, *Smart Baseball*, introduces readers to advanced statistical metrics—loves and appreciates the game every bit as much as Stacey May Fowles, who writes about her adoration for Adam Lind, Devon White, and David Price, and has a chapter that defends the baseball crush. Other chapters of her book devote informed, humane attention to cheating, booing, and performance-enhancing drugs. Two themes recur: baseball's endemic sexism, which Fowles confronts

with honesty and grace, and our intimate-distant relationship with individual players. On pitcher José Fernández, who died in a boating accident at the age of twenty-four: “There is no real roadmap for dealing with the kind of inexplicable grief that comes with the death of someone we didn’t know.”

Keith Law’s book is less emotionally charged but equally humane. He happily rejects the manufactured conflict between reductive number crunchers and old-fashioned scouts fostered by films such as *Moneyball*, with its infuriating portrayal of baseball scouts as ignorant hicks.¹⁰ For Law, statistics don’t extinguish meaning; they interpret it: “Every player’s stat line tries to tell the story of his season, so if you want to get the story right, you have to use the right stats.”

Law documents the failings of conventional statistics, such as pitcher wins, runs batted in (RBI), and saves and explains advanced statistics that are more revealing: weighted on-base average, fielding-independent pitching, ultimate zone rating (a measure of fielding ability). He predicts a future in which teams exploit the almost unfathomable wealth of data supplied by PITCHf/x and Statcast, which track velocity, break, and location for pitches, exit velocity and angle for hits, positioning, reaction time, and route for fielders, and more.

Law is less reliable when it comes to history. He blames flawed statistics on baseball’s reverence for tradition, with its consequent inertia, tracing the problem all the way back to Henry Chadwick, “the father of baseball”: “Henry Chadwick is credited with creating batting average (among many other common baseball stats) in the late 1800s, designing it along the lines of cricket’s version of batting average, which is runs divided by outs.”

Because batting average ignores both walks and extra-base hits, it is a poor gauge of offensive contribution, and there is no doubt it has been overemphasized. But the quotation above is multiply

skewed. For one thing, Chadwick did not invent batting average: the blame for that must go to H. A. Dobson.¹¹ Nor does batting average follow the model of runs divided by outs in cricket, as Law suggests, since the latter incorporates the equivalent of extra bases. In fact, Chadwick originally focused not on batting average but on total bases per game, which is much closer to modern slugging percentage (bases on hits divided by at-bats) but improves on that statistic by including walks. Law should be singing Chadwick's praises.

Chadwick wasn't perfect. He was corrupted by batting average and seduced by the misguided RBI.¹² But he anticipated Law's perspective more than once. Take the fielding error, in which a fielder gets to the ball but is unable to make what would be, in the opinion of the official scorer, an expected play. Law is derisive about this: "The problem here is that you'd get an equally good measure of a player's fielding abilities if you rolled a pair of dice. Fielding percentage doesn't impart any useful information whatsoever." For Kingwell, errors are another way in which baseball is a game of failure: "In no other major sport is 'error' an official scoring category, feared and respected by fielders at every position." Again, he echoes Vincent: "Baseball, alone in sport, considers errors to be part of the game, part of its rigorous truth."¹³

But errors are to be feared only because they are a wildly misleading measure of fielding ability. Errors are the opposite of "rigorous," Law complains, since they rely on the subjective judgement of the scorer. Worse still, they victimize fielders whose greater range means that they attempt more difficult plays. In practice, errors are scored only for fumbling the ball, never for failing to reach it: "You can't mishandle a ball you never touch."

As Henry Chadwick argued in 1868, when we evaluate a fielder, "[it] is in the record of his *good plays* that we are to look

for the most correct data for an estimate of skill.”¹⁴ Instead of errors, he tracked putouts plus assists per game, a statistic reinvented by sabermetric guru Bill James as “range factor,” more than a hundred years later.¹⁵ It is far from perfect, but it is a whole lot better than tracking rates of error, as in fielding percentage, or simply rolling dice. The lesson of Henry Chadwick is that, like philosophy, baseball is never done with its past. Everything old is new.

Some treat baseball as an allegory for life or for a perilous journey in which, if we are lucky, we make it safely home.¹⁶ For me, it is an allegory for philosophy at its best: humanistic but rigorous, historically informed. We do not have to choose between humanity and rigor, between progress in solving problems and engagement with history. In fact, you can’t have any of these without the others. Baseball’s romance with advanced statistics is not a rejection of its past but a fulfillment, not an indifference to meaning but a better interpretation. That is a condition to which philosophy should aspire.

NOTES

1. I criticize Rawls’s arguments here: <http://ideasofimperfection.blogspot.com/2008/04/critique-of-rawls.html>.
2. For the complete story, see here: https://philosophynow.org/issues/115/The_Philosophy_Professor_and_The_Holy_Book_of_Baseball.
3. In fact, I don’t believe the rules were inconsistent. According to Rule 6.05(j), “A batter is out when after a third strike or after he hits a fair ball, he or first base is tagged before he touches first base.” According to Rule 7.08(e), “Any runner is out when he fails to reach the next base before a fielder tags him or the base, after he has been forced to advance by reason of the batter becoming a runner.” According to Rule 6.09(a), “The batter becomes a runner when he hits a fair ball.” See Ted Cohen, “There Are No Ties at First Base,” *Yale Review* 79, no. 2 (October 1990): 316. If the runner touches first base just as it is tagged, the last two rules imply that he is out; the first rule does not. But silence is not contradiction. The rules

would be inconsistent if Rule 6.05(j) said that the batter is out *only if* first base is tagged before he touches it, not if both things happen at the same time. But it does not say that. A philosopher should mark the difference between *if* and *only if*.

4. Mark S. Halfon, *Can a Dead Man Strike Out? Offbeat Baseball Questions and Their Improbable Answers* (Solana Beach, CA: Santa Monica Press, 2005); Mark S. Halfon, *Tales from the Deadball Era: Ty Cobb, Home Run Baker, Shoeless Joe Jackson, and the Wildest Times in Baseball History* (Lincoln, NE: Potomac, 2014).
5. On the role of wonder in scientific discovery, see Philip Fisher, *Wonder, the Rainbow, and the Aesthetics of Rare Experiences* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).
6. Francis T. Vincent Jr., "Education and Baseball," *America* 64 (April 1991): 373.
7. *Baseball*, dir. Ken Burns (PBS, 1994).
8. Here are the numbers: 17.5 percent of pitches are foul balls, 9.5 percent are swinging strikes, 15 percent are called strikes, which leaves 19 percent batted balls. Thirty-five percent of batted balls are fly balls and just under 10 percent of fly balls are home runs, which comes to about 0.65 percent of pitches. The remaining batted balls are put in play. Since batting average on balls in play hovers around .300, 5.5 percent of pitches are put in play for hits. Hence the figure of just over 6 percent. The data come from baseball website Fangraphs (<https://www.fangraphs.com>).
9. Max Weber, "Science as a Vocation," in *The Vocation Lectures* (Cambridge, MA: Hackett, 2004), p. 13. For a serious attempt to make this argument about modern sports, see Allen Guttman, *From Ritual to Record* (Columbia University Press, 1978), p. 55: "When we can no longer distinguish the sacred from the profane or even the good from the bad, we content ourselves with minute discriminations between the batting average of the .308 hitter and the .307 hitter." For a response, see A. Bartlett Giamatti, *Take Time for Paradise: Americans and Their Games* (Summit, 1989).
10. *Moneyball*, directed by Bennett Miller (Columbia Pictures, 2011). The original book by Michael Lewis, *Moneyball: The Art of Winning an Unfair Game* (New York: Norton, 2004), is less cartoonish but still seriously flawed. See Allen Barra, "The Many Problems With 'Moneyball,'" *The Atlantic*, September 27, 2011, <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2011/09/the-many-problems-with-moneyball/245769/>.

11. My information about Henry Chadwick derives from chapter 1 of Allan Schwarz, *The Numbers Game: Baseball's Lifelong Fascination with Statistics* (New York: St. Martin's, 2004).
12. Schwarz, *The Numbers Game*, 22–25.
13. Vincent, "Education and Baseball," 373.
14. Schwarz, *The Numbers Game*, 239–40.
15. Schwarz, *The Numbers Game*, 10.
16. See Giamatti, *Take Time For Paradise*, Chapter 3, "Baseball as Narrative."