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## **“There Are No Rules”: On the Martial Arts Status of Mixed Martial Arts**

How can anyone say [the UFC] is a martial arts event, when, in reality, it is just a glorified toughman contest? I have yet to see a display of any martial arts techniques at the event... The ancient martial arts masters are probably fuming over in their graves right now. (Pennenga 1995: 141)

When the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) was first formed, many traditional martial artists asserted that mixed martial arts (MMA) was not a martial art. At first glance it is hard not to meet this sentiment with an incredulous stare—“martial arts” is in the name, after all. Moreover, the early days of MMA pitted particular martial arts disciplines against each other with the hope of determining what the most effective martial art is. If particular martial arts are competing against each other, how could this competition not be within the domain of martial arts? What about this contest disqualified it from being a martial art in the eyes of these traditional martial artists?

The UFC’s early tagline “There are no rules!” succinctly summarizes all that traditional martial artists found wrong with UFC events: early MMA was marketed as a violent, “no holds barred spectacle”, when martial arts are supposed to be centered on discipline, technique, and tradition. Traditional martial artists asserted that the focus on entertainment and lack of technical

proficiency at MMA events were antithetical to the spirit of martial arts, and so MMA fighting is not a martial art. With the development of social media and the acceptance of MMA as a legitimate sport, MMA is now more than ever about entertainment, making these early criticisms relevant today.

By drawing upon Socrates' distinction between 'crafts' and 'knacks' found in Plato's *Gorgias*, we clarify the difference between real martial arts (martial crafts) and mere imitation of martial arts (martial knacks). Utilizing this distinction, we examine three reasons why traditional martial artists saw early MMA as martial knack, rather than martial craft. We show that (1) MMA is a craft and (2) that it is craft similar in nature to that of martial arts. In doing so, we argue that MMA is a real martial art, but it is not always practiced as one. Although the spectacular nature of martial arts is knack-like, the competitive aspect of MMA has furthered the aims of the craft of martial arts. We conclude by exploring the status of these objections with respect to contemporary MMA.

## **Crafts, Knacks, and Martial Arts**

In order to determine whether MMA is a "real" martial art, we must first develop an account of what it means to be a real martial art. To do this, we will leverage Plato's account of craft. The craft account basically offers a way of separating practices that aim at goods with internal rational structures—and thus are able to be taught, have experts, and have stance-independent excellences—from those that do not. We think that the craft account is particularly illuminating in this context because of the explicit comparisons that have been made between MMA and things like street fighting, brawling, and "human cockfighting" for the purpose of discrediting MMA. MMA has often been criticized for being random, violent show-fighting between aggressive hotheads, which

contrasts with what such critics see as the disciplined, restrained sparring between masters that occurs in martial arts. We believe that this perceived contrast between MMA and martial arts maps onto the distinction between crafts and knacks that Plato discusses in his craft account: true martial arts resemble what Plato describes as crafts, while MMA, if the criticism of it holds, resembles what Plato describes as knacks. If MMA is a knack rather than a craft, then this would suggest that MMA is not a real martial art, since martial arts are crafts. Thus, the craft account can be used as a means to distinguish real martial arts from mere imitators.

### *Crafts*

For Plato, crafts (*technai*; singular, *technē*) are rational disciplines that have a characteristic function or activity (*ergon*). As Socrates explains in the *Republic*, ‘the function of each thing is what it alone can do or what it can do better than anything else’ (353a).<sup>1</sup> By looking at the characteristic activity of something, we can discover its excellence or virtue (*aretē*). The excellence of a thing is the quality, or set of qualities, that allow this thing to do its characteristic activity well (353b-c). The characteristic function of a knife, for example, is to cut; thus, the virtue of a knife is to cut well, which would require that the knife have qualities such as having a firm handle and a sharp blade.

Crafts not only have characteristic functions and excellences, they also have experts. A craft-expert isn’t merely someone who can perform certain actions well or make certain products; the expert must also be able to correctly explain how her actions relate to the function of the craft.

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<sup>1</sup> See also, *Republic* 1.346a; *Euthydemus* 291e, 301c; *Euthyphro* 13d; *Ion* 537c; *Charmides* 165e.

Thus, there is both a practical and a theoretical dimension to craft-expertise. For example, the expert of medicine (a physician) not only has the skill to achieve the aim of medicine (promoting health and minimizing disease and suffering), but she will also understand the nature of health and disease in the body—she will be able to explain why a particular treatment brings about health or minimizes disease.<sup>2</sup>

### *Crafts and Knacks*

We can gain further insight into Plato's account of crafts by examining how he distinguishes them from pseudo-crafts, or knacks (*empeiriai*), in the *Gorgias*. Socrates and Gorgias, a famous instructor of rhetoric, are discussing whether rhetoric is a craft. Socrates asks Gorgias what the characteristic activity of rhetoric is (447c-449d). Gorgias says that rhetoric aims at persuading, but not educating, people about matters of justice (454c-455a). Indeed, the rhetorician can persuade non-experts better than an actual expert can (456b-c), and hence there is no need for the rhetorician to actually learn anything other than how to persuade (459b-c).

Socrates doesn't think that what Gorgias has described is an actual craft because it lacks a rational account (454c-455a, 462b-c, 465a, 500e-501b): those who practice rhetoric cannot explain the nature and cause of rhetoric's object (justice), they can only appear to aim at justice. Instead, Socrates argues that rhetoric is a knack, which is done from habit, experience, and memory (462c, 463a, 464c). Socrates argues that knacks are parasitic on actual crafts. For instance, the knack of

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<sup>2</sup> See *Republic* 342d-e, 407d; *Charmides* 170c-171b, 174c; *Apology* 22b-d; *Ion* 537c-53b, 539d-541c.

pastry baking imitates the craft of medicine, the knack of cosmetics imitates the craft of gymnastics, and the knack of rhetoric imitates the craft of justice (465b-c).

In saying that a knack imitates a craft, Socrates means that a knack aims at the appearance of a good that relates to the end of the craft that it imitates. The point of gymnastics (a craft) is to make the body healthy, strong, and beautiful, while the point of cosmetics (a knack) is to make the body *appear* beautiful, but not actually *be* beautiful. Similarly, rhetoric in a law court, merely aims at the appearance of justice, not justice itself. Thus, unlike crafts, knacks do not necessarily bring about something good.

In merely aiming at the apparent good of a craft, knacks pander to popular opinion, and since popular opinion fluctuates, knacks lack a rational account: what explains why something is good will change depending on the audience. In contrast, since crafts have goods internal to them—goods that do not depend on the judgment of others—they have a rational structure. Because knacks lack a systematic account, they cannot be taught in any real sense; instead, they are more or less just a skill one develops a knack for.

Taking stock we see that:

#### Crafts

- a. Crafts have characteristic activities that determine the excellences of the craft. That is, there are goods internal to the craft.
- b. The procedures and activities of crafts are capable of rational explanation and thus can be taught.

#### Knacks

- a. Knacks imitate specific crafts, but aim at external goods rather than goods internal to the craft.

- b. Knacks lack rational explanation and thus cannot be taught.

### *Martial Arts and the Craft Account*

In order to determine whether MMA is a craft or a knack, we need to get a grasp on what makes martial arts a craft. If we follow Plato, this will involve examining martial arts' characteristic function. Because there are many types of martial arts, and because the category of martial art is nebulous and has changed over time, the characteristic activity must be somewhat general. The original purpose of martial arts was skill in combat; today, however, martial arts often serve more of a recreational and even a philosophical purpose. Thus, we need an account of martial arts that is general enough to cover the breadth of the concept, while capturing what is distinctive about martial arts.

Peter Lorge's work on the history of Chinese martial arts provides us such an account. He defines martial arts as

the various skills or practices that originated as methods of combat. This definition therefore includes many performances, religious, or health-promoting activities that no longer have any direct combat applications but clearly originated in combat, while possibly excluding references to these techniques in dance, for example. (2012: 3)

On this definition, martial arts must essentially relate to the "martial", presumably because fighting is the characteristic activity of martial arts. As Lorge writes, 'at root, martial arts is about skill with violence' (2012: 5). There are many ways to be healthy or to train the mind, but what distinguishes martial arts from these other activities is that martial arts essentially relate to fighting.

Although fighting is the characteristic activity of martial arts, martial arts training certainly involves other aspects, such as physical and mental improvement. Martial art should improve one

in such a way that one is able to perform martial activities well. This would include not only physical abilities, like strength and agility, but also the cultivation of character traits—such as discipline, fortitude, patience, and courage—that will allow one to remain focused, calm, and strategic in a fight. Being skilled in fighting without having the physical and mental ability to execute these skills would be worthless. Since skill in fighting requires the training of both the mind and body, we propose the following three aims of martial arts, with (1) being the characteristic activity.

1. Skills in fighting.
2. Physical improvement.
3. Character development.

With the general function of martial arts outlined, we can begin to distinguish the craft of martial arts from its knack counterpart. Crafts can provide a rational account of how to cause the goods they aim at, while knacks cannot, so the craft of martial arts will not only aim at the three goods listed above, but will also be able to provide a systematic account of how the skills and practices of a martial arts cause these goods. As Lorge explains,

[W]hat makes something a martial art rather than an action done by someone who is naturally good at fighting is that the techniques are taught. Without the transmission of these skills through teaching, they do not constitute an “art” in the sense of being a body of information or techniques that aim to reproduce certain knowledge or effect. (2012: 3-4)

The systematic nature of Jigoro Kano’s Kodokan judo provides a useful example of this. Kano (1986) divides techniques into three main categories: throwing techniques, grappling techniques, and striking techniques. Each of these main categories can be broken into

subcategories, which can then be further divided. The individual techniques are themselves explicable, and so we end up with a body of techniques that is systemic all the way down. The systematic nature and complexity of Kodokan judo separates it from something that one just does from trial and error and allows the techniques to be explained and taught.

Another way to distinguish martial art as craft from martial art as knack is by looking at the aims of the activity. Martial arts *qua* craft aim at internal goods like mental and physical improvement and skill in fighting, but martial arts sometimes aim at external goods as well. Some common aims of this nature include making money, gaining spectators/popularity, and appearing impressive, tough, or cool. If a particular practice aims more at such external goods, then the practice is a martial knack rather than a martial craft.

Taking stock, we can distinguish martial crafts from knacks in the following ways:

#### Martial Crafts

- a) The characteristic activity of martial craft is fighting. The excellences of martial crafts are the cultivation of skills in fighting, as well as the physical and mental development that aids fighting well.
- b) Martial crafts have a rational account such that the procedures and activities of the craft are capable of rational explanation and thus can be taught.

#### Martial Knacks

- a) Knacks imitate martial crafts by involving fighting, but they ultimately aim at things external to skills in fighting and mental and physical development, such as entertainment, profit, and approval.
- b) Martial knacks lack a rational account and thus cannot be taught.



Having outlined the distinction between martial crafts (“real” martial arts) and martial knacks (imitation martial arts), we are now in a good position to examine the question of whether MMA is a martial art.

### **“No Holds Barred” MMA and Martial Arts**

As the story commonly goes, MMA as it is known today got its start when Rorion Gracie came to the United States to teach Gracie Jiu-Jitsu. In order to demonstrate the strength of Gracie Jiu-Jitsu and to increase its popularity in the States, Gracie issued the “Gracie Challenge”, inspired by the Brazilian sport Vale Tudo (Portuguese for “anything goes”), which pitted fighters with different styles against each other in matches that had very few rules. The Gracie Challenge and Vale Tudo became the inspiration for the UFC when adman Arthur Davie saw an advertisement for the Gracie Challenge and contacted Rorion Gracie about developing a Vale Tudo-style fighting tournament, which led to the first UFC fight in 1993.

The term MMA was not yet in use when UFC 1 was held,<sup>4</sup> and so the genre of fighting seen in the UFC was referred to by a different name: “no holds barred”. This name accurately captures the Vale Tudo spirit that the original UFC fights were attempting to channel: the only rules were no eye gouging, biting, or groin strikes. Other than that, the matches were completely unstructured—the first UFC fights had no time limits, no scoring, no uniforms, and no referee stoppage unless the fighter’s corner asked for it. The final lineup for UFC 1 was chosen in what

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<sup>4</sup> The first documented use of the term appears to be in a review by Howard Rosenberg (1993) of UFC 1, but was not used in promotional material until UFC 7 in 1995, and was not adopted officially by the UFC until 1998 with UFC 17.

would now be considered an unconventional way as well: although Davie and Gracie had sent out letters to martial arts organizations in an attempt to find highly trained fighters, most of the fighters they reached out to declined. Davie and Gracie's picks ended up being a mix of men that they knew and men that responded to ads placed in martial arts magazines—that is to say, most were not particularly well-known nor had they proven themselves to be elite within their chosen martial art.

This combination of limited rules and skills made for a violent, but commercially successful first UFC. However, several prominent martial artists were critical of these early UFC events, and worried about what the continuing production of UFC fights would mean for martial arts. Perhaps the most notable critic was Bill Wallace, a full-contact karate champion who was the commentator for UFC 1. Following UFC 3, Wallace wrote:

After 30 years of practicing martial arts and teaching students the correct way to throw punches and kicks without hurting themselves, I resent guys who throw off-the-wall bogus techniques...they make a mockery of the martial arts, injuring themselves more than their opponents... As a martial artist, I'm embarrassed to be associated with these people. (Feb. 1995: 16)

He also declared that 'the whole event is getting to be a circus' and complained that the commentating 'was a two hour commercial for Gracie's jujutsu'.

We can see in these comments three potential objections to the claim that early MMA is a martial craft and thus a real martial art. One objection holds that MMA fighting aims at things like audience entertainment, spectacle, and promotion of Gracie Jiu-Jitsu—goods that are external to the function of martial arts. The second objection holds that the fighting seen in the UFC lacks skill and technique—the fighters chosen to compete in the UFC are unable to give a rational

account of what and why they are doing what they are doing in the cage, and are instead just using moves at random. The third objection is that martial arts involves a commitment to various principles and values which are not reflected in UFC events. If these objections hold, then early MMA would be a martial knack rather than a martial craft.

### *The Spectacle Objection*

Let's call the first objection the "spectacle objection". This objection is based on the idea that the UFC is a spectacle—a visual display that aims at evoking a particular emotion/affect in the audience. If MMA aims at pandering to the crowd in such a way, then it would not have the same aims as martial craft (and, in fact, could not have the same aims as any craft) and thus would not count as a true martial art.

The argument expressed formally is thus:

1. A martial art is a craft.
2. Spectacles are not crafts.
3. Early MMA is a spectacle.
4. Therefore, early MMA is not a craft.
5. Therefore, early MMA is not a martial art.

We defended premise (1) in the first section above: martial arts, like all crafts, have characteristic functions, excellences inherent to those functions, and admit of a rational account. Premise (2) is also based on the discussion in the previous section: spectacles aim at evoking audience emotion, which is something external to the activity itself. The success or failure of the activity thus depends on the audience's response, rather than on the excellence of the activity. The resemblance to rhetoric should be clear here: rhetoric aims at producing a convincing, moving speech—a kind of

spectacle of words. (4) follows from (2) and (3), and the conclusion (5) follows from (1) and (4). The crucial premise, thus, is (3), which we examine below.

Regardless of what MMA has become, it does appear that the motivations for creating the UFC were clearly to create a spectacle that would make money and, perhaps, popularize Gracie Jiu-Jitsu. Art Davie, one of the original founders of the UFC, has remarked that, when promoting UFC 1, one of the factors that was considered was whether the UFC should be promoted as a spectacle or a sport: ‘I remember sitting in John Milius’ office...and we sat around debating that issue. I reminded everybody that I had sold it to Bob on the basis that it was a spectacle. It was designed very much as a spectacle. We did not feel it was a sport’ (Gentry 2011, 40). John Milius is a well-known screenwriter and director, and was enlisted by Davie and Gracie as a creative director for UFC 1. In order to emphasize the spectacle aspect of the event, the fights would need an enticing stage. Suggestions for additions to the ring included ancient Greek structures, an electrified panel, barbed wire, and a crocodile moat (Gentry 2011: 38). Although these thrilling set ups never came to fruition, the fact that they were considered in the first place suggests that the event was probably not simply aiming to showcase skill in fighting. The stage that was eventually chosen, the now well-known octagon, was developed after film designer Jason Cusson became the art director for UFC 1. Cusson credits the movie *The Octagon* (1980), a movie about a martial artist (played by Chuck Norris) fighting terrorists, for his inspiration: ‘It was just the name of it... I had no martial arts background. The reason there's an Octagon is because of Chuck Norris’ (Rossen 2013).

Other aspects of the early UFC fights and their marketing suggest that the aim of MMA at the time was spectacle. Following the bloodiness of UFC 1, the marketing of the second UFC event emphasized the violent, rule-less nature of the match. “There are no rules!” became the marketing

slogan, and the press release for UFC 2 not only highlighted the lack of rules, but also proclaimed that ‘each match will run until there is a designated winner—by means of knock-out, surrender, doctor’s intervention, or death’ (Gentry 2011: 72). Giving the UFC the appearance of being a blood sport makes it clear that a major goal of the UFC was to create a sensationalized spectacle (Gentry 2011: 73). UFC 3 continued this trend: following focus group data, it became apparent to the UFC’s marketers that most people were not watching the UFC in order to see which martial art was the best—viewers knew little about the technical differences between the martial arts, and were instead simply interested in watching action-packed fighting (Gentry 2011: 82). Marketing for UFC 3 thus adopted a similar strategy as pro wrestling, focusing on highlighting rivalries and personas of the fighters (Gentry 2011: 92). By showcasing competitors who could be colorful performers as well as fighters, UFC 3 was able to raise overall viewership again. Pro wrestling is, of course, all about spectacle, and thus by mimicking the strategy adopted by pro wrestling, the UFC was demonstrating its commitment to making MMA into a spectacle.

This brief examination demonstrates that there is support for premise (3): early MMA was marketed and designed with an eye towards creating a spectacle. Round 1 goes to early MMA being a martial knack, but there are still two rounds left in this fight.

### *The No Technique Objection*

Let us call the second objection to MMA being a martial craft the “no technique objection”. This argument maintains that the majority of fighters in early MMA lacked proper martial technique. Because it is a condition of craft-hood that the practitioner be able to give a rational account of how the technique produces the aim of the craft, if it is the case that early MMA fighting lacked

technique, then this would suggest that MMA is a knack rather than a craft and thus not a true martial art.

Formally, the argument is:

1. A martial art is a craft.
2. Crafts involve technical skills.
3. Early MMA lacks technical skills.
4. Therefore, early MMA is not a craft.
5. Therefore, early MMA is not a martial art.

Premise (1) is the same here as it was in the argument above. Premise (2) is based on the idea that crafts involve a rational account: the skills displaying in a craft should be systematic and not something that one just does. We will examine (3) below. Premise (4) follows from (2) and (3) and the conclusion (5) follows from (1) and (4).

A common complaint raised by traditional martial artists in the early days of MMA was that the UFC fighters lacked skills. For example, world kickboxing champion Kathy Long said that ‘[b]illing these [UFC] events as martial arts competitions definitely makes the arts look bad because of the lack of technique’ (Long 1995: 12). And, as we saw in the beginning of this section, UFC 1 commentator Bill Wallace described MMA events as nothing more than ‘toughman contests’ (see also Wallace Nov. 1995: 16).

Although it is true that many early MMA fighters had deficient skills, it cannot be denied that MMA competitions as a whole have advanced martial arts techniques and training modalities. By pitting discipline against discipline, early MMA played an essential epistemic role in the development of the craft of martial arts. Stand-up fighters realized that unless they learn how to defend a takedown or how to defend themselves once taken down, they are vulnerable to

submissions and ground-and-pound. Wrestlers learned that they needed to develop proper ways to end the competition. Without learning submission holds or strikes, taking someone down isn't effective on its own. Submission fighters learned that they needed to develop stand-up fighting techniques or advanced takedown techniques, for if a pure submission fighter cannot take his opponent to the ground, he has no remedy for countering strikes. In essence, MMA competitions helped push martial artists to broaden their skill sets. Martial artists learned the deficits of their particular martial art and then learned the precise ways to make-up for such shortfalls. This is a clear case of MMA advancing the general understanding of the craft of martial arts.

Furthermore, MMA unraveled various myths surrounding martial arts. The rise in popularity of martial arts films in the United States brought with it many illusions about what traditional martial arts was and what it was capable of. As Clyde Gentry III explains,

If nothing else, MMA competitions laid to rest the stereotypes surrounding martial arts. Martial artists were finally able to throw punches and kicks at their discretion without any regard for rules germane to their disciplines. The mystique of the black belt, the *dim mak* (death touch), and the lightning-fast kicks that break dozens of boards is a powerful one, often leading followers to believe the performers are deadly. This perception also gives us an unrealistic view of how a real fight unfolds. (2011: 317)

The idea that the martial arts bestow some kind of special power of combat that should only be used in rare circumstances is itself a misunderstanding of martial arts (see Russell 2010). Martial arts, from its origin onward, is about combat, and MMA helped return martial arts to the realistic

aspects of combat at least to some extent.<sup>5</sup> Thus, MMA competitions played two key epistemic roles in the development and health of martial arts: (1) they advanced the technical aspects of martial arts, and (2) they helped eradicate epistemic vice from the martial arts community. Round 2 clearly goes to early MMA being a craft, leaving the final round to decide the fight.

### *The Moral Vice Objection*

The final objection to the craft status of MMA is what we will refer to as the “moral vice objection”. The idea here is that early MMA promoted moral vices that were contrary to the moral teachings of martial arts. Formally, this objection goes:

1. Moral virtues are essential to martial arts.
2. MMA instantiates and promotes moral vice.
3. Therefore, MMA is not a martial art.

Both premise (1) and (2) are contentious, but we will focus on premise (1) because premise (2) would require a paper of its own.<sup>6</sup> Premise (1) might be endorsed for two major reasons: (a) because religious, philosophical, and moral principles are core aspects of the martial arts, and (b) because martial arts are crafts, and crafts necessarily aim at good and promote excellent character traits. However, both of these reasons lack sufficient support.

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<sup>5</sup> See the final section for a brief discussion of the ways in which the “realness” of MMA needs qualification.

<sup>6</sup> On moral vice in martial arts, see Roberts-Thomson (2014) and Russell (2014). On MMA and vice, see Dixon (2015) and Weimer (2017).



First, one might think certain religious, philosophical, and moral principles are an essential part of martial arts. We saw above that a common complaint levied against the early UFC was that the fighters chosen were not serious martial artists, and some surmised that this was intentionally done so that Gracie Jiu-Jitsu would dominate. However, the absence of skill is more likely attributable to a general disdain for the UFC amongst martial artists. When trying to find competitors for the first UFC, Davie sent letters to people in martial arts organizations, but many people declined, offering ‘self-discipline, honor, respect, pacifism and varying Eastern philosophies as valid reasons for not competing in this type of forum’ (Gentry 2011: 44-45).

This sentiment is echoed in an opinion letter in to *Black Belt Magazine* signed by Tokugawa Yoshimune from Plantation, Florida<sup>7</sup>

I am totally disgusted by the hype and egos brought out at the UFC. The goal of most martial artists is peace, harmony, humility, self-improvement, and, of course, to protect what no one has the right to take away—your well-being. The public is being fooled by competitors calling themselves real martial artists, who fight and act like schoolyard bullies...the martial arts are not for competition, but for personal growth. (Yoshimune 1995: 8, 34)

These martial artists are not pulling these ideas out of thin air. Embedded in many martial arts are various moralistic teachings. Judo’s two core principles, for instance, are maximum

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<sup>7</sup> This is likely a pseudonym. Tokugawa Yoshimune (1684-1751) was the 8<sup>th</sup> shogun of the Tokugawa shogunate. Ironic, given the opinion being expressed, both because feudalism and the samurai are not moral paragons, and the Tokugawa samurai were essentially ‘sword-wearing bureaucrats’ (Wert 2019, 78).

efficiency and mutual benefit (Kano 1986). Archery in China is connected to the teachings of Confucius in which the ultimate aim of archery is self-cultivation (Lorge 2012: 38-43). Gichin Funakoshi, the founder of Shotokan karate, preaches that ‘the ultimate aim of karate lies not in victory or defeat, but in the perfection of the character of its participants’ (1981: 85). Not to mention that if one walks into almost any dojo or reads a popular book on martial arts, one will be told that martial arts is about respect. But are these teachings essential aspects of martial arts, or are they merely associated with a specific iteration of martial arts, practiced in a particular historical context?

Two key pieces of evidence point to the latter. First, this is a very myopic view of what constitutes a martial art, as it ignores practices like Western wrestling, boxing, and fencing, which have no direct association with religion or philosophy (see Priest and Young 2010, ch. 16-20). Second, from within the perspective of Eastern martial arts, these religious and philosophical teachings were not always present. As Lorge explains with respect to Chinese martial arts,

It is a modern perspective, both inside China and abroad, that Chinese martial arts is only about self-defense and self-cultivation. This connection to nonviolence is further enhanced by a vastly distorted connection between religion and the martial arts. Martial arts preexisted both religious Daoism and Buddhism and was mostly practiced outside the religious context. (2012: 5–6)

Similarly, many Japanese martial arts see kinship with Bushido (the code of the samurai), but this is problematic because popular conceptions of the samurai are historically inaccurate (see Wert 2019). Moreover, the code found in these popular conceptions is hardly moral. Hence, the moralistic conception of martial arts is thus overly narrow and historically problematic if not inaccurate. However, as we have argued above, martial arts *does* involve character development

as one of its characteristic activities, but we believe it is mistaken to interpret this as *moral* character development, which brings us to our second point about the moral vice objection.

The second reason one may hold that moral virtues are essential to martial arts has to do with the craft status of martial arts that we have defended in this chapter. Crafts aim at something good and involve the cultivation of good skills and traits. From this, one might think that, in learning the craft of martial arts, one must be learning moral virtue, both because crafts must aim at good and because a specific aim of martial craft is character development.

However, although craft-expertise requires the cultivation of certain *ethical* values—patience, discipline, work-ethic, perseverance, respect for the craft, etc.—these values differ from *moral* values. Morality picks out a narrow set of norms and values relating to welfare, justice, obligation, right, and wrong (see Williams 1985), and these norms and values are not essential components of all crafts. For instance, although one must develop certain character excellences in order to become an expert cobbler—e.g. patience, precision, hard work, etc.—and cobbling has a rational structure and aims at producing something good—these are not *moral* character traits nor is cobbling *unconditionally* good. Though it is true that the local character traits one learns through cobbling can, with the right instruction, help one cultivate moral traits, morality is not an essential aspect of cobbling, for one can be an expert cobbler without being a morally good person.<sup>8</sup>

This idea should be all the more apparent when we apply it to the craft of fighting. Why should we expect that a craft centered on striking, choking, and physically controlling another

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<sup>8</sup> Although we are trying to state neutral on various interpretations of Plato's view of craft, in denying that crafts are unconditionally good, we are taking an interpretative stance; see Kozey 2019.

human is necessarily connected to morality? Though it is essential that one develop certain character traits in order to be an expert martial artist—e.g. one must have a certain amount of discipline and fortitude—and though fighting admits of a rational structure and aims at something good, these traits are not *moral* virtues nor is fighting *unconditionally* good. Thus, the moral virtues do not bear an essential relationship to all crafts and certainly do not bear this relationship to the craft of fighting.<sup>9</sup> Martial craft takes round 3.

When we tally the scores as to whether MMA aligns with the craft of martial art, we see that early MMA scored quite well overall. Although the spectacle objection holds merit, the no technique objection and the moral vice objection do not. Thus, early MMA is more craft than knack. But what has become of these objections and the status of MMA in its current form? Though we do not have room to discuss this issue fully, we will conclude in the next section by exploring these concerns with respect to contemporary MMA.

### **Contemporary MMA, Sport, and Knack**

MMA has evolved significantly since the “no holds barred” era in three broad ways. First, the technical proficiencies of the fighters have improved and broadened. Competitions no longer pit one style of martial arts against another; rather, all fighters have some familiarity with different

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<sup>9</sup> Nothing we say excludes the possibility that martial arts can lead to moral improvement, we are merely denying that it is an essential aspect of martial arts. Interestingly enough, Brent and Kraska (2013) found that many MMA fighters were motivated to fight and train for the purpose of “self-actualization.” Thus, even if self-actualization were an essential feature of martial craft, it isn’t clear that MMA wouldn’t meet this standard.

styles. In fact, today some fighters could be said to have an MMA style since they have learned multiple disciplines while training at an MMA school. Second, MMA competitions have become more professional. MMA is now on major television networks and fighters can make more money than the early days. Everything from weigh-ins to post-fight press conferences are now available to fans. The increase in financial opportunities has led to fighters making their training and social persona more professional. Third, MMA has become less of a “no holds barred” fight and more of a sport. MMA is marketed not as bloody spectacle, but as a display of strategy, technique, and athleticism. MMA coaches and athletes have also become more scientific with their training modalities.

The confluence of these three things have led to the reemergence of the objections levied against early MMA, though they now differ in interesting ways. With the backing of mainstream media and the prevalence of social media, “trash talk” has become a central component of MMA culture and broadcasting. Trash talk is seen by some martial artists as antithetical to the spirit of martial arts, since martial arts should be about respect. Chatri Sityodtong, the founder of the ONE Championship MMA promotion, has stated that one of his motivations was to create an MMA promotion that was more in-line with the values of traditional martial arts than the UFC is, and that his approach to promoting fights is to do so ‘in the proper way; not in an ugly way but in a positive manner, you know, the martial arts way’ (Long 2016). This is the return of the “moral vice objection”. We have argued above that moral vice doesn’t preclude MMA from being a martial art, and those responses still stand in the era of trash talk.

Trash talk can also be seen as a symptom of a larger problem: MMA’s focus on popularity and hype-based matchmaking. This is a version of the “spectacle objection” and just as before, it holds merit today. In fact, the “spectacle” and “no skill” objections have been combined and

reformulated in a way that creates a novel challenge to the craft-status of martial arts. Greg Downey (2014) argues that UFC fights are ‘carefully crafted through constant experimentation with the rules, format, and incentives to better conform to aesthetic standards of what unarmed combat should look like given cultural expectations’ (4). We see that MMA competitors are no longer accused of being unskilled street brawlers; instead, today, Downey argues that the regulation and structure of the UFC aims at producing an ‘idealized form of bodily combat that [is] decisive and appear[s] “real”’ (2014: 3), thus making MMA “fights” inherently unrealistic. For example, if there is a lull in action when fighters are on the ground, the referee will stand them back up to encourage more action, but controlling someone on the ground is an effective combat skill and encouraging excitement has little to do with effective martial skill and strategy. Thus, though competitors display athleticism and skill, the skill is aimed at producing a spectacular form of combat, thereby the “no skill” and “spectacle” objections have been transformed into the “not relevant skill objection”: the skills MMA fighters develop are for a form of combat that looks good to viewers, but are not necessarily relevant to *real* fighting.

This “not relevant skill” objection does endanger the craft (and thus the martial art) status of MMA. If the skills developed in MMA aim more at spectacle, rather than excellence at fighting, then MMA will be more knack-like. However, as we argued above, even if the rules of the UFC have been designed to facilitate more spectacular combat, the rise in popularity of MMA has led to epistemic gains in martial arts. Thus, there is still room in MMA for the development of

technique and skill in fighting, rather than in just the appearance of fighting, but in order to maintain its craft status, MMA must avoid amending its rules for the purpose of appearances.<sup>10</sup>

Relatedly, mastering martial craft requires developing certain character traits such as discipline and patience. However, as Downey notes, these character traits ‘pose challenges for the marketing side of the industry, which places a premium on larger-than-life personalities’ (2014: 19). Thus, if MMA competitions seek out athletes for their ability to put on fights that appear exciting to the crowd, then MMA is likely to become more knack-like. These fighters likely will not be developing the character-traits of martial arts and thus will not be carrying out the aims of martial craft.

The return and reformulation of these original objections demonstrates how important it is to deal with them adequately. In this chapter, we have utilized Plato’s craft account as a framework for addressing them and thus for examining the martial arts status of MMA. In doing so, we have argued that martial arts are craft-like, and that MMA, for the most part, aims at the same goods that martial arts *qua* crafts do and thus qualifies as a real martial art. However, there are some aspects of MMA that are more knack-like. Insofar as MMA wishes to count itself among the martial arts, it should lean into the aspects that make it craft-like, such as focusing on techniques that promote better fighting, and avoid those that make it knack-like, such as pandering to public’s hunger for spectacle. This is an especially important consideration as MMA continues to grow in

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<sup>10</sup> Note that this doesn’t entail that MMA must return to its “no holds barred” rules as there can be legitimate martial craft reasons for restricting the rules in various ways. But it does require that whatever restrictions are implemented can be justified for martial craft reasons, as opposed simply being more viewer-friendly.

popularity and reach a wider audience: if the sport is to maintain its ties to the martial arts, it should avoid practices that aim predominantly at entertainment.

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