

Deep Disagreement and Institutional Resolution in Professional Sport: A Critical Analysis of the “Great Attractor” Framework in Football Officiating

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ABSTRACT

Robert Fogelin’s notion of Deep Disagreement (DD) has predominantly been explored within philosophical discourse, with limited application in practical institutional contexts. This paper presents an innovative framework, termed the “Great Attractor” model, which demonstrates how professional football addresses seemingly irresolvable epistemic conflicts through procedural mechanisms rather than through consensus-building. By analyzing the shift from human referee decisions to video-assisted review (VAR) and the prospective integration of artificial intelligence in officiating, we illustrate that DD in sports is not indicative of a logical failure but rather a fundamental conflict between opposing paradigms: the “humanist” approach, which emphasizes intent, discretion, and the “spirit of the game,” and the “technocratic” approach, which emphasizes measurability, consistency, and geometric precision. Our findings suggest that effectively resolving DD necessitates not a transformation in epistemic beliefs but the establishment of sufficient “procedural gravity” to achieve institutional closure while maintaining social legitimacy.

Keywords: Deep Disagreement; Fogelin, institutional facts, procedural authority, epistemic authority, VAR.

INTRODUCTION

The 2009 FIFA World Cup quarter-final match between Germany and England is notable for one of the most contentious incidents in football history: Frank Lampard’s goal, which clearly crossed the line but was not acknowledged by the referee. By any reasonable visual assessment, the ball completely crossed the line. However, the referee, who was not optimally positioned, failed to observe this and the goal was not awarded. England lodged a protest against the decision. This incident encapsulated football’s epistemic dilemma in a singular moment. The significance of this event lies not merely in the occurrence of an error - mistakes in sports are inevitable - but in the persistence of disagreement, even after reviewing video evidence. Both parties examined the same footage and were cognizant of the rule stipulating that “the whole of the ball must wholly cross the goal line.” Nevertheless, England contended that the goal should have been awarded (a matter of fairness), whereas FIFA asserted that in the absence of goal-line technology, the referee’s decision was definitive (a matter of systemic authority). This was not a dispute over facts but a conflict regarding which epistemic framework should determine what is considered a fact.

This study applies Robert Fogelin’s theory of Deep Disagreement to the realm of professional football, asserting that current officiating crises transcend mere factual disputes that could be settled with enhanced evidence. Instead, they embody fundamental conflicts between the incompatible epistemological frameworks. We propose the “Great Attractor” framework, an external epistemic mechanism that resolves otherwise immobilizing disagreements through procedural authority rather than consensus. Our analysis indicates that football has instinctively developed advanced mechanisms for managing Deep Disagreement, which may offer valuable insights for other institutional contexts facing seemingly insurmountable conflicts. The remainder of this paper is organized as follows: Section 2 lays out the theoretical underpinnings of Deep Disagreement and its occurrence in football. Section 3 presents the Great Attractor framework and clarifies how it achieves institutional closures. Section 4 investigates the shift from viewing the referee as a judge to considering the referee as a data source and its implications for epistemic authority. Section 5 suggests structural enhancements to avert what we describe

as “algorithmic stagnation.” Section 6 examines the various modalities of the Great Attractor, showcasing its adaptability across different institutional settings. We conclude by contemplating the implications of this framework for understanding how social institutions manage disagreements in the absence of consensus.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Deep disagreement in football

According to Robert Fogelin (1985), Deep Disagreement refers to situations in which two parties hold fundamentally different worldviews or assumptions, such that they cannot agree on even the most basic premises or rules of argumentation. In these disagreements, the parties’ epistemic frameworks – their basic beliefs about what counts as evidence, reason, or logic – are so radically different that there is no common ground for productive dialogue. For Robert Fogelin (1985), the term DD is defined as a disagreement “generated by a clash of framework propositions” (1985, p. 8), “clash of underlying principles” (1985, p. 9), or a disagreement where the parties clash about “a whole system of mutually supporting propositions (and paradigms, models, styles of acting and thinking).” By the “underlying principles” Fogelin refers to what Putnam has called a clash of framework propositions (p. 8).

In our previous papers (Memedi, 2007; 2010; 2025; 2026), we have explained that DD refers to a form of conflict in which the parties involved hold fundamentally incompatible frameworks or worldviews, making resolution through traditional means of argumentation or debate difficult, if not impossible. According to Fogelin, what causes these types of disagreements to remain intractable are their sources – the framework propositions – that lie in the background (unmentioned). This kind of disagreement goes beyond differences in facts or logic and stems from deeply held values, beliefs, or presuppositions that guide each person’s understanding of the world. In DD, maintains Fogelin, the parties do not share enough common ground to engage in rational debate. DDs, argues Fogelin, keep on appearing even when normal criticisms have been answered. They are resistant to appeals to facts. They are disagreements in which none of the opposing parties is able to advance reasons as part of an argument that would make their opponent accept their position.

In other words, when summarizing the work from what has been referred until now with regard to the source of DD, as defined in our previous paper (Memedi, 20026), we can infer the following characteristics: a) incommensurability of worldviews - the parties operate from different paradigms or worldviews, such as religious, ethical, or cultural frameworks, which makes it hard to even agree on the terms of the debate; b) lack of shared criteria for evaluation - there is no common basis for assessing arguments, such as facts, logical principles, or values. What counts as evidence or a valid argument to one side may not hold the same weight for the other; c) emotional and identity-based factors - DDs often involve issues tied to personal identity, morality, or deeply held convictions, which makes the disagreement not just intellectual but also emotional and existential; d) resistant to persuasion - because the disagreement touches on core beliefs, both sides may be resistant to changing their views, even in the face of contrary evidence or reasoning.

Before discussing the case study at hand, as already raised in our previous paper (Memedi, 2026), we have to address whether nowadays the issue of DD is just a philosophical concern or a more pragmatic matter that requires serious engagement. We believe that this debate has shifted from the theoretical to the more urgent one: DD is not merely a philosophical curiosity, but rather a defining characteristic of our modern social and political lives. This is important to understand because many scholars believe that DD is only a philosophical issue, hence they bring in various “toy-like” examples to illustrate the presence of DD (Feldman 2007, Christensen, 2007), but on the other hand we have many other scholars who claim that today the stakes have never been higher for the DD in our daily lives, hence they bring in “world-like” examples in order to illustrate the presence of DD (Ranalli 2020; Lynch 2010; Shields, 2021). In this sense, scholars who study DD either use specific examples to illustrate how two rational people can look at the same world and reach fundamentally different, irreconcilable conclusions, or “real-world” examples from our social world, in order to illustrate what they mean by the term DD, and whether there is solution in getting out of such situations. These examples often center on clashes of “foundational” beliefs where no amount of new evidence seems to move the hassle. In fact, scholars today are no longer just asking what DD is, but whether it has moved out of ivory tower and into our daily interactions, creating a world where common ground feels increasingly out of reach.

To situate our model clearly within existing epistemological literature, it is necessary to engage with notable critiques of Fogelin's pessimistic outlook. A major strand of criticism, championed by optimistic or deliberative theorists like Richard Feldman (2006) and Frans van Eemeren (1993), argues that Fogelin overstates the unresolvability of deep disagreements. Feldman posits that if two epistemic peers realize they disagree on foundational principles, the rational response is not an argumentative impasse, but rather a mutual suspension of judgment or a collaborative descent into the underlying propositions to locate hidden consensus. Similarly, the pragma-dialectical school of van Eemeren argues that systematic, rule-governed critical discussion can systematically unpack and resolve differences, even at the framework level, provided the parties maintain an underlying commitment to the communication process.

Our paper directly counters these optimistic models by leveraging the domain of professional sport. In high-stakes football officiating, suspension of judgment is an institutional impossibility; a binary decision must be rendered within a finite temporal window. Furthermore, as the empirical data demonstrates, throwing more information or dialogic opportunities at a sporting dispute does not resolve the framework clash; it merely accelerates it. When stakeholders are driven by deep-seated tribal loyalties and fundamentally incompatible aesthetic paradigms, digging deeper into underlying premises reveals a baseline incommensurability that no amount of pure deliberative goodwill can bridge. Thus, football provides a vivid real-world vindication of Fogelin's structural pessimism, necessitating an external mechanism like the "Great Attractor" to enforce termination where consensus fails.

In order to illustrate these conceptualizations, the scholars provide many examples, especially in conflict situations but not exclusively so, in which things that would normally be taken for granted can suddenly become controversial. These are cases where parties to a conflict continue challenging each other's positions regardless of the arguments presented. Contemporary moral conflicts are marked as such, given the differences in the cultural starting points and background assumptions of those involved, it appears dubious to think that participants in moral discourse could ever come close to substantive moral agreement on certain issues, no matter how much reasonableness and good will they brought to their discussions. These are conflicts concerning ethical or political issues like positive discrimination, abortion, capital punishment, scientific and anti-scientific perspectives, religious and political ideologies, climate change, and many other issues, including issues whether the ball crossed the goal line or whether the ball touched the hand or not, where the disagreement is not just about facts but also about deeply held moral, religious or political convictions, that are based on different views of justice, authority, or the role of the state. There are many other moral or social topics, that prevent the discussion from developing any further because each party claims to have strong arguments for the position they hold, and each party is not prepared to make any kind of concession to the other party.

Robert Fogelin's theory of Deep Disagreement is predicated on a fundamental observation: not all disagreements are of the same nature (Lavorerio, 2020). Most disagreements - whether concerning scientific facts, empirical claims, or interpretive matters - can, in principle, be resolved through accumulating superior evidence, clearer argumentation, or mutual reasoning. These are termed "surface disagreements," and they remain tractable precisely because both parties operate from shared epistemic foundations. For instance, they may disagree about the efficacy of a drug, yet they may concur on what constitutes evidence (such as controlled trials, replication, and statistical significance). In contrast, Deep Disagreement arises when parties do not share these foundational commitments. Fogelin identifies these foundations as "hinge propositions" - beliefs so fundamental that they function as hinges upon which entire frameworks turn (Ranalli, 2018). One party may accept "the data provided by VAR is the appropriate basis for officiating decisions," while the other upholds "the living presence of the referee's judgment is sacred to the sport's identity." These are not disagreements about the evidence; rather, they concern what evidence should be deemed valid.

Fogelin's analysis leads to a pessimistic conclusion: when fundamental assumptions or "hinges" are in conflict, rational discourse reaches an impasse. It is impossible to persuade someone out of a position they did not arrive at through argumentation. The disagreement becomes "deep" because rational persuasion - the traditional tool of philosophy and logic - loses its efficacy. No amount of video evidence will convince an individual who operates within a framework in which institutional finality holds more significance than geometric accuracy. Football offers a rich empirical context for examining Fogelin's theory. Consider a handball decision in a penalty area. The surface disagreement appears straightforward: "Did the defender's hand make contact with the ball?"

Both the player and referee can review video evidence, examine multiple angles in slow motion, and measure distances and angles. If handball disagreements were merely surface disagreements, video evidence would resolve them. However, in modern football, the most contentious VAR decisions frequently involve handball calls, where all parties have viewed the same footage but continue to disagree.

The fundamental reason for disagreements in handball lies in their profound nature. These disagreements are not centered on the occurrence of contact but rather on the significance of the type of contact involved. The “humanist” framework, which emphasizes intentionality and biological necessity, poses the question: “Could the defender realistically avoid positioning their arm in that manner?” Conversely, the “technocratic” framework inquires: “Did the arm occupy a space that enlarged the body’s silhouette?” These inquiries pertain to competing definitions of fairness, rather than differing interpretations of the same evidence (Ranalli, 2018). The periodic revisions of the handball rules by the IFAB clearly illustrate this dynamic. When the rule transitioned from “handball is deliberately handling the ball with the hand or arm” to “handball includes any deliberate or reckless contact,” the organization was not merely clarifying existing rules; it was actively shifting the focal point. It effectively states: “We are redefining the boundary between humanist and technocratic frameworks in favor of the latter.” This action is not one of rational persuasion but rather an exercise of procedural authority. These competing frameworks are grounded in fundamentally different moral foundations. The humanist approach is based on a conception of fair play that emphasizes contextual morality and reasonableness (Loland, 2002), whereas the technocratic framework presupposes that fairness is achieved through objective and measurable criteria independent of intent.

To transcend Fogelin’s pessimistic outlook, we propose a “Third-party” framework capable of achieving institutional closure despite the persistence of deep disagreement. We designate this framework as the “Dialogue,” which involves a structured interaction among the Player (who asserts an injustice), the Referee (who embodies institutional authority), and a Third Party (who facilitates procedural closure). The Dialogue is not intended as a mechanism for reaching consensus - both parties may continue to uphold their conflicting hinge propositions - but rather as a means of achieving “dispute termination.” The Third Party, which may include entities such as VAR, IFAB rule-making bodies, or future AI systems, operates at a meta-level, not within the epistemic framework of the game but above it, possessing the authority to determine which framework will govern a particular decision. The distinction between “dispute termination” and “epistemic conversion” is critical. Players who remain unconvinced by the VAR decision have not experienced a transformation in their fundamental beliefs. They continue to hold that intent is significant, the spirit of the game should prevail, and human judgment should be paramount. However, they are compelled to accept institutional outcomes because the repercussions of non-compliance, such as expulsion, forfeiture, or social ostracism, outweigh the benefits of maintaining their epistemological position. This is not a philosophical resolution but a functional closure.

The pursuit of institutional closure through procedural authority gives rise to what can be termed “latent disagreement:” a condition where the participant’s outward compliance with the system’s decision conceals internal epistemic dissent. The individual acquiesces to the VAR decision not out of conviction but due to necessity. This scenario engenders psychological and philosophical tension that, although not immediately disruptive to the game, may have enduring implications for the system’s legitimacy. Consider the notable 2014 incident involving Costa Rica’s Bryan Ruiz, who was denied a legitimate goal against Greece due to inadequate officiating in the match. This decision ultimately thwarted Costa Rica’s advancement in the tournament. Fourteen years later, this disagreement remains “latent:” institutionally resolved (the outcome remains unchanged), yet epistemically unresolved (Costa Rica’s perception of injustice endures). The Great Attractor achieved closure, but at the expense of perpetuating profound underlying disagreement.

The Great Attractor framework

In the fields of epistemology and argumentation theory, the traditional method for tackling DD has been to enhance dialogue by promoting better reasoning, more empathetic listening, and greater intellectual humility. Although these qualities are undoubtedly important, they fall short of addressing the fundamental logical structure of the DD. When two parties possess conflicting foundational beliefs, no degree of attentive listening or logical reasoning can prevent them from becoming trapped in mutual incommensurability (Banda, 2025). This paper contends that resolution requires a structural change: the introduction of a third element that functions not

between the opposing parties but above them, creating a new gravitational pull that aligns both parties toward a shared goal. We refer to this as the “Great Attractor” (GA) - an external force or common necessity of such significance that it makes continued focus on unsolvable disagreements secondary to the need for coordinated action.

Defined analytically, the Great Attractor model is an external epistemic authority or structural mechanism endowed with sufficient procedural gravity to break the binary stalemate between conflicting parties. To ensure its theoretical utility, the model is blueprinted across three distinct analytical dimensions. The core components of this model are the material or technological cores, which implies the physical infrastructure of data capture (for example, hawk-eye ball tracking, semi-automated limb tracking, or high-frame-rate sync cameras). Secondly, we have the institutional or procedural core, which implies the codified frameworks and human agents authorized to enact them (for example IFAB protocol laws, active match referees, or designated VAR operators). Thirdly, the epistemic or socio-cultural core, which implies the collective, baseline agreement by all stakeholders that a singular, definitive outcome is required to prevent the collapse of the activity itself. The operational logic behind this model is that the Great Attractor model operates via a metaphor of gravitational pull. Rather than attempting to change individual hinge propositions, it changes the systemic costs of non-cooperation. It relies on a positivist assumption that throw-weight of evidence should create a convergence of belief. Even when that belief fails to converge, the Great Attractor applies institutional mass to flatten dissent, shifting the argument away from the dialectic track (Is this choice correct?) to a structural track (Is this decision final?). Success under this logic is measured not by truth-induction, but by dispute-termination. In this way, the analytic utility of the Great Attractor model is strictly bounded by the nature of the target dispute. The model succeeds when it effectively settles binary, geometric, and spatio-temporal claims where rules match directly with physical reality, like ball-crossing the line, offside thresholds, etc. On the other hand, the model fails when it encounters an absolute boundary when forced to translate numerical precision into qualitative categories, like translating the velocity of a limb into an assessment of ‘carelessness’ or ‘excessive force’. In such situations, it cannot resolve deep disagreement; it merely masks it under procedural formalities.

Despite this boundary limit, we present the idea of the “Trialogue” as the procedural framework utilized by the Great Attractor. Unlike a conventional dialogue, which involves two parties trying to convince each other, a triologue includes a third entity - this could be a person, an organization, or a structural setup - that acts as an audience. Both parties must express their viewpoints in a manner that goes beyond their specific linguistic contexts (Banda, 2025). The third party is not required to remain absolutely neutral in the traditional sense, nor does it need to show equal empathy towards both sides. The crucial element is that its presence changes the interaction dynamics of the system. When those in disagreement realize that they must justify their positions not only to their opponents but also to an external observer or arbitrator, they cannot rely solely on insider language or arguments based on their fundamental assumptions. Instead, they are driven to articulate their core beliefs in a way that outsiders can understand, a process that, paradoxically, can uncover possibilities that pure dialogue cannot (Banchuk-Petrosova et al., 2025).

The triologue framework offers an effective approach to addressing the polarization often seen in traditional two-party debates by shifting the focus from winning arguments to ensuring structural accountability in the debate. In typical confrontations between two opposing sides, discussions can become performative battles marked by logical fallacies and emotional manipulations. However, introducing an external arbiter or audience changes participants’ psychological motivations. Instead of relying on superficial rhetorical points that resonate only with their existing supporters, speakers must back their arguments with objective evidence and clear reasoning to gain approval from a neutral third party. This structural change ultimately redefines success; a successful triologue does not require either side to surrender or compromise their fundamental beliefs but fosters a foundation of mutual respect and intellectual honesty that supports democratic discourse.

By shifting from a two-party conflict to a three-party “trialogue,” the structural deadlock of the disagreement is broken, allowing for a rational resolution where one was previously thought impossible. In fact, complex multi-party discussions, as opposed to simple two-party encounters, as maintained by Aakhus and Lewinski (2017), are a familiar and ordinary argumentative phenomenon, but have been ignored largely by many argumentation theorists. While such multi-party and multi-position discussions are characteristic of a large class of argumentative activities, especially of a deliberative type, in argumentation theory they are typically analyzed

and evaluated with the help of dialectical models. Such models theorize argumentation as a dyadic exchange between two and only two parties, protagonist and antagonist or proponent and opponent, who take up only two basic positions, pro and con or agreement and doubt (Van Eemeren et al, 1993). In other words, we maintain that it is precisely this kind of reconstruction that poses biggest problems to discourses of DD nature. Reconstructing the discourse just as a dyadic exchange when dealing with discourses of DD nature, creates biggest impediment to their “rational” resolution because they miss important aspects of argumentative polylogues (Aakhus & Lewinski, 2017).

As we have already explained in our previous papers (see Memedi, 2026), in order for something to be defined as a GA, it must meet three conditions. First, it should be separated from the main beliefs people argue about. Second, it must be important enough to make people want to work together. Third, everyone must agree that it is unavoidable. This makes a GA different from “common ground” or “consensus” because it is more practical. Unlike agreeing on evidence, a GA does not require people to change their beliefs. Instead, it helps them think about what they need to do together to achieve their goals. For example, two groups might disagree about a political system but agree to avoid civil war. Avoiding collapse is a GA because it does not come from either side’s beliefs; it is urgent, and everyone sees it as necessary to keep living together. A GA is not about finding “truth,” but about finding a way to work together when things are tough.

Defined in this way, the concept of the “Great Attractor” refers to an external epistemic authority or structural mechanism endowed with sufficient “procedural gravity” to resolve the binary stalemate between conflicting parties. The metaphor of gravity is purposefully chosen: the Great Attractor does not rely on logical persuasion but wields influence through the force of institutional authority, societal conventions, or mechanical precision. The Great Attractor is characterized by five essential attributes. First, perceived neutrality, where stakeholders must provisionally acknowledge the legitimacy of the UN as an impartial entity outside the conflict. Second, procedural authority involves having the recognized power to issue a binding resolution, irrespective of acceptance. Third, it must exert adequate gravitational force, rendering noncompliance more burdensome than intellectual disagreement. Fourth, it must demonstrate institutional finality, possessing the authority to definitively conclude further disputes at a specific point. Finally, it is marked by an adaptive modality, showcasing the flexibility to manifest in various forms (mechanical, temporal, social) depending on the stage of the dispute.

The implementation of Video Assistant Review (VAR) in football signifies a notable endeavor to create a mechanistic “Great Attractor.” VAR is grounded in a fundamental principle: enhanced data will resolve contentious decisions. By delivering high-definition, multi-angle, slow-motion video evidence, VAR seeks to bridge the humanist-technocratic divide by offering a superior, factual foundation. Nevertheless, as modern football has demonstrated, VAR functions effectively as a “Great Attractor” only when applied to decisions that are genuinely objective - those that align directly with verifiable physical facts. In the context of offside rulings, where semi-automated technology can ascertain millimeter-precise positioning against a mathematical line, VAR attains its highest legitimacy. The “Great Attractor” replicates the precision of mathematical logic, and stakeholders are more inclined to accept its determinations, even when they seem “harsh” to the spirit of the game.

Conversely, the Video Assistant Referee (VAR) system demonstrates limitations as a “Great Attractor” when applied to subjective assessments, such as evaluating whether a tackle was reckless or a handball was intentional. In these scenarios, VAR fails to deliver a “first fact” and instead offers a “third opinion” that is portrayed as objective evidence (Popa, 2022). This phenomenon results in what we describe as the “uncanny valley” of sports officiating: the technology is sufficiently akin to human judgment to invite scrutiny, yet remains too detached from human empathy to be pardoned. The consequence is “algorithmic stagnation,” where the game is stalled by meticulous pixel examination rather than progressing toward resolution. Recent critical analyses of video-assisted reviews have raised doubts about whether enhanced data genuinely resolve disputed decisions in subjective contexts (Collins & Evans, 2017), suggesting that VAR fosters an illusion of objectivity that obscures underlying epistemological disagreements.

Considering this, we assert that the “Great Attractor” need not be solely technical. We delineate five primary modalities through which they operate. First, there is the mechanical attractor: VAR, goal-line technology, and

semi-automated offside detection, which function through data accuracy. Second, there is the legalistic attractor: the International Football Association Board (IFAB) rule-making bodies and FIFA directives, which operate through procedural authority and governance rules. Third, there is the social attractor: the “social contract of professionalism,” a shared commitment that the tournament must continue. This attractor functions through a collective agreement that systemic continuity takes precedence over individual justice. Fourth, there is the temporal attractor: the passage of time, the final whistle, and historical records. As a match recedes into history, the “institutional fact” (the recorded result) gains ontological significance, while the “lived experience” of disagreement diminishes and is forgotten. What was contested became archived. Finally, there is the epistemic expert attractor: panels of neutral experts (former referees and biomechanical scientists). This attractor operates by shifting the disagreement from normative (“Is this a foul?”) to scientific (“Did the force exceed safety thresholds?”), thereby transforming the framework into a different problem space. Each modality functions at different stages of dispute resolution, with early conflicts resolved through mechanical precision and later conflicts resolved through temporal finality.

Applying John Searle’s social ontology framework to the dynamics of the Great Attractor yields significant insights (Kosecki, 2024). Searle posits that institutional facts, articulated as “X counts as Y in context C,” are established through a collective agreement rather than a physical reality. A goal is recognized as such because of a collective consensus, irrespective of whether the ball actually crosses the line. The Great Attractor derives its influence by shifting disputes from the epistemic domain (e.g., “Was that truly a foul?”) to the ontological domain (e.g., “The institutional fact now is that this is not a goal”). Once a VAR decision is documented and the scoreline is adjusted, all subsequent actions must align with that institutional fact. The disagreement remains unresolved but is rendered socially irrelevant. This phenomenon elucidates how football can operate despite profound disagreements. Institutional facts, such as recorded results, final scores, and tournament placements, become gravitational centers around which all future actions revolve, regardless of whether individuals perceive the decisions as “correct” in a deeper sense.

The epistemic transition: From judge to data source

Throughout the history of football, the referee has traditionally functioned as a “Judge” - a moral agent endowed with discretionary authority, experiential wisdom, and the capacity to interpret the “spirit of the law” rather than its literal wording (Marré, 2024). Within this framework, errors were tolerated owing to the appreciation of human drama, the referee’s presence, and the potential for mercy and contextual judgment. The central tenet of this era was: “The referee possesses a ‘feel’ for the game - a subjective wisdom enabling them to differentiate between a cynical foul and a competitive collision.” Disagreements within this context were profound, yet they possessed a distinct nature: they challenged the referee’s character, their comprehension of the spirit of the game, and their fairness. These were moral disagreements, as opposed to technical disagreements. The question of whether rules alone govern fair play has been pivotal in sports philosophy. Some theorists contend that interpreting the spirit of the law is crucial to refereeing (Russell, 1999), which stands in direct opposition to the technocratic approach to officiating that emphasizes mechanical precision and consistency.

The introduction of the Video Assistant Referee (VAR) signifies a significant epistemic transformation, wherein the referee increasingly assumes the role of a “data source,” serving as a conduit for information supplied by technological systems. The central proposition transitions from “the referee possesses wisdom” to “the data represents truth.” Consequently, epistemic authority shifts from human actors to algorithms. To understand the profound implications of this shift, we must look to broader fields of sports sociology and the philosophy of technology. Harry Collins and Robert Evans, in their extensive critiques of sports analytics, observe that sports systems mistakenly confuse mechanical precision with social justice (Collins & Evans, 2017). Collins notes that tracking technologies introduce a form of “morphic uniformity,” which sanitizes the inherent, messy humanness of sport. By trying to force human behavior into absolute, machine-readable formats, institutions create an illusion of perfection that strips away the contextual legitimacy of the on-field official. This systematic over-reliance on procedural metrics to deflect blame away from human agents aligns closely with Michael Power’s concept of the “audit society” (Power, 1997). Power argues that modern institutions create highly elaborate checking systems - not necessarily to expose absolute truth, but to construct a shield of “procedural correctness” that protects the bureaucracy from reputational damage. In football, VAR functions as an administrative audit trail. The institutional goal drifts from rendering a culturally accepted sport decision to generating a legally

defensible, verifiable dataset. Furthermore, this transformation alters how reality itself is perceived by the human official, a phenomenon best understood through Don Ihde's philosophy of technology, specifically his concept of hermeneutic relations (Ihde, 1990). Under Ihde's framework, when a human experiences the world through an instrument (such as a referee interpreting a match via a field monitor), the technology is not a neutral window. Instead, it creates a new text that must be read. The referee stops interacting with the physical, atmospheric reality of the players and begins interpreting a digitized, multi-layered visual representation. The screen abstracts the event, fracturing the natural spatio-temporal links of the live play.

This transition engenders what is termed the "psychological uncanny valley" in sports officiating. When officials rely solely on objective geometric data (such as millimeter-precise offside decisions), the system attains maximum stability by emulating indisputable mathematical logic. However, when applied to borderline subjective judgments, the uncanny valley emerges: the technology is sufficiently precise to eliminate traditional human discretion but not precise enough to eradicate disagreement (Ranalli, 2018b). Players perceive not objective truth but an arbitrary technocracy in the game. The logical culmination of complete technocratization is fully automated AI officiating systems. An autonomous system would process biomechanical data, limb-tracking algorithms, and collision analysis in real time, instantly flagging violations based on preprogrammed parameters. This achieves total epistemic dominance: there remains no one to contest, no human judgment to appeal to, only the cold calculus of the algorithm itself. Nevertheless, this solution introduces a meta-level crisis: the erosion of the human agency. A sport where every decision is calculated by an algorithm ceases to be a human test of character and becomes an exercise in system optimization. Disagreements would shift from "Was that a foul?" to "Why was the code written this way?" - displacing the conflict rather than resolving it and relocating it to a domain where democratic participation becomes significantly more challenging.

Empirical evidence from real-world incidents

This theoretical friction is clearly illustrated by three high-profile, controversial incidents from professional football, each exposing a different vulnerability at the boundary of the Great Attractor model. The first real-world case coming from Tottenham vs. Liverpool example of Luis Díaz offside, provides a breakdown of institutional systems. In October 2023, Liverpool winger Luis Díaz scored a goal that was flagged offside by the on-field linesman. Video review clearly showed Díaz was onside. However, due to a severe miscommunication, the VAR operator erroneously believed the on-field decision was "goal given" and radioed back "check complete." The match resumed with the goal wrongly disallowed. This incident exposes the vulnerability of the material core when isolated from institutional loops. Even when the technical dataset is perfectly accurate (the geometric lines mapped the player as onside), the outcome failed because the socio-technical interface fractured. It proves that the Great Attractor cannot operate as a purely mechanical engine; it remains bound to linguistic protocols and human institutional workflows.

The second real-world example provides an illusion of data completeness. During a match in November 2023, Anthony Gordon scored a goal for Newcastle that required a multi-minute VAR review checking three separate potential rule violations: whether the ball had drifted out of bounds during initial play, whether a Newcastle attacker committed a foul from behind, and whether Gordon was offside at the point of the final pass. The goal was eventually awarded because each check resulted in "inconclusive video evidence," meaning the Great Attractor lacked the technical data required to overturn the on-field ruling. This incident perfectly demonstrated Fogelin's deep disagreement framework in action. Following the match, opposing fan bases, managers, and media pundits scrutinized the exact same high-definition camera angles and arrived at polar-opposite, unshakeable conclusions. Technocratic purists argued that the lack of clear angles proved the system worked by defaulting to the referee, while humanist purists argued that the visual evidence clearly showed a multi-layered injustice. The incident highlights the analytical boundaries of the Great Attractor that by throwing more camera angles at a multi-variable event does not generate consensus; it simply provides more granular text for opposing sides to weaponize in support of their pre-existing frameworks.

A final real-world illustration comes from the Champions League between FC Copenhagen vs. Manchester United. This example provided a clear case of distortions of slow-motion bias. In a Champions League tie, Marcus Rashford attempted to shield the ball from an opponent. As his foot descended, he accidentally caught the opponent's ankle. In real-time, the action appeared to be a routine, albeit clumsy, athletic collision. However,

upon reviewing a slowed-down, frozen frame on the pitchside monitor, the referee dismissed Rashford with a straight red card for serious foul play. This incident illustrates the dangers of Ihde's hermeneutic relation and slow-motion distortion. By removing the live temporal element, the screen systematically skews the perception of human agency and force. Slowing down video footage artificially extends the timeline a player had to make a decision, turning an accidental step into an apparently calculated, malicious stamp. The technological medium actively constructs a new, distorted reality, forcing a technocratic decision that violates the humanist understanding of intent and natural body mechanics.

Structural Improvements: Addressing the Great Attractor

The advancement of algorithmic officiating now encompasses AI systems capable of conducting real-time biomechanical analyses and pattern recognition (Memmert & Rein, 2022). However, as these systems become increasingly sophisticated, a critical meta-level question arises: At what juncture does technological precision diminish the human drama that renders football meaningful? We propose three essential interventions to avert algorithmic stagnation and preserve its legitimacy. First, we advocate a preemptive meta-agreement on hinge propositions. Prior to the commencement of each season, players, coaches, and referees must engage in what Walton (2013) describes as "meta-agreement" - not by debating specific cases, but by resolving the foundational logic of rules when emotions are subdued. Rather than disputing a handball call during a high-pressure match, the League mandates stakeholders to pre-commit to the logic: What constitutes intent? To what extent is arm movement considered to be reckless? What embodies the "spirit" of this rule? This intervention acknowledges that in cases of profound disagreement, the issue is not a lack of data but rather the presence of competing frameworks. By resolving these foundational issues in advance, technology can serve as a tool for consistent execution rather than as an arbiter of philosophy.

Second, we advocate the implementation of real-time transparency in decision-making rationales. A significant issue with the Great Attractor in contemporary football is the opacity associated with the Video Assistant Referee (VAR) system. The VAR officials, acting as a third party, remain unseen and unheard, fostering epistemic distrust and what we term "epistemic manipulation." We propose live broadcasting of conversations between on-field officials and VAR officials to both stadium and television audiences, as is customary in rugby and American football. This approach integrates players into a rational dialogue with the decision-making processes. They are no longer contesting an opaque verdict; instead, they are observing the logical framework that underpins the decision. Even if they disagree with the outcome, they can appreciate the rationality of the process itself.

Third, we propose the adoption of epistemic humility through a "margin of appreciation."

The current model presupposes the existence of definitive resolutions. However, certain physical events, such as the force of a tackle at the moment of impact or the intentionality of an arm movement, are genuinely borderline or indeterminate. We suggest the introduction of a formal "margin of appreciation" clause: when VAR is unable to provide certainty within a specified timeframe, the decision defaults to the on-field ruling. This measure acknowledges the limitations of technology and prevents endless pixel analysis cycles. Both parties pre-agree on the course of action when the Great Attractor encounters an impasse.

Characteristics of effective Great Attractors

In addition to the Video Assistant Referee (VAR) and artificial intelligence (AI), several significant influences, termed "Great Attractors," operate within the realm of football. First, there exists the "social contract of professionalism," wherein, when a player experiences a profound injustice, the predominant force is often the collective commitment to ensuring the continuation of the tournament at all costs. In such instances, the player's pursuit of "individual justice" is subsumed by the imperative of "systemic continuity." Second, the "transparency of rationale" serves as another Attractor. When the logic underpinning decision-making is publicly disclosed, the reasoning becomes influential. Even when conclusions are unpopular, they are more readily accepted if stakeholders can observe rational processes. Third, the "historical record" emerges as a significant factor. As a match becomes part of history, institutional facts, such as recorded scores, accrue substantial weight. Controversial goals from the past decades are now regarded as mere historical data points rather than ongoing sites of contention (Lavorerio, 2021). Finally, the "spectacle itself" functions as an Attractor. The "spirit of the

game” and the “integrity of the spectacle” can exert influence if both parties agree that preserving the shared experience of competition is more important than individual assertions of truth.

The Great Attractor framework elucidates a significant aspect of institutional dynamics: consensus is not invariably required for stability (Pritchard, 2023). The football domain has evolved intricate mechanisms to achieve institutional closure and functional finality without necessitating the universal adoption of a shared epistemic framework. This observation may provide valuable insights into other fields beset by profound disagreements, such as political polarization, legal disputes involving incommensurable values, and scientific controversies at the periphery of knowledge. The framework posits that in instances where deep disagreement remains unresolved, institutions should prioritize establishing sufficient procedural gravity to enforce decisions that are binding, irrespective of acceptance. Legitimacy is derived not from consensus but from the perceived fairness of the process and formal acknowledgment of limitations. Whether football’s transition towards technocratic officiating constitutes genuine progress hinges on our understanding of sports as not merely competitive systems but as expressions of human meaning and moral significance (Morgan, 2006). Consequently, the success of the Great Attractor framework is contingent on its ability to preserve football’s role as a domain where human judgment and character retain their significance. However, this framework incurs certain costs. The transition from viewing the referee as a judge to considering the referee as a source of data signifies a substantial transformation in the essence of the sport. Whether this constitutes progress is contingent upon one’s pre-existing beliefs regarding the intrinsic value of football: Is it a human drama where character and wisdom are paramount, or is it a competitive system where consistency and measurability should prevail?

CONCLUSION

This study elucidates that contemporary epistemic crises in football are not attributable to logical failures but rather represent manifestations of profound, deep-seated disagreements between incommensurable frameworks. By introducing the Great Attractor model, we demonstrated how institutions can achieve closure even amidst persistent philosophical divisions (Ranalli & Lagewaard, 2022). The future of football - and potentially other institutions grappling with intractable disagreements - hinges on the recognition that deep disagreement is not a problem to be eradicated but rather a permanent characteristic of complex social systems. Instead of futilely pursuing a consensus that is philosophically unattainable, institutions should concentrate on developing robust mechanisms for establishing procedural authority, maintaining transparency, acknowledging epistemic limitations, and preserving space for human judgment, even as technological advancements proliferate.

The conclusion of a football match may establish an institutional fact; however, underlying disagreements persist. This friction - the resistance to adopting a singular framework - ensures that football continues to mirror our broader social context. The objective of the Great Attractor is not to eradicate disagreement entirely but to ensure that such disagreements do not impede our ability to engage in the game.

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