Philosophy Bakes Bread, Episode Thirty-One, With Dr. Erin Tarver

Sports Fan I Am

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Eric Weber: Hey everyone. Thanks for listening to WRFL Lexington, 88.1 FM. This is Dr. Eric Thomas Weber, here live in the studio in Lexington, and I am about to play for you episode 31 of Philosophy Bakes Bread. This episode is on the Fourth of July. It's playing ... That's when it's airing, and we are talking with Dr. Erin Tarver of Oxford College of Emory University, and we're going to be talking with her about sports fandom and identity, and it's a particularly American attribute, at least the context that she's focusing on, and I hope you enjoy today's episode.

I do want to say that I'm excited to celebrate the Independence Day for America, though I do always want to remember, independence for whom, as an important feature about this day. As Frederick Douglass famously spoke about many years ago, he would talk about how this is your independence, he would say, to European white audiences, and that it was a good thing for white Europeans, especially men, to get their freedom from the United Kingdom, and to go after what they wanted at life, and not everybody in the United States was independent and free thereby.

That's an important thing to remember. That said, it was a step in our history in a country which I hope will continue to progressively embrace more and more freedom for people, and in that spirit, here is, as I said, episode 31 of Philosophy Bakes Bread. I hope you enjoy.

[Intro music]

Eric Weber: Hello, and welcome to Philosophy Bakes Bread, food for thought about life and leadership, a production of the Society of Philosophers in America, aka SOPHIA. I'm Dr. Eric Thomas Weber.

Anthony Cashio: And I'm Dr. Anthony Cashio. A famous phrase says that philosophy bakes no bread. That is not practical, but we at SOPHIA, and on this show, aim to correct that misperception.

Eric Weber: Philosophy Bakes Bread airs on WRFL Lexington, 88.1 FM, and is distributed as a podcast next. Listeners can find us online at philosophybakesbread.com, and we hope you'll reach out to us on Twitter at PhilosophyBB, on Facebook at PhilosophyBakesBread, or by email at philosophybakesbread@gmail.com.

Anthony Cashio: Last but not least, you can leave us a short, recorded message with a question or a comment, or if you're feeling like it, some bountiful praise that we may be able to play on the show at 859-257-1849. That's 859-257-1849. On today's show, we're very very fortunate to be joined by Dr. Erin Tarver, who's Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Emory University's Oxford College. She works in feminist philosophy and the critical philosophy of race, with a particular focus on the social self. We'll ask her about all of that, I think, and her book, The I in Team: Sports Fandom and the Reproduction of Identity, which is soon to be released by the University of Chicago Press, and we're going to talk about sports today. How are you doing today, Erin?

Erin Tarver: I'm great! Thanks so much for having me.

Anthony Cashio: Thank you for joining us.

Eric Weber: It's our pleasure. Dr. Tarver is the co-editor of Feminist Interpretations of William James, and the author of articles in Hypatia, Critical Philosophy of Race, and Contemporary Pragmatism. Her research is motivated by her own experiences growing up as a sports fan in the American South, and draws on philosophical influences, from Michel Foucault to Malcolm X, William James, John Searle, and Iris Marion Young.

Anthony Cashio: All right Erin, well welcome to the show. It is a beautiful afternoon here in Wise, Virginia. Hopefully, it's nice where you are today.

Erin Tarver: It is extremely hot and humid here in the Atlanta area.

Anthony Cashio: Oh, so it's good to be inside. I kind of wish I was doing this outside. Our first segment, we do this every episode, we simply call it Know Thyself, and so we want to know whether you know yourself. We're going to test you right off the bat here, so maybe tell us about yourself, tell us maybe how you came to be doing philosophy, maybe even about sports and philosophy, and we'll just take it from there. How about that?

Erin Tarver: Sure. I grew up in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, which is maybe not where I first encountered philosophy, but it's definitely where I first encountered sports. It's interesting. I actually went to college not in South Louisiana. I went to a tiny liberal arts college that very few people have heard of called Palm Beach Atlantic University. At the time, it was Palm Beach Atlantic College, and I actually started college as a theater major, if you can believe it.

Anthony Cashio: I can believe it.

Erin Tarver: And so, between my experience in theater, and I'd also grown up actually in a Southern Baptist church, I was deeply concerned with what it meant to be a good person, and what it meant to be perceived by others as a good person, and it was actually when ... my freshman honors seminar was the first time I ever encountered philosophy, and I still remember actually to this day, we were reading Cicero, and it was this collection of Cicero's essays that's reprinted as On The Good Life, and there's a section in which Cicero is talking with his [inaudible 00:06:06] about the difference between seeming good and actually being good, and whether it was important to really be good, or if, if one is a public person, if the most important thing is merely to seem good.

And at one point, he starts talking about the distinction there, and he's like, "Well, actually, how would we know? How would we know for sure whether we were one or the other?" And he quotes, he attributes this line anyway to Socrates, who says, "Make yourself the kind of person you want people to think that you are." And I remember at the time, and I don't know if it was because of my experience in theater or because of my experience in the Church, but I remember being utterly destroyed by Cicero at this moment, and thinking that I could not be actually sure if all the work that I was doing to be a good actor, to be an honors student, was about actually being good or just having people around me perceive me as a good person or a good student or a good daughter, and I tried to explain to my roommate at the time how this was such a compelling problem, and she said, "I think that you've lost your mind."

And that's when I knew I had to major in philosophy.

Eric Weber: So now, wait a minute, so this was in college though, right? Okay ... that you're having this, so you were thinking about the resume and getting the job and so on. "How do I know if I'm doing what's right? Because this is what it means for me to be a good person, and that's what I want to be, or because this is how I want people to think about me so I can get what I want in life?" Is that ...

Erin Tarver: Exactly, exactly, and I found that I couldn't pinpoint the precise line between these if it was the case that ... So having, again, grown up in the Baptist Church, if it was the case that I was interested in helping poor people or in pursuing knowledge or the truth or something like that about God, did I want those things because those things were status symbols, that they enabled me to, like Cicero and his compatriots, exert influence over the others around me, or if those thing actually genuinely reflected on something worthwhile in my character? And so-

Eric Weber: So-

Erin Tarver: I thought that philosophy would give me a means to be able, I guess, get to that self-knowledge that I really wanted.

Eric Weber: Did you find-

Anthony Cashio: Did you get there?

Eric Weber: Yeah, right. Did philosophy help?

Erin Tarver: That's a great question. I think that actually ... I know that what I've told my students before is that I really expected, by the time I graduated as a senior in Philosophy, to have had the answers, and I remember looking forward to it. I was...

Anthony Cashio: Boy, I bet that was disappointing.

Erin Tarver: Exactly. It was so disappointing, in a way. By the time I was a junior, I thought, "Oh no, I'm really behind if I'm going to get the answers by the time I graduate," but of course, as I progressed in my philosophical education, I learned the value in asking better questions, and not just thinking that the destination had to be in getting the right answers.

Eric Weber: Very interesting. So, when you started studying philosophy, did you know that you wanted to major in this before you'd taken any philosophy classes, or was this ...

Erin Tarver: Oh God no.

Eric Weber: You'd taken a few and you could tell that that was helping to address those kinds of issues you were worried about?

Erin Tarver: I had never taken philosophy before. I didn't actually know what philosophy was. I'd never heard of it before. I started in college not only doing theater, but on the side, doing theology, because of my background in the Church, and I found myself compelled by philosophy because I appreciated the kinds of answers that philosophy gave, not in the sense that it gave me the correct answers, the right answers, but I appreciated the fact that philosophical inquiry was able to talk to more people, was able to have productive conversations with folks who didn't share my assumptions about who God was, or what religious textual authority was, or that sort of thing.

And so I came to ... I guess I came to my interest in philosophy through theology, and then ... this is maybe an unkind way of saying it, but for me, philosophy ended up saving me from theology, because it enabled me to address the kinds of concerns that I had about being a good person, and living the way that I thought I ought to be living, but without requiring a set of assumptions in advance, I suppose, that I thought limited the number of people I would be able to engage with and learn from.

Eric Weber: So, wait, Socrates saves is what I'm hearing, but I thought it was Jesus who saves, right? What do you mean, you were saved-

Erin Tarver: This is why they killed him, right, is because-

Eric Weber: Well, they were both killed. That's true. But wait, what do you mean by saying you were saved from theology?

Erin Tarver: Oh gosh. Well, my parents are going to be mortified if they listen to this.

No, I think that ... Let me say this. When I start teaching any Intro to Philosophy class, I always have students read ... The first essay that they read is from Antonio Gramsci's Prison

Notebooks, and the first thing that Gramsci says is, "We have to disabuse everyone of this notion that philosophy is very difficult, because it's the province of intellectuals. Rather," he says, "all people are philosophers." Every person has an underlying set of beliefs and commitments that can be subjected to study, and so the only question is, are you going to be a good philosopher or a bad one?

And so, the way that I think about this is that the questions that were driving me to theology, about my purpose in the world, and what it meant to live well, and what my obligations to those around me and those on the other side of the world were, and what the truth is, and all of that stuff, those are ultimately philosophical questions, and I pursued religion, and theology in particular, because I thought that that would be the way in which I gained answered to those questions, but I found myself, over and over again, disappointed with the quality of the answers that I thought I was getting from Christian theology.

Now, that may not be true for everyone, certainly. It was true in my own experience. I found ... I remember looking back at my experience in Sunday school, having interchanges with my Sunday school teachers, in which they would say things like, in response to questions like, "Well, how do we know that the Bible is true?" They were reference, there's this section of the text of the Bible itself in which it says, "All scripture is God-breathed and worthwhile for instruction." And that was the answer to, "How can we know that the Bible is true?" And at the time, even as a child, I said, "Well, that doesn't seem right to me. That seems like-"

Anthony Cashio: That's circular, yeah.

Erin Tarver: Exactly, you know, and so [inaudible 00:13:05] logic, and that's my example of begging the question, but I think that ... that certainly, I don't mean to say that this is what theology or Christianity does in general. Rather, for me, I found the kinds of responses that I was able to discern from theology unsatisfying, and I felt that my experience in philosophy at least validated my continual impulse to say, "Well, but why? Why should I accept that as a response?"

Eric Weber: Erin, one second, just because we heard a technical term, for unacquainted listeners, in a nutshell, what is the begging the question fallacy, and how did it occur in this case? Just for anybody who hadn't heard of that before.

Erin Tarver: Oh, sure. Begging the question, sometimes people refer to this as circular reasoning, so an argument begs the question when it assumes the truth of its conclusion in its premises, so meaning like, in order to justify a particular conclusion, I would appeal to the truth of that conclusion, so in other words, I haven't actually given you a reason to believe this thing. I've only repeated something that only someone who had already accepted my conclusion would accept.

I teach logic, and in my slide for begging the question, I have this image that I got off the internet that is ... It's an image of a paper napkin, and then written, sort of scrawled in blue marker on the paper napkin, it says, "The napkin religion is the one true religion. It says so right here on the napkin." And so, of course, it's an example of begging the question, because nobody

who didn't already accept the napkin religion would accept that the reasoning being written on the napkin is evidence for the truth of the napkin religion.

So yeah, so I said that in that case, that my Sunday school teachers' justification of the reliability of the Bible was begging the question, because it referenced the Bible as evidence for the Bible's own trustworthiness.

Eric Weber: I think this could be a textbook example or a demonstration for any logic class about how to understand circular reasoning, and it shows how it arises in life. That's great.

Anthony Cashio: Nice and clear. I actually have a question, follow-up for this. So you said, you know, if you turn from theological answers, but it does seem, maybe in your own work, in your thinking, has your Baptist upbringing, your religious upbringing, helped guide your questions? Right, the kind of questions, the concerns you were asking? Do you see an influence there?

Erin Tarver: Absolutely. I think that's absolutely right, and this is something that I've talked with my family about, because I'm no longer a part of the Baptist Church, but my family still is, and so, we've had those kinds of questions that children have with their parents before about, what does it mean to have learned values and truths and things like that from your parents, and yet then, become your own person? And I think that what I've told my parents, and also my students, is that my deep concerns with living well, and being a good person, and seeing justice be done in the world, that those are all concerns that are outgrowths for me of my upbringing in the church, and that I think were really valuable. I would never be ungrateful for those things.

Anthony Cashio: I hope you parents like that answer.

Eric Weber: Well, we're going to take a break, but before that, let's take one more minute here and ask you an enormous question, Erin. We like to ask in every first segment, what is philosophy to you? In your eyes, now that we something about you, what would you say philosophy is, in about a minute?

Anthony Cashio: Yeah, we'll give you about a minute here.

Erin Tarver: Oh my God. You know, what's funny is, when I started writing this book on sports fandom, the first question I had to answer was, "Who is a fan?" And I thought, "That question, just like the question, 'Who is a philosopher,' or 'What is philosophy," there's no surer way to start an argument than to ask a question like that." So for me, when I talk to my Intro students about what philosophy is, I think that philosophy is a method, and so I think that the questions that philosophers ask about truth, and about knowledge, and about goodness, and about reasonability, and all of that stuff, those are questions that I think are human questions, and as I suggested before, I think that all people ask these questions.

And there's lots of different ways of answering them, but not all ways of answering them are philosophical, so I mentioned earlier, I think that theology has ways of answering those questions, but what distinguishes philosophical approaches to those kinds of questions have to do with the rigors of argument, and the willingness to subject even our most cherished beliefs to

scrutiny, and so I think that philosophy, at the end of the day ... and I don't know, I always sort of hesitate to say these sorts of things, because I think there's lots of different ways of doing philosophy and I engage in them, so I'm not just in one philosophical camp, but for me, philosophy is about the construction and evaluation and analysis of arguments, and about asking whether an argument is reasonable, and to whom, and what would make a good argument good, and distinguishes it from another one.

Eric Weber: Well, excellent. Well there we go. We've been talking with Dr. Erin Tarver. I am Dr. Eric Weber, and my co-host is Dr. Anthony Cashio. You have been listening to Philosophy Bakes Bread. We're going to come right back after a short break.

Anthony Cashio: Welcome back to Philosophy Bakes Bread. This is Dr. Anthony Cashio and Dr. Eric Weber, here talking with Dr. Erin Tarver, author of the forthcoming book, *The I in Team: Sports Fandom and the Reproduction of Identity*. We're going to have a lot of questions about this. That's just an engaging title. In the first segment, we'll begin talking with you, Erin, about why we should talk about sports fandom, right? So let's start with that. Why write a book about sports fandom? Maybe tell us a little bit about how you came to be wanting to write this book.

Erin Tarver: I grew up as a sports fan, and I found as I continued my academic work that when I tried to explain what sports fandom was to academics or how important it was or how much I loved it, I was met with a lot of bewildered stares, or suggestions that this was deeply irrational. So, for example, "Why do you care? Why actually would it matter to you what happens when that guy over there, who you have never met and has nothing in common with you, when that guy strikes out? And also, what does it even mean to strike out? This is not actually a real thing that matters out in the world beyond the confines of that particular game."

And when I tried to explain to myself why this matters, and as I said, I grew up a sports fan, so it mattered quite a lot to me. My entire semester was almost ruined when OSU was defeated by Alabama in the National Championship game-

Anthony Cashio: Roll tide.

Erin Tarver: Oh my God, Anthony. This is horrifying.

This was 2012, very early 2012. I found myself sort of stumped, trying to explain why in the world this should matter to me at all, and so I decided to start investigating it. The other reason that I wanted to write this book is that I thought, "This is such ..." As I started to begin research, "This is such a complex human phenomenon, which occurs in what we could say is perhaps the most rigidly gender segregated venue currently operative in contemporary American life, and somehow, there's virtually no feminist philosophical scholarship on it." Very little philosophical scholarship at all on sports fandom, and so I thought, "This is something that would benefit, I think, from philosophical analysis, not only because it's complicated, but because it touches on all these different features of contemporary life that people, like feminists or critical philosophers of race, like to talk about, but which, for some reason, is not addressed in most of the contemporary literature."

Eric Weber: So Erin, in the last segment, we asked you what philosophy is, and you were explaining that the question like that or like, "What is a sports fan," is actually really difficult, because we have to ask you that very difficult question, what exactly do you mean by a sports fan, and have there always been sports fans, or is this a modern phenomenon? Because you might think that there were sports fans ever since the gladiator games and such in Rome or even well before. Is this a modern thing? What is a sports fan, is the big picture question.

Erin Tarver: The surest way, as I said, to start an argument about sports fans is to ask them to define a real fan, because sports fandom is, I say in the book, a thickly normative concept, so a primary pastime with sports fans is determining who's in and who's out, right?

Eric Weber: The ones who paint their faces, right? And not the other ones.

Erin Tarver: Yes, absolutely, those people, no. So a lot of sports fans, the sort of litmus test winds up being around things like knowledge acquisition, so can you name the starting lineup of the, since I mentioned LSU, the 2012 National Championship team that was defeated by Alabama, or something of that nature. Fans of all stripes, it seems, are interested in boundary policing, in the same way that some philosophers are interested in boundary policing.

Eric Weber: Tell me about it.

Erin Tarver: People who are theorists of popular culture point out that this is a means of reproducing what people call popular cultural capital, so it wouldn't be valuable at all to be a sports fan if everybody gets allowed into the club, so we get to ... Fans engage in these sorts of behaviors where they say, "You're in," or "You're out," or "You're a poser," or "You're a bandwagon fan," or something like that.

Because fandom carries all this normativity in the concept, it's important to me, in the book, to not engage in those boundary policing sorts of practices from the beginning, because I think what we do when we say, "Oh, fans are only those who know this much stuff," or "Fans are only those who attend this many games," what we end up doing is eliminating from consideration a whole range of people and practices that are of interest if we're trying to understand what it is that fans are doing, and why what they're doing is important to them in their lives.

Eric Weber: Erin, you used the word normativity. For our listeners who've never heard that word before, which is probably quite a few, what is normativity and how is that referring to what you were just saying? I'm sorry. Let's put that in simple terms.

Erin Tarver: Sure. So the root word of normativity is norm, and philosophers who write about norms will often point out that there's a couple of different ways in which we can mean that word, but they often can run together, so something can be a norm in the sense that it's typical, so it's the norm that women, on the whole, are less physically strong than men, on the whole, say. The typical woman has less muscle mass or something like that than the typical man.

Now, the other meaning of norm would be that which ought to be the case, so you can hear this in people's suggestion that, "That's not normal," means you should not behave in that

way, so when we talk about normativity, we're saying that we're ... There's a particular concept too that carries certain claims about what ought to be the case, and for feminists who make this point about the relationship between the two meanings of the word norm, will suggest that what is typical in that first sense of the word norm very often then slides into the that which ought to be the case, so such that our views of, "Oh, this is how things are," means "This is how things should be."

Just to give you a simple example, for many years, just because it's more normal to be right-handed, people would deliberately train small children to write with their right hand, even if they were showing propensities of left-handedness, because it was thought to be better, because this is normal or typical, and there's all sorts of other examples like that, where we say the normal, the norm, becomes normative. That is to say, the typical exerts a moral force to conform to that typical status.

Eric Weber: I see. So the kid, for instance, who really wants to read books when all his friends want to play sports is treated as abnormal, and there's almost something wrong with the kid. Why doesn't he want to go play outside?

Erin Tarver: Exactly, and so sports fans, I suggested, have a kind of normativity to them as well, insofar as there are typical behaviors now, currently, of sports fans that end up exerting force on other sports fans, so I mentioned knowledge acquisition as one of those things that fans tend to do, and there's actually well-documented literature on this in the social sciences that sports fans, particularly male sports fans, will use knowledge acquisition as a means of competition amongst themselves, and will dismiss others or use it as a kind of status symbol, to show that they're better sports fans than others by virtue of their greater volume of knowledge of sports, or to exclude women, more often, from the realm of legitimate fan.

The other part of the question that I skipped over, because I was talking about normativity, was the question of sports fandom's historicity, and whether it's new or not.

Eric Weber: I was going to ask you what historicity is, but I think you just got it for us.

Erin Tarver: Yeah, sorry. Sports fandoms ... The fact that it's an historical phenomenon, that's the way that I can talk about it.

Eric Weber: Is it modern, or is it ... yeah.

Erin Tarver: Right, exactly. Even though it's certainly the case that human beings have always played games, and it's certainly the case that at least some of those games have always been classifiable as sports, and probably there have always been some people who are interested in watching those other people play those sports, the phenomenon of sports fandom as we know it is a pretty modern one, and certainly the term sports fan doesn't come into usage until the late 19th century in the United States, and I should say that it's also an American term, so in the U.K., for example, they would say supporter.

Anthony Cashio: Supporter?

Erin Tarver: And that's important for my book, I should say, because my book is actually ... it doesn't purport to be about sports fandom universally, but rather to locate sports fandom as a phenomenon that is both historically and geographically contextual, so I talk about it in the context of the United States, and especially, my interest is in the American South, but yeah, sports fans come about late 19th century with baseball, actually, is the first time we start to see people described as fans, and actually, it's not a nice word when it first comes about.

Anthony Cashio: Right.

Eric Weber: Wow.

Anthony Cashio: I mean, doesn't it come from fanatic?

Erin Tarver: Yeah. There's actually ... there's a small dispute amongst some scholars about whether it's definitely etymologically linked to fanatic. There was some speculation that it might actually be short for the fancy, because at the time, people who would go to, it was actually illegal boxing rings, and bet on them, were called the fancy, but there's very little evidence to support that view. There's much more evidence to support the fanatic claim, and more people, by the time we get to the end of the 19th century, wanting to claim ownership of the advent of the term, and they all suggest it's because they at one time used it as a shortened form for fanatics.

What's fascinating is that from the time that it originates as a derogatory term for people who are basically obsessive and want to tell the baseball managers how to do their jobs, essentially, up to-

Eric Weber: "Are they blind?"

Erin Tarver: Yeah, up to the point of the end of the 19th century are people wanting to claim ownership of the term, there's this fascinating shift that happens where initially, it was derogatory, where finally fans are using it as a means of self ascription, so they're calling themselves by this name, such that people would actually want to say, "Oh, where that comes from is from me. I'm the one who first coined that term."

Anthony Cashio: That's a good story.

Eric Weber: Yeah, it seems like there's ... especially when you think about how crazy people go in that sense of the term, fancy doesn't seem to match so much as fanatic does, right? The crazy enthusiasm, so one question is, aren't fanatics terrifying and dangerous, like the fact that we get, after soccer matches in some parts of the world sometimes, a ref is murdered, you know? And there can be riots after a sports match. Aren't fans sort of terrifying in terms of being way too spirited, over the top, and they lose control of their reason?

Erin Tarver: At some times, certainly, and I think that quite a lot of the literature on sports fans is talking about just that thing that you describe, where it's this sort of Dionysian frenzied experience, where we're going to start a riot or set a couch on fire or ... get into a fight with our opponents.

Eric Weber: That's a term after Dionysus, who drank too much, is basically right?

Anthony Cashio: Kind of, yes. And liked to have boys.

Erin Tarver: Yeah, and also, you probably know this, the followers of Dionysus, the Maenads, would engage in similar sorts of out of control, ritual ... craziness, for lack of a better word.

Anthony Cashio: Ripping people into pieces and then eating them?

Erin Tarver: Yes, exactly, yeah.

Anthony Cashio: Yes.

Erin Tarver: So, more resemblance to some contemporary sports fans than one would hope, but I think that there's quite a lot of attention to that part of fandom, and I mean, for good reason. This is really apparently bizarre behavior that is somehow identifiable in a wide variety of human groups, and so I think that's worth study. What's interesting to me is that sports fans don't just do that, that sports fandom is way bigger than just the experience of the arena, so social scientists who talk about this, they use these two acronyms, which are stomach turning actually to say.

Eric Weber: Oh?

Erin Tarver: Okay, so the way that social scientists talk about the experience of being caught up in the moment, in the moment of victory, and they suggest that this phenomenon or this feeling is responsible for fans' engagement in sports fandom. They call it birging, so birging, B-I-R-G-ing. That stands for basking in reflected glory, so basically, the way that we talk about this is that sports fans, when they identify with a team ...

So it's not an accident, for example, that we say, "We're number one!" They are sort of like orbiting satellites to a sun or something like that, where they feel themselves aglow from the victories of their team, such that they feel themselves as somehow part of it. When I watch my team, for example, and we win ... See, I said "we." It's not that I feel good for them. I'm not like, "Oh, that's so nice for those guys that they did well. Good job. I'm happy for you." No, I actually feel like I am victorious, and so this is birging.

Now, social scientists will then also talk about corfing, and ... equally stomach turning.

Anthony Cashio: Someone had fun making up these terms.

Erin Tarver: Yeah. So corfing stands ... It's C-O-R-F, stands for cutting off reflected failure, and this is the phenomenon that occurs when a fan ... their team experiences defeat, and the fan will do something like switch from we to they in their references to the team, so they'll no longer identify themselves with that team, and they'll also do things like, for example, if you ... Let's say your team is in the World Series, that we just ended, like the NBA Championship or the Stanley Cup, and you're really excited, and you go to the game, and you have your sweatshirt or your t-

shirt, or whatever it is, your colors on, or you paint your face. You're preparing for birging, right?

And then, after your team's defeat, you're like, "Oh God, I have to get rid of this," and so you take off your shirt. You're not going to wear it anymore. You're going to burn it, or at least you're going to put it in the back of the closet or something like this. This is corfing, social scientists say, and so the dominant explanation of why sports fans are doing what they're doing is access to the feelings of birging, and obviously, trying to avoid the feelings of corfing, and I think that those things are good places to start, but when we think about what sports fans do on a regular basis, the experience, the euphoric experience in the arena or even watching a game period, this is only a small portion of what sports fans do on a regular basis.

We have to think about what happens when fans are ... their team is on the off season, or there's no game being played. It's not like their sports fandom goes away. They still engage in the collection of artifacts, or the surrounding themselves with symbols of their team, or they read updates about what's going on with the team in the off season, or they memorize statistics from baseball teams past or something like that. There's quite a lot that goes into being a sports fan, and so what I was interested in was thinking about all of those things as part of what it is to be a sports fan, and asking questions about how they all hang together and what they're doing.

Eric Weber: Wow, so there's an awful lot involved in being a sports fan. We're going to have to take a short break and come right back with Dr. Erin Tarver. This is Philosophy Bakes Bread, with your hosts Dr. Eric Weber and Dr. Anthony Cashio. Thanks everyone for listening. We'll be right back.

Anthony Cashio: Welcome back everyone to Philosophy Bakes Bread. This is Dr. Anthony Cashio and Dr. Eric Weber, and it is our privilege today to be talking to Dr. Erin Tarver, who is the author of the upcoming, The I in Team: Sports Fandom and the Reproduction of Identity. We spoke in the last segment a bit about sports fandom, and we're going to continue that conversation right now, and maybe talk a little bit more about also the moral and political effects of sports fandom.

So Erin, in your book, you argue that sports fandom offers fans a means to understand and cultivate their identities. As you were talking about last time, so you but the t-shirt and the mug, and then break out the hat, paint your face, get the tattoo, right?

Erin Tarver: That's right.

Anthony Cashio: Name our child War Eagle and so on. Just got to get it out there. That's real fandom, by the way, so I think it sounds great, and it makes people happy, but you also suggest though that there might be a downside to fandom, I mean, besides having a child named War Eagle, War Eagle.

Erin Tarver: Indeed, yes. Although that would be a negative in my view.

Anthony Cashio: So what is-

Eric Weber: So what is-

Erin Tarver: I'm not an Auburn fan, but you know.

Anthony Cashio: What's the danger here?

Erin Tarver: I think that sports fandom is ... I will say not innocuous, and I should start off by saying that ...

Eric Weber: But what does that mean?

Erin Tarver: Right. Uh, one of my favorite quotes from Michel Foucault is, "I don't say that everything is evil, but I do say that everything is dangerous." And I sort of think this way about sports fandom, and I think that there are really clear places that can suggest that sports fandom's affects are, to put it mildly, problematic, and so what I mean by that is that when sports fans are using their fandom to cultivate their senses of self, that the specifics of that cultivation often involve the retrenchment or reinforcement of gender and racial and sexual hierarchies that we think are, I think most of us, those we would want to avoid.

So just to give you an example, I was talking a little bit ago about knowledge acquisition, and the ways in which knowledge acquisition functions as a means of carrying out one's sports fandom, but also to be able to be a dividing line between fans and non-fans. It actually turns out that this dividing line is highly gendered, and that it functions very often as a means to exclude women from the realm of legitimate sports fans, and to reproduce this sense that typically masculine ways of understanding and interacting with the world are the correct ones.

One of the most common things that I have heard from women who identify as sports fans is that anytime they say in public, and it's always a public setting, they identify as sports fans or they say that they're fans of a team or something like that, almost every woman sports fan I've encountered has reported that they've experienced the following interaction. So I'll say, "Oh, I'm an LSU fan," and someone, a guy next to me will say, "Oh yeah? Well, name all the teams in the SEC." This actually happened to me in a Feminist Political Theory class.

Eric Weber: Testing your knowledge, huh?

Erin Tarver: Yeah, exactly, so being subjected to a knowledge test is a nearly universal experience for women sports fans, and it turns out that that's not just true for people like me, who are just whatever, regular couch potato sports watchers, but women who reach the very highest echelons of the sports industry, so women like Linda Cohn, who is the most recognizable, perhaps, announcer on ESPN period, or at least the most recognizable woman, reports that she too has experienced this.

And now, that might seem like a small thing, but what I try to argue in the book is that sports fandom, in its knowledge acquisition form, is one of the primary places, or a primary place, I should say, that we see this normative or typical sexual hierarchy being reestablished, so

even though there's lots of different ways in which women are no longer restricted from owning property or participating in politics or other forms of public life, sports, for whatever reason, continues to be one of the most rigidly gender segregated arenas of public life, so not only is it the case that we just take it for granted that there are women's sports and there are men's sports, but also, the men's sports generate far more income and interest and spots on ESPN.

Women are much less likely to be able to advance in the industry of sports media and that sort of thing, and women, in their everyday interactions with men sports fans, are regularly denigrated in these ways that, interestingly, continue to be acceptable, whereas this is not acceptable in other forms of life, and so that's one area in which I try to explain how sports fandom is instrumental in reproducing hierarchies that are taboo in other areas, but are perfectly acceptable in sports fandom.

The other one that I spend a lot of time talking about in the book is race, and I think that this is really crucial to pay attention to, because many many people I think believe that once we decided that racial integration was going to be the standard, and that not only did Jackie Robinson cross the color line in the 1940s, but finally, by the time ... it's like 1970 is when college football was fully integrated, by the way, that this means that we've overcome racism, and that sports become a force for racial equality, and a famous philosopher of sport makes this case, so his name is Claudio Tamburrini, and he argues that sports have been really crucial for, in his words, "the reappraisal of minorities in public life," so basically, it used to be the case that white fans would explicitly suggest that the victory of all white teams was somehow a victory for the white race in general, and obviously, this is deeply disturbing, but ... by the way, rhetoric that is still present in newspapers in Alabama into the late 1960s.

So there's the suggestion that once that stops happening, and once fans are explicitly rooting for the success of players who are people who don't look like them, so white fans are rooting for players of color, that this means that we've ... come over a hump, and that racial equality throughout society can't be far behind, and it's important for us to be able to identify with players in these day to day interactions, and that helps transfer over into real life, and what I argue in the book is that's actually not true, unfortunately.

That white fans are perfectly capable of cheering for players of color in such a way that they're able to identify with them in the limited scope of the field or the court, but at the same time, still view these players as a threat if they exceed their place, and so I try to argue in the book that what we see in many cases of white fans interactions with individual black players is that they're not actually identifying with them, so in a strong sense of hero worship, but rather, they're treating them more like mascots. That is to say they're treating them like things that are particularly useful for access to certain kinds of feelings in the context of the sporting event, but who are disposable, or who become dangerous, if they don't adhere strictly to the role that their fan believes they ought to play on the court.

Anthony Cashio: Yeah, was it the 49ers football player, Colin ... [crosstalk 00:45:18].

Erin Tarver: Kaepernick. I think that's a great example.

Anthony Cashio: Yeah, Kaepernick, who's ... He would kneel down and everyone gets so angry, just-

Eric Weber: Well-

Anthony Cashio: "Know your place," I can remember hearing people saying things.

Erin Tarver: Yeah.

Eric Weber: There's also ... I lived in Oxford, Mississippi for nine years, and there were plenty of people who used to, and maybe some still occasionally do, fly Confederate battle flags in The Grove before football games, and of course, the players would run through The Grove, and finally we had some players say, "Look, it makes me sick to see that." And people would be very upset about statements asking for no more Confederate battle flags. They really want their flags all over the place, and they want their team to win, and they're cheering on these players who feel very uncomfortable about these symbols, and so it's like, "Hey hey, shut up about that. Just play football." You know what I mean? They're treated as this, as you say, as a mascot. Tell us what you mean by treating a player like a mascot, in what sense do you mean that?

Erin Tarver: I draw on Malcolm X here, actually. Malcolm X, in the second chapter of his autobiography, he talks about his experience of going to an all-white school as a child, and he ... in Michigan. He says that although he's treated, on the surface it seems, well by his classmates ... he's even elected class president, he says that he realized that he was being treated like a mascot, that he felt like he was like a pink poodle, that he was a kind of novelty, and the way that he describes that is that ...

In his class, he also played basketball. He was a hero, apparently, on the basketball court, but he understood, viscerally and deeply, that he should not do certain kinds of things, so number one, he knew that he should not at all pursue relationships with the white girls in his class, and his classmates expected him not to do those sorts of things. He was also told explicitly by even his favorite teacher, Mr. Ostrowski, to be reasonable about what he could expect to be in life, so Malcolm, as a young man, told his teacher that he wanted to be a lawyer. He performed well in school, and in particular in English class, and Mr. Ostrowski, in this very important moment in his life says, "That's not a realistic goal for you. You know, everyone likes you. You're good at working with your hands. Why don't you be a carpenter? You'd do well."

And so, Mr. Ostrowski, like the family, the Swerlins, that Malcolm lives with as a child, they believe that they like him, and they have a kind of affection for him, but they expect him to stay in a particular place, and they expect him not to voice desire of his own, or ambitions that exceed what they think he ought to be doing, but they're all too happy to have him there, particularly when he does things that make them feel good about themselves, [inaudible 00:48:20] win on the basketball court, or say yes sir and no sir, that sort of thing.

And so, what I try to argue in the book is that when we look at the way that many white fans are talking about players of color and interacting with them, there's this similar kind of patronizing relationship that I think is about access by proxy to feelings that they associate with blackness, either as they associate black masculinity, in particular, with animality, or aggression,

or hypersexuality, or the kinds of power or athletic prowess that we associate with good athleticism, and that in the racist caricature, has been associated with blackness historically.

Or they treat these young men as pets, as non-threatening, and Eric, you mentioned Ole Miss awhile ago, and I wanted to say something about that, because I think that ... There's a couple of Ole Miss examples that I use in the book, not because Ole Miss is particularly unique in being racially problematic in it's practices. I think that's true of many many predominantly white institutions in the American South, but because there are some really striking ones.

In the section on mascots, I actually talk about this man named James Ivy, who was truly treated explicitly as a mascot by Ole Miss, and what's interesting about that case is that when the Colonel Reb controversy was happening several years ago, there's a Colonel Reb Foundation who was interested in defending the mascot and all of this stuff. Part of their argument was, "Oh no no no no no, Colonel Reb's not a plantation owner. He's a spitting image of this guy who they call 'Blind Jim.'" Blind Jim is James Ivy. James Ivy was a black man who was taken up by Ole Miss as a mascot, because he ... Supposedly, the story goes, one day he was selling peanuts or something like that, and by the way, he was blinded because he had been working as a young man, and some chemicals from paint got into his eyes and blinded him, but as the ... it was the Ole Miss baseball team was losing, and James Ivy was cheering on the sidelines, and the story goes, his big booming voice catalyzed a come-from-behind victory for the Ole Miss baseball team.

And subsequent to that time, the school would incorporate James Ivy into most of its athletic events, so they would have him in the stands, and they would, in some cases, hang signs on him, or in some cases, put on ... hang basically the sheet music for the band on him, and he was photographed each year with the freshman class, who would each year give him a new suit, and so he'd be wearing the new suit, and in the photo, they would call him, jokingly, the Dean of the Freshman Class.

And so this is a joke at the expense ... a tongue-in-cheek joke about freshmen, one would imagine, at the expense of James Ivy, this elderly black man who was blind who they'd dress up in this suit with a small skinny tie that resembles the one that Colonel Reb wears later. Importantly, they eventually endowed a scholarship in the name of James Ivy, but that scholarship was for a student of color to attend another school, so not Ole Miss.

Eric Weber: Not Ole Miss, oh boy.

Anthony Cashio: Oh gee.

Erin Tarver: Prior to integration. In any case, James Ivy is there, and he's part of the community to a certain extent, but make no mistake, he's not a part of the community.

Eric Weber: Right, well there's, I think, a pretty clear-cut example of someone being treated in a demeaning way as a mascot. That is troubling. I hadn't heard that whole story before.

Well, we've got to take a break yet again. We're going to come back with one more segment with Dr. Erin Tarver, talking about sports fandom, on Philosophy Bakes Bread with me, Dr. Eric Weber, and my co-host, Dr. Anthony Cashio. We'll be right back.

Anthony Cashio: Welcome back, everyone! It is your lucky day today. You're listening to Philosophy Bakes Bread. My name is Dr. Anthony Cashio, and I'm here with my co-host, Dr. Eric Weber, and we've been talking this beautiful afternoon with Dr. Erin Tarver, about sports and sports fandom, and some of the moral and political issues that go around with it, and in this last segment, we're going to have some big final questions, as well as some light-hearted thoughts.

Eric Weber: Well, Erin, in what we've heard, there's been a pretty wide variety of things to say about sports fans, and yet it seems as though we've heard some deeply troubling things that are possibilities anyway, for what goes on when sports fans go wrong, or just do what they usually do, and so the big question for you, the final big question, is are you saying that sports fandom is a bad thing?

Erin Tarver: Not necessarily. As I suggested in my answer to the last question, I think that sports fandom has possibilities. I think that it might be possible, in the future, with some significant reorganization of some of the most important institutions in sports that enable sports fandom, it might be possible to do fandom differently.

I said earlier that, according to Foucault, "Not everything is evil, but everything is dangerous." I think that quite a lot of sports fandom, in its current iteration, is classifiable as evil, or that it is at least morally troubling. That would be the nice way of putting it, but I'm a pragmatist, and also influenced quite a bit by Foucault, and so I think that we get into trouble when we suggest that any kind of human phenomenon is necessarily a particular way. I think it always depends upon the context and the purposes for which its being deployed, and I think that there are glimmers of hope that we might do sports fandom differently.

In the last chapter of my book, I do this discussion of a group of women that call themselves the LeBron James Grandmothers' Fan Club, and just to be clear, they are not LeBron James' grandmothers. They are grandmothers who are fans of LeBron James. Anyway, this group of women are mostly women of color, all grandmothers from the Cleveland area, and they are explicitly fans of LeBron James, and they do their fandom in this really wonderfully fascinating way.

They, first of all, did not abandon LeBron when he left Cleveland to go to Miami. They still retained their support of him, and importantly, unlike those fans who might mascot LeBron James, they understood him to be a full human being, who had to make decisions to perhaps better himself or his children or his community, and so they appreciated that, but they also, not only beyond pushing back against the, at times, vitriolic and frankly disturbing response to LeBron, they also, as part of their fandom, they are involved in the community in Cleveland, and they do ...

It's not even good enough to call them community service projects, because they're genuinely members of the community that they're working with, but they, as members of the LeBron James Grandmothers' Fan Club, get together and talk about how they might make Cleveland better. They push the children around them who are also fans of LeBron to finish school, and it's there's primary thing, to finish their secondary education, and importantly, they're all doing this as grandmothers.

They understand what they're doing as sports fans to be a reflection of what it is to love one another, to love people who are like their children if not their children as such, and to see their sports fandom as a force for good in their community, that can make tangible changes in that community. And I think that they are this wonderfully promising example of what sports fandom could be, or how we might understand ourselves as sports fans, or fans of a team that represents a community, or of players that represent a community, that actually seeks to do good in that community, and to unify it in a way that doesn't require the kind of hierarchization that we tend to see in sports fandom.

Eric Weber: That's a really nice example of sports fans not going wrong.

Anthony Cashio: How to navigate the danger of fandom.

I think we already got a feel for it, but I'm curious to see what your answer is. Our final question, big question, comes from the name of this show, about philosophy baking bread, so would you, Erin, would you say that philosophy bakes no bread, as the sort of famous saying goes, or does it? Is there some sort of practical use to philosophy, and maybe why and how? Show your work?

Erin Tarver: Oh gosh. You know what's funny, is my family is always like, "You're too literal." My first response is always, "Literally no, it doesn't ... [inaudible 00:58:10]." No, I think that one of the things that I'm most keen to do in my teaching, and also my own scholarly work, is to show that philosophy does something, or it should, and I think that in this case, I'm definitely Jamesian. I think that if what I do ...

Eric Weber: William James, right?

Erin Tarver: Yes, William James. I think, as James says, "There is no difference that doesn't make a difference," and so when I make distinctions as a philosopher, when I try to understand the details of something, if it doesn't make a difference out in the world, then I'm not sure why I'm doing it, and so I think that philosophy can and does make important differences in the world, and I think that all of what we do, in trying to live together and figure out how we're going to continue working on this planet, involves philosophical commitments whether we know it or not, and the important thing is getting clear and getting better in those, and I think that that is the true value of philosophy, is in helping us figure out how to live together better.

Eric Weber: Right on. Very nice answer. Well, as you know, Erin, we want people to know both the serious side of philosophy as well as the lighter side, so in this last segment, we have a bit we call Philosofunnies.

[Prerecorded]

Eric Weber: Say philosofunnies.

Young Sam: Losofunnies.

Eric Weber: Say philosofunnies.

Young Sam: Losofunnies.

[Laughter]

[End of pre-recording]

Eric Weber: That's my son trying to say the word for us. In this segment, we want to ask you whether you've got a funny story or a joke or something about philosophy or about sports fandom that you can tell us. Do you have a joke or a funny story for us?

Erin Tarver: You know, I thought of something right before we started talking today that's more about philosophy than about this ...

Eric Weber: That'll work.

Anthony Cashio: That's fine.

Erin Tarver: The topic of this, but I don't know how funny it is. We'll see.

Here on Emory's Oxford campus, we're a really small campus. I specialize just in doing liberal arts education, so Emory's a self-contained liberal arts college, and so that means that I get to talk to lots of faculty from lots of different disciplines. I actually don't talk to other philosophers that frequently in my regular life here on campus, and I remember when I first came, I was talking to some colleagues at the lunch table one day, and they were all talking about someone that they knew who had previously worked at our campus who retired, who they were all talking about the fact that he called himself a philosopher in their meeting, and they thought that was so weird. "Why would you call yourself a philosopher? You might teach philosophy," but they thought it sounded sort of like, "Ew, you're so highfalutin. You're a philosopher. Whatever."

And they said, "Well, Erin, would you ... do you say that you're a philosopher?" And I said, "Well, of course! Of course I say that I'm a philosopher. What else would I say?" And they all thought that was very strange, and one, I will not tell you who said this, but one person said, "Well, you don't have the right kind of facial hair to be a philosopher."

Eric Weber: Ohhhhh.

Erin Tarver: Yeah, and so as a feminist, I was like, "Well-"

Eric Weber: What's wrong with my eyebrows?

Erin Tarver: "Let me explain to you why that might be a problem. It's actually an issue with you thinking that philosophers have beards, for example." And so this person I was talking to ... wanted to press me on the issue, I think because they were sort of invested in the idea that you're claiming something more than you ought to be if you're claiming to be a philosopher, and so he said to me, "Okay, so are you a canonical philosopher?" And I said ... This is the only time I've ever had my wits about me to be able to respond quickly, and I said, "Not yet ... you've got to give me some time."

I don't know, I ended up explaining to him about how it's ... as I said earlier, I tell all our students, it's important to recognize that philosophy is all around us, and all of us are philosophers, and we need to disabuse ourselves of this image of the philosopher with the big beard and the gravity ideas and that sort of thing.

Eric Weber: Yeah, we should put a link to it. There's a movement where people have t-shirts that say, "This is what a philosopher looks like," and all of these women, kids, and some men wear these shirts too, to show that all kinds of people can be philosophers.

Erin Tarver: Absolutely.

Eric Weber: That's great. That's a good story. Anthony, you want to tell one of these guys here?

Anthony Cashio: I apologize ahead of time. You know we have a lot of big fans of this segment...

Eric Weber: Womp womp.

Anthony Cashio: Uh ... let's do this one.

All right, so swimming is a confusing sport, because sometimes you do it for fun, and other times you do it not to die.

That's from comedian Demetri Martin.

Erin Tarver: That's the motivation for improving.

Eric Weber: There you go, and here's one:

I'm known at the gym as the before picture.

That's just sad, right? Hold on, we need a rim shot.

[Rimshot with laughter and applause]

Anthony Cashio: All right, last but not least, we want to take advantage of the fact that today, we have some powerful social media that allow for, too, great communication, even for programs like radio shows, so we want to invite our listeners to send us their thoughts about big questions we raised on this show today, and I think we're raised a lot.

Eric Weber: That's right, so given that, Erin, we'd love to hear your thoughts about what question you think, or questions, that you'd like to raise for our listeners for a segment that we call You Tell Me. Have you got a question you propose that we ask our listeners?

Erin Tarver: The question that I want to ask is actually the question that my next book project is on, so I'm kind of crowd-sourcing this a little bit, or at least, asking for some feedback, and that is this: Should colleges be in the business of intercollegiate college athletics at all? Should we have the NCAA, with big time athletic competition, as it currently exists? And I think the reason this is an interesting question is, first of all, as many of my colleagues have pointed out, we're educational institutions. Our job is supposed to be the education of young people, the conferral of degrees, that sort of thing. The spectacle that we see on college campuses across the United States, as particularly when we get at what is, or at least used to be in many cases, called the NCAA D-I level, seems, to put it mildly, antithetical to the mission of the university.

In many cases, it takes quite a lot of money, although, as many people at LSU for example will point out, the athletic department actually, in some cases, there's precious few of these, contributes money to the university-

Eric Weber: Very few cases.

Erin Tarver: Very few, it's fewer than 10, actually nationwide. In most cases, the vast majority of cases, the athletic department consumes more money than the revenue that it generates, and so there's, I think, some good reasons to be skeptical of the fact that we have, what amounts to, a minor league system attached to a series of state funded institutions of higher education.

On the other hand, there is a case to be made I think that education, from the time of Plato, has been conceived as an enterprise that's not just about the mind, but that is about the body, and that there's good reason to think that athletics ought to be part of the undergraduate education. The other thing that people often point out is that, and in line with what I argue in the book, sports fandom ... so not only for those students that are participating in the athletics, but for the wider community, sports fandom is a really effective means of producing a coherent sense of communal identity, so it tends to produce a kind of loyalty to the institution, and people like development officers like to say that, "Oh, it produces alumni giving." Now whether this is actually borne out statistically in practice is another question.

Eric Weber: And whether that alumni giving primarily goes to athletics or to anything else.

Erin Tarver: Exactly, exactly. I think this is an interesting question, and now ... I will say that, for many of us, the fact that we recognize this problem maybe isn't even enough to deal with it. The fact that there might be concerns about athletics that range not only from the mission of the institution but to the exploitation of student athletes, even if we recognize those things, we might still say, "Well, how are we going to do anything differently?" This is so much part of the

entrenched culture. People really believe in it. It really matters to them, so how would we possibly get away from it? It seems unrealistic, so ...

Eric Weber: So, the big picture question here is, should colleges and universities even be in this business of intercollegiate athletics? That's a good question-

Anthony Cashio: I want to know what everybody thinks.

Eric Weber: Topic for another episode. We do, we do. All right.

Anthony Cashio: All right, well I want to thank everyone for listening to this episode of Philosophy Bakes Bread, food for thought about life and leadership. Your hosts, Dr. Anthony Cashio and Dr. Eric Weber, are very grateful to have been joined today by Dr. Erin Tarver. Thank you for joining us, Erin.

Eric Weber: Yeah, thank you.

Anthony Cashio: It's been a wonderful afternoon.

Erin Tarver: Thank you for having me. It was fun.

Anthony Cashio: We hope our listeners will join us again, and hopefully, maybe Erin will too. Consider sending us your thoughts-

Erin Tarver: It would be awesome.

Anthony Cashio: About anything you've heard today that you'd like to hear about in the future, or about the specific questions we've raised for you.

Eric Weber: That's right. Once again, you can reach us in a number of ways. We're on Twitter at PhilosophyBB, which stands for Philosophy Bakes Bread, surprise surprise. We're also on Facebook at PhilosophyBakesBread, and check out SOPHIA's Facebook page while you're there, at philosophersinamerica.

Anthony Cashio: You can, of course, email us at philosophybakesbread@gmail.com, and you can also call us and leave a short, recorded message with a question or a comment that we may be able to play on the show, at 859-257-1849. That's 859-257-1849. Join us again next time on Philosophy Bakes Bread, food for thought about life and leadership.

[Music Outro]

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