Introduction: The Moral Significance of Sport

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There is no doubting that sports play a significant role in the lives of many Americans and indeed of many people around the world. Millions watch not only the Olympics, soccer’s World Cup, baseball’s World Series, football’s Super Bowl, test cricket, the college football bowl games, college basketball’s Final Four, and the NBA Basketball Championships, but also games leading up to these, as well as those that never make it to that level. ESPN has afforded us the opportunity to watch sports twenty-four hours a day on not just one but two television channels; newspapers devote entire sections to sports. And while millions watch, millions more participate at their own levels of play. The engagement in sports at all levels surpasses that in any other activity, including work.

What accounts for this? It has been suggested that sports merely provide an outlet for violence in society; but this is too simplistic. Participants, spectators, writers, and even critics recognize and admire the artistry, beauty, grace, elegance, heroism, discipline, courage, and drama of sports. Human beings are moved by the discipline of the best athletes, and applaud their heroism and courage, not the violence which occasions the display of these virtues.

There is more to sport than what draws our attention to it. Because of its nature and design, it serves significant moral functions both for individuals and for societies. First, sport provides individuals with activities for creative self-expression, and means of self-respect and self-development. By extension, sport serves to form a social union in a society of social unions, “a community of people with shared ends and common activities valued for themselves, enjoying one another’s excellences and individuality as they participate in the activities.” In this way individual development and respect are reciprocal.

Second, because sport is a microcosm of society, it dramatizes the social order. Sport represents the social order in miniature, exhibiting a “slice of life” in an exaggerated and dramatic form, much as a play dramatizes an episode from life. Sport mirrors or reflects society, its virtues and vices, but, unlike a mirror, it is active; it affects what it is a reflection of.

Finally, as an art form, as a controlled expression of emotion, sport enhances the notion of a social union, and further serves a significant moral function in its dramatization.

The Paradigmatic Form of Sport

The paradigmatic form of sport can serve to illuminate its moral significance, both negatively and positively. Four features exemplify sport in its paradigmatic form: (1) it is a freely chosen, voluntary activity; (2) it is governed by rules, of two sorts; (3) it is physically challenging; (4) it
involves competition in a mutual challenge to achieve excellence. These features provide neither an exhaustive nor an exclusive definition, but a model.

First, sport is a freely chosen, voluntary activity, participation in which is an expression of the individual's creativity and his or her freedom to choose. Thus, sport is an unalienated activity, and as such is in what may be called "the realm of freedom," and has as its end the activity itself. Though it may serve other purposes, it does not have to have a product or provide a service, nor is it a means to an end outside itself.

Of course, those who participate in a sport necessarily have goals. For example, to play basketball one must have the goal of scoring baskets. In stating the rules of the game, one necessarily states the goals internal to it which the participants must have. The goals are within the context of the activity itself.

In its paradigmatic form then, participation in sport is both conscious and free, and the participants know and freely abide by the rules. This voluntary cooperation is required to begin, continue, and end the activity. Thus, for example, when I play basketball, tennis, or golf, I freely choose to do so and am conscious of my freedom to participate in the activity for no end outside the activity itself. Neither my existence nor my subsistence depends on my participation in the activity. This is unlike work.

By contrast, work in its paradigmatic form is non-voluntary and aims at something other than itself. Most members of society work in order to live; for them work is a means to an end other than itself. It is seen as a deliberate providing for needs or wants. As such work belongs in what may be called "the realm of necessity."

It is possible, of course, for the fortunate few to express their creativity and freedom to choose in their work; most often when work approaches the paradigm of sport, it also enters the realm of freedom. But this cannot be the case for the great many workers whose work has little or no room for creativity or self-expression. Conversely, sport, which in its paradigmatic form is in the realm of freedom, may be an individual's means of living and thus in the realm of necessity. As I will argue, however, this is one possible source of the perversion of sport.

Now it might be objected that on my analysis, sport is no different from work, because sport is indeed a means to some ends: happiness and pleasure, health, discipline, relaxation, a sense of achievement, or money. Several points may be made here. First, when the aim is health or discipline, the activity degenerates into dull routine and quickly becomes something akin to work. When these objectives dictate what is done, efficiency becomes the concern. The question is "what is the most efficient way of obtaining these products?" This is the question one asks in work, not in sport. Examples of such activities are calisthenics, weightlifting, and jogging. These are better called exercises, not sports. They are generally designed for physical fitness and are generally subjectively different from sport, in that they are not enjoyed for themselves.

This subjective difference has an objective counterpart. They are not designed or participated in for self-expression because they are repetitive and simple. In doing sit-ups, for example, you do not try to be creative, nor do you do them for their own sake. You can concentrate on the sit-ups initially to make sure you are doing them correctly or efficiently, but after the efficiency level is reached, there is no more to think about except what end they will achieve, the "cut" abdominal muscles. "Once given a chance to train for games, students revolted against doing set exercises as ends in themselves. They found them to be tedious, repetitious and meaningless." This may be further illustrated in body building. This was not satisfying in itself; the regimen had to be seen to be for something; thus, competition was devised.

Interestingly and importantly, when one participates to the fullest, the by-products of all sports are health, discipline, and a sense of achievement. These may be aimed at, as we saw, but they are better achieved when one forgets about them. This is certainly also the case with relaxation, happiness, and pleasure. These are by-products of sports, but only when they are not the aim. This is just a particular instance of the paradox of happiness.
discussing this issue, a friend commented that she jogged, “not for its own sake, but for fun, relaxation, health and a sense of achievement.” But if my analysis is correct, these can best be achieved by participating without those aims in mind. A person “who wants to be refreshed through play must forget about refreshing himself and just play.” By participating to the fullest, that is by participating freely with no other specific aim in mind, one achieves these “products.” This is not the case in work, where the end product must always be kept in mind. If I am building a house and am concerned with the end product, I must keep fully aware of that end and must be alert to all the day-to-day operations. If I “lose myself” occasionally, it could be disastrous.

When money becomes the aim, sport begins to degenerate into a means to that end, insofar as this objective dictates what is done. “How best can I command money?” becomes the question. Being good at the sport helps, but creating a spectacle or being an entertainer is often the main criterion. To this end individuals try gimmicks or antics, or go to schools with a big athletic publicity department. For example, winning the Heisman trophy means players command more money, but they are not always the best football players in the nation. Winning this most coveted award is often the result of the publicity put out by the athlete’s school and by television promotions. Athletes become commodities and the “bottom line” is what matters to the owners. Further, salaries are decided relative to how high up a player is chosen in the annual draft selections of the professional leagues.

Of course, the Heisman trophy winner is still an outstanding athlete, but unfortunately there are other cases where the sport itself is incidental. How best to be an entertainer or produce a spectacle is the primary concern, since that is how to command more money. At this point sport begins to be perverted, and moral virtues are undermined. The epitome of a perverted sport is professional wrestling. Everything is done for the entertainment value, for the benefit of the spectators, or more honestly for their money. In fact there is little sport left in it.

The perversion is so pervasive that in most states professional wrestling is not even considered a sport. The participants are not athletes, but actors and stuntpeople, certainly talented in their own right. There is little resemblance between this spectacle and collegiate wrestling, which is a spectacular sport, but is far from being spectacle.

Fortunately, in most sports ability is still the primary money-maker. But because money becomes the aim, other factors are introduced, or at least encouraged; namely violence or “bad boy” behavior. Violence is encouraged, not for the good of the game, but for the good of the gate. Violence does nothing to enhance the sport performance. This can readily be seen in professional hockey. Hockey is a contact sport, but the contact is often exaggerated and violence is encouraged because it is spectacular and develops fan loyalty through hatred. This testifies to humankind’s great capacity for passionate involvement and our failure to focus on the essence of the event. In this sense sport begins to parallel war. Love of one’s country, or patriotism, is enhanced during war; loyalty developed through hatred of a common enemy.

We also see this in professional basketball, with some players seeing who can be the “baddest” or the most outrageous. We are all familiar with former NBA players Charles Barkley and Dennis Rodman. Spectators flocked to see their antics, encouraging others to follow in their footsteps. League officials could curtail behavior such as theirs, but it would cost the league ticket sales, and so their infractions are basically ignored. Again this attests to what is good for the gate not for the game. It is true that fines are levied for fighting in professional basketball, but given the enormous salaries players can command, this has little affect. Once more the bottom line is money.

It might be claimed here that where there are spectators, perversion is inevitable. It is certainly possible, in that spectators often dramatize or intensify the atmosphere so that violence is encouraged even more. But it is not inevitable. While participating rather than watching is central to sport, spectators can add a new dimension by recognizing and applauding the
choreographies of good play and by admiring beautiful moves. Nevertheless, I hold that everyone should participate, if she or he is able. This point I will take up in the following section.

The second feature of sport in its paradigmatic form is that it is rule-governed. There are two different sorts of rules that are important to sport: rules of decency or fair play and constitutive rules. Some sports have more rules than others, and some may have only one sort. First, there are rules of decency, safety, and fair play. For example, in boxing one cannot hit below the belt; in football one cannot tackle by grabbing the face mask or tackle a non-ball carrier from behind; in baseball one cannot throw at the batsman’s head; in cricket one cannot continually bowl bodyline, etc. There are very many rules for decency and safety, and when these are violated players are penalized. Rules of fair play include penalties for moves of strategy within the game. Rules of decency reflect basic moral standards. The ground rules are accepted, and while they may be manipulated for strategic advantage, they must not be overstepped without swift punishment (e.g. in the case of fighting, biting, etc.). The death of ethics is the sabotage of excellence.

Added to the rules of decency and fair play are constitutive rules which define the game and the permissible moves. Their existence comes from their acceptance. Constitutive rules are designed to develop and exhibit distinct sets of skills and talents. In combination these rules impose a discipline and create a framework for self-expression and self-development. These rules require calculations, decisions, strategies, and mental agility as well as the meeting of a physical challenge. Thus, when I agree to play basketball, I agree first of all to abide by the rules which define the game, and the rules of decency, safety, and fair play within it. Further, I use these rules as a disciplined means of self-expression and self-development. For example, I cannot put the ball in the basket any way I choose; I must put it in the basket in the ways the rules permit. I cannot stand on a ladder, knock someone out of my way, or climb on someone to reach the basket, nor can I score a basket by sending

the ball through the bottom of the net. The carefully specified rules impose a kind of discipline that requires me to devise ways of scoring a basket which require skill, bodily excellence, and ingenuity. The rules force me to use various strategies to create moves to score within them.

Now it is a fact that not all sports impose a defining set of rules. One example is mountain climbing. However, besides the rules for safety, there are impositions that require bodily excellence and ingenuity, rules that require strategies for climbing to reach the top. The goal is not just to reach the top, but to climb to reach the top, and this requires adherence to rules, or laws, of nature. No artificial rules need be imposed.

It is this rule-governing feature that differentiates sport from play, where the rules are simply the more general rules of the society. In play there is little to guide the play activity except the general rules that guide normal human behavior, in particular ones against harming others. But such rules impose no discipline for self-expression or self-development. (They do serve to develop character, however.) The rules of sport, on the other hand, provide a framework for creativity in accordance with aesthetic standards, requiring both mental and physical energies. It is this last notion which leads on to the third feature of sport.

The third feature of sport in its paradigmatic form is that sport is physically challenging. This feature differentiates sports from games. In being rule-governed, sports are coextensive with games, but games do not always emphasize a physical challenge or require bodily excellence. Thus, for example, chess is a rule-governed activity and is a game, but it does not qualify as a sport because it is not physically challenging. The rules which define the sport activity are specifically designed for displaying and expressing bodily performance and aimed at bodily excellence. Thus, these rules often create artificial obstacles for just this purpose.

Using the example of basketball again, rules and obstacles are designed so that scoring baskets requires skill, coordination, strategy, and bodily excellence. The obstacles and rules present a challenge. The size of the court forces the action into a relatively small area. The
“three-second lane” forces continuous action around the basket and prevents very tall players from simply standing next to the basket for a dunk. This is why we have heard some people advocate raising the rim of the basket to 11 or 12 feet, so that the tallest players must create moves which require bodily excellence. Dunking itself displays a tremendous amount of ability — coordination, timing, jumping ability, and balance. It is probably one of the most beautiful moves in basketball because it requires such a combination of abilities — mental and physical.

A rule that imposes another discipline is the shot clock. In college men’s basketball the shot clock is 35 seconds; in women’s it is 30; and in the professional game it is 24. The shot clock requires a basket to be attempted within the time allowed. This requires not only bodily excellence but mental concentration and strategy. Interestingly the women’s rules included the 30-second clock in their revision when they changed to approximate the men’s rules. Professional men’s basketball has required the 24-second clock since 1954. In every case the clock serves to keep the game challenging, mentally and physically, and also increases spectator appeal.

Obviously some sports impose more obstacles and discipline than others. However, as I mentioned above, not all obstacles need be artificial. The mountain itself is the obstacle in climbing, as the water is for kayaking and white water rafting. But all impose some obstacles providing a physical challenge, and forcing the participants to create ways to display their abilities. Cricket, for example, does not allow the bowler to throw the ball to the batter in the same way the pitcher throws to the batter in baseball. Also the bats are very different. But in both baseball and cricket the bats are designed to meet very definite specifications stipulated by the rules. All these rules, obstacles, and equipment specifications are designed for displaying and creating bodily excellence.

What is interesting and significant is that the different sets of rules which define different sports are designed to exploit the different bodily excellences which correspond to the different body types in men. A good basketball player, for example, does not necessarily make a good football player; a good football player does not necessarily make a good swimmer, etc. There presently exist sports opportunities for nearly every male body type; though there have been great strides, this is not the case for women.

Women cannot as a rule compete in football and boxing, or compete with men in most other sports. Although there will always be exceptions, because these are exceptions there will always be societal prejudice which guarantees inequalities of opportunities. Therefore, there is a case for developing sport activities that exploit women’s body types. In some cases this may simply involve revising the rules of existing sports, such as in basketball by reducing the size of the ball for college players. In other cases it may require developing entirely new activities. In any case since sport is already the single most available activity for self-expression for men, as is clear from the great variety of sports which serve most men’s body types, it seems reasonable that similar activities ought to be provided for women. It is interesting to note that basketball was originally created for men to play in the winter between the fall and spring sports. This testifies to the truth that a sport can be a fresh creation made to satisfy definite purposes; other sports could be similarly created. What is also fascinating about basketball is that women played the same game as men in 1892, but due to concern for women’s bodies, it did not develop as the men’s game did, and only in 1976 was women’s basketball made an Olympic sport.

The final feature of sport in its paradigmatic form is that it requires competition. And it is in competition that the mental and physical skills, talents, and coordination come together. Competition in sport obviously compels the players to exercise and develop their mental skills. Each must develop strategies to counter a competitor’s skills and strategies. Here coaches often play significant roles; they are the skilled strategists, work with the athletes in practice, and discuss the mental aspects of the sport in the locker room. But once on the court or the playing field, it is up to the athletes to make quick calculations and decisions based on experience, since only the most basic plays and
moves become automatic. The quarterback in football must be able to “read” and understand the opposing team’s defense and then call the next play accordingly. And if the defense shifts in anticipation or if the play does not go quite as it should, the quarterback must make a quick calculation and decision, and the other players must do the same. Good players are afflicted neither with “decidophobia” nor with rashness. In most activities challenges change in unpredictable ways and so one must be prepared to counter within the rules. Making these decisions in those circumstances can serve an important moral function. It is not only in sport that one has to make decisions quickly, but not rashly.

It should be noted here that not all sports require person-to-person competition or even team competition. There are different forms of competition. Sports such as rock and mountain climbing do not require competition between persons; rather they pit a person against nature. This may be understood as “contention” rather than competition; but the requirements are the same in that one must put one’s mental and physical skills to the test. However, while this is the case, in analyzing the moral significance of sport, my discussion centers on the person-to-person aspects especially seen in organized sport.

Sport dramatizes how competition can lead to friendship, to a cooperative challenge toward a shared end. When the game is played fairly according to its rules, and when the competitors are relatively evenly matched, the participants take pleasure in a well-played game, in which they put out their best efforts in the desire to win. This requires the cooperation of all involved. The shared end is the game well played. Without the cooperative efforts of the participants, referees, etc., such an end cannot be achieved. This cooperative effort constitutes a mutual challenge: I am challenged by my competitor as she is challenged by me. I am not interested in destroying or subjugating her; I view her not as an enemy, but as a challenger, someone who by her efforts makes me work hard to develop my abilities. In this way I respect her as a person with similar abilities and virtues and also respect myself in this mutual cooperative challenge. That competition leads to friendship is epitomized by the traditional handshake at the end of the competition. What the competitors are saying in this symbolic gesture is, “Thanks friend, I could not have done it without you. Thanks for the challenge.”

Unfortunately sport also dramatizes how competition may lead to combat. But the dramatization in either case performs a significant moral function. It shows our intense passion and desire to be victorious as well as our failures. Competition as a challenge to better oneself is of value to society and to the individual. This is not unique to sport situations; it is important in all fields of endeavor. Competition is valuable when it is viewed as a cooperative challenge and not as combat, when it is viewed as a means to friendship and not as a means to alienation. In these ways competition does serve to develop citizens as well as individuals. Competition enables participants to deal properly with other realities.

Now, of course, this does not carry over into all activities and realities. It does not mean, for example, that participants then put as much energy into activities they dislike or find great difficulty doing. There are, of course, aberrations, and these are definitely dramatized in a sport context. This is especially seen when competition is viewed as combat, emphasizing the “win-at-all-costs” syndrome, and when viewed as a zero-sum game. It has been argued that these are essential features of competition. But if my analysis is correct, these “features,” so far from being essential, are instead perversions.

The point of competition is not just to win, but to function at a maximum, to develop oneself to the fullest, and to do this one must compete against those who challenge. If it were simply to win, one would choose weak opponents that one could always defeat. Generally one prefers to lose against a strong opponent than win against no competition at all. This is evidenced by the expression “hollow victory.” Certainly winning is part of the game (i.e. someone must win), but one sees an opponent not as an enemy to be defeated, but as one whose excellence challenges and makes possible one’s own best performance. This point was made clear to me in the 1993 National Indoor Tennis Cham-
pionship. Roland Thornquist of the University of North Carolina disagreed with a line that was in his favor, saying, “I’d rather lose a match and be a good sport than cheat and win the match. I think you win in the long run.”

This epitomizes competition in sports. The goal is not to destroy, but to achieve, to discover how effectively one’s power can be used to bring about a successful outcome under the established rules, not at all costs. Again here I am talking about person-to-person competition.

These observations are not relevant to all kinds of competition, as I noted above. Perhaps we ought to derive our model of competition from that of the mountain climber, or kayaker, or rower, where strategy is used to challenge the mountain or the river. The point is not to subjugate, but to challenge, to achieve, where the struggle involves the process, the desire to be tested. The win-at-all-costs syndrome does not seem to be present in sports where the competition does not involve other persons. Much can be learned from this and transferred to the person-to-person organized sports which are the focus of this project.

To illustrate the virtue of competition as an achievement toward a shared end, let me quote David Halberstam, a noted sportswriter:

When most oarsmen talked about their perfect moments in a boat, they referred not so much to winning a race as to the feel of the boat, all eight oars in the water together, the synchronization almost perfect. In moments like that, the boat seemed to lift right out of the water. Oarsmen called that the moment of swing... it allowed you to trust the other men in the boat. A boat did not have swing unless everyone was putting out in exact measure, and because of that, and only because of that, there was the possibility of true trust among oarsmen.

This same moment of “swing” can be seen in other team sports when the play works beautifully because everyone is putting out the same energy to be synchronized with each other’s.

These four features constitute a schema for sport in its paradigmatic form, and it is these four that characterize the importance of sport. Sport, therefore, is an unalienated activity which is required for self-development, self-expression, and self-respect. This is part of its fascination. I do not deny that other activities provide vehicles for these goods. What I contend is that sport is the single most available means and the single most participated-in means for attainment of these goods. It is in this sense that sport is the art of the people and is therefore morally significant.

Sport and Work in a Social Union

Karl Marx argues that work is the means to self-development — not, of course, work under capitalism, but unalienated work; work that is freely chosen and exemplifies human creativity requiring the energy of both the mind and the body, in accordance with aesthetic standards. And, Marx continues, given the proper setting, i.e. communism, there can be this unalienated work available to everyone. This obviously was essential for Marx’s argument.

Further Marx maintained that in a communist society, we could all be not only workers, but philosophers, poets, etc.:

In communist society, ... each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes, society regulates general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticize after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, cowherd, or critic.

I am not sure this is the case, but Marx is correct in emphasizing that this well-roundedness, which is necessary for self-development, requires “unalienated activities”; activities designed specifically to provide room to express and develop oneself freely and not activities that are means to satisfy needs. I have already
discussed sport as an unalienated activity. I will now discuss how it also provides the basis for well-roundedness and for development of our uniquely human capacities.

I adhere to the claim that we all ought to be well-rounded and that we all ought to develop our uniquely human capacities; capacities which include the rational, aesthetic, and moral, as well as the capacities for friendship and cooperation. But Marx’s claim notwithstanding, we can’t all be artists, philosophers, poets, or top athletes. To be well-rounded and to develop all our faculties is impossible if it means we must attempt to perfect all our faculties. Time alone does not permit the development of all our potentialities. As Rawls puts it, “One characteristic of human beings is that no one person can do all that they might like to. . . . Potentialities of each are greater than those we can hope to realize.”

How then can we be well-rounded? If excellence necessarily requires specialization, it would seem that we cannot. One possible solution is for everyone to participate in as many activities as possible, but specialize in only one or two endeavors. We can’t perhaps all be philosophers, but we should all philosophize. We can’t all be experts in any one area, but we should participate in as many as possible. Obviously not all of us can be superior athletes, but we should all participate; and the more we participate, the more we appreciate the excellence of the best. In both cases, philosophy and sports, some must specialize so that they embody excellence in that activity. In this way we can participate in that excellence. It is in this sense that sport fulfills the requirements of Rawls’s social union. The successes and enjoyment of others complement our own good. Thus, the successes and enjoyment of superior athletes and their performances complement the good of others. This justifies professional sports. The professionals display the superior talent and excellence of the best and as such enable us to participate in and appreciate their excellence. We do this as spectators. In this way we become complete vicariously.

Now it may be asked here whether participation is necessary for appreciation. The answer is yes; otherwise one runs the risk of becoming an elitist, or of focusing on the “accidents” of the activity, or of denying its significance. As a result the non-participant often fails to give respect to the superior participant. It is in this situation that spectators contribute to the perversion of sport.

Rather than perverting sports, our participation and knowledge enhance the quality of the performance. An analogy may be made with philosophy and philosophical conventions. Attending a convention are professional philosophers, students of philosophy, other academics, and professionals interested in certain areas of philosophy. Some of the performances are entertaining with little content. But these are rare, because most of the spectators at any presentation are fairly knowledgeable and are actual participants themselves, and thus “see through” such performances. Thus the quality of the convention is enhanced. And further, we as spectators appreciate the excellences of the professional philosophers through these performances (i.e., their papers).

The same can and does hold true in sports. By being a participant, or a student or a knowledgeable aficionado of a sport, a spectator enhances its quality. The more knowledgeable people become, the more they are able to see through the performers who lack ability, and the less likely to be impressed with violent displays. Such people appreciate the superior performances, the hard work, the creativity, the strategy, and the artistry involved. They need not be participants in all sports to appreciate all sports. The unique nature of sport activities inheres in any sport. So that while I may be a participant in basketball, I can appreciate the excellences of other sports because they all have similar requirements. They all, in some way, participate in the model presented in the preceding section. However, the more I know about any one sport, the more I can appreciate it. And the more I participate in a variety of sports, the more I can appreciate the significance of sport in general.

To sum up: we cannot all be specialists in all areas, but because there are specialists who do achieve excellence, we can participate in excellence in the performances of others. In this way our capacities are complemented, and
we become well-rounded. So, "when [we] are secure in the enjoyment of the exercise of [our] own powers, [we] are disposed to appreciate the perfections of others." This is the essence of Rawls's social union.

Thus, individuals realize themselves as individuals by participating in roles and stations in the social order. "We need one another as partners in ways of life that are engaged in for their own sake, and the successes and enjoyments of others are necessary for and complementary to our own good." Social institutions, and sport along with them, are to be judged by their contribution to this aim.

**Sport as a Microcosm**

It has been argued by many that sports mirror the society in which they operate, and I will now examine this claim in more detail. Sport is a microcosm of society, complete with all its conflicts, assets, and defects. Sports serve to bring out the best and the worst in people. Just as there is corruption in society, there is corruption in sports; just as there is violence in society, there is violence in sports; just as there are drugs in society, there are drugs in sports. On the other hand, just as there are rules of conduct in society, there are rules of conduct in sport; just as there are successes and heroes in society, there are successes and heroes in sports. In all these ways and others, sports reflect the society in which they take place. But this is only part of the picture. A mirror provides a passive reflection, but sport is active and affects what it is a reflection of. Further, sport not only reflects society, it also dramatizes the social order. These unique aspects are what make clear the moral significance of sport both for the individual and for society at large.

In being a miniature of society, sport compresses and heightens certain features, much like a dramatic presentation. Aspects of society are exaggerated and dramatized, and in this way are made clear to all of us. Like drama, sport may reveal to the society virtues it has not yet recognized, or present new values and criticize old ones, or dramatize the established virtues and values. For example, in the triathlon competition perseverance is dramatized in the mere attempt to finish. We admire the finisher as well as those who push themselves to the limit in the attempt.

In all of these ways sport may spur moral change. Insofar as it declares the virtues and values of society, sport tells people when they do not live up to their ideals, chastises them for their laxity, and prods them to be better people. For example, "that's not cricket" is not said only in cricket.

We espouse the virtue of hard work. Sport does much to dramatize this, and it is with this in mind that some rule changes are made. Surely some people have more talent and aptitude than others. That is as it should be; but raw talent is usually not sufficient. No one, no matter how apt, is naturally great. To be great, an athlete must become great. This is why Michael Jordan is a great basketball player, and Tiger Woods is a great golfer. They both have talent, but they have dominated their sports because they developed their natural abilities to be the best they could be. Sport emphasizes the development of the raw talent, and this carries over into society.

We also espouse the virtues of courage, patience, sportsmanship, perseverance, and determination. These are emphasized in sports, but also dramatized so that any undermining of them becomes more obvious and acute. And when this happens we chastise not only the violators but society itself for its laxity. This was illustrated quite well in our attitude toward John McEnroe, who in his displays on the tennis court dramatized the lack of some of our cherished values. Again some rule changes have tried to address such behavior.

Another value society holds dear is justice as fairness. Sport may serve to dramatize how justice ought to be administered and how fairness is emphasized. This is done by carefully specifying rules, both to define the game to provide for development, bodily excellence, hard work, and fairness, and to provide for proper conduct within the game. With regard to the latter, infractions are swiftly and surely dealt with. Referees and umpires mete out immediate justice.
In playing the game one agrees to abide by the rules, recognizing both their importance and their essential fairness. In this way participants are made aware of each other as individuals with shared ends. And it is in this way participants come to appreciate others as moral persons and as such constitute a moral community.

It is because sport is an art form and dramatizes our virtues and values that we are outraged at its aberrations from these. And it is therefore most important that these be corrected within sports and that this is done surely and quickly. But while this dramatization of virtues may spur moral change, it may also be the source of a great moral danger in sport. People may substitute sport for reality and in so doing be content with their cherished virtues being played out in the game and not in reality. For example, C.L.R. James, in his book *Beyond a Boundary*, gives the example of how on the playing field, racism was non-existent. The important thing was the competition, the cooperation, teamwork, and friendship. But as soon as the players left the playing field, the racial prejudices returned, and this the racists felt was all right. After all we treat you as equals on the playing field, what more do you want?

This situation is analogous to the effects of religion that Marx criticized. Religion, says Marx, “is the imaginary realization of the human essence.” Thus, to tolerate misery on earth, people live in imagination and all that is good is played out in this imaginary world. “Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the feeling of a heartless world, and the soul of the soulless circumstances. It is the opium of the people.” Sport could represent an alienation in this sense and become the opium of the people in a similar way. All the virtues could be carried out in the sport instead of in our own day-to-day lives, as C.L.R. James says. On the cricket field there was no prejudice—not on the field, a place of honor—not in heaven! Thus the players alienate their good qualities from themselves and live them out in an imaginary realm. But neither sport nor religion is wholly imaginary.

In sport the realm is not imaginary. As a matter of fact in sport the prejudices were not and are not dropped. As James shows, there were black captains in cricket, and there were indeed teamwork and friendships on the field which were not acknowledged off it; but other prejudices carried over into the sport itself. So what happened? When glaring prejudice was pointed out, people were forced to recognize what they were doing. By focusing on a specific point, they made changes. Hopefully this dramatization and change carried over into society and spurred further changes. As I have said above, sport is not a mere passive reflection, but is active in that it affects society even when this is not intended.

We can see this in the circumstances and changes in our own society and in sport in America, in particular baseball, football, and basketball. In baseball there were black and white leagues, no integrated teams. This was a glaring violation of the ideal. When dramatized with the emergence of Jackie Robinson into the Brooklyn Dodgers, it stimulated or provoked analysis and criticism of wider issues in society. More recently the issue of black managers has been raised, and when Al Campanis, then vice-president of the Los Angeles Dodgers, answered that blacks do not have the requisite abilities to manage, he was chastised and relieved of his position. And after that, we had Marge Schott, owner of the Cincinnati Reds, whose racist comments landed her a suspension. In an interview she commented that “everyone” makes these comments, so why was she singled out? The answer is that doing so serves to put people on notice to recognize these issues in society, and that people in power are most in need of this awareness because their examples may not only reflect society’s prejudices, but also serve to perpetuate them. Such people, by their very positions, take on the duties attached to those positions, because they exemplify what is allowed in society. This includes owners, CEOs, public athletes, and professors, to name a few. It is through these people that society learns what is proper, what is tolerated, and is right or wrong. So Marge Schott, Dennis Rodman, John McEnroe, and Marion Jones all have duties beyond those of the general public. Once you choose to become a public figure, you also
choose the duties that go along with this, because it is the nature of being a public figure that you affect others in society. Since sports have become the most public of all professions, they impose more duties. Sports figures are role models; it goes with the territory.

This can be extended to other areas as well, and feminist issues in particular. The Title IX ruling of 1972 requires that schools not discriminate in their athletic programs on the basis of sex. Though even today this is met with resistance, most schools complied with this ruling and provided teams and coaches for females. Some schools did the bare minimum just to placate females and keep the law off their backs. Other schools made facilities and revenue available to provide competitive and challenging sports. Now we could stop there, claiming that the challenges have been provided, and that is enough. But because sports are viewed by many people as insignificant, sex equality in sports is tolerated, though not necessarily extended to or tolerated in society in general, in business or politics, say. But rather than permit this, sports can serve to show that many of the old ideas held about women were simply prejudices—prejudices such as women being weak, not competitive, rendered incapacitated by their biology, etc.—and in this way sport may again spur moral change. "If women’s athletic potentialities are taken with as much seriousness as a man’s, it will become more evident that sport concerns not only mankind but humankind and deserves to be viewed as a basic human enterprise."

Gender equity is presently one of the biggest issues facing the NCAA and college athletics.

This serves to strengthen the analogy between sport and religion. Both are only partially or temporarily in an imaginary realm. Prejudices carry over in both, and in this way both are reflections of the wider society. But because sport dramatizes and affects these prejudices, it turns and helps change society. Religion may serve a similar function, and often does, but only when it approaches the public dramatization that sport can perform.

Marx recommended that religion be abolished to destroy the illusion, this “holy form of self-alienation…to establish the truth of the here and now.” On the contrary, neither sport nor religion ought to be abolished; rather both should continue to dramatize our ideals and our virtues, as well as our prejudices and vices. In this way both may serve to spur on moral change. But because sports involve a more public realm, the dramatizations are more visible and prominent. And further, sports are concerned with the here and now in a way that religion is not. Sport is only “imaginary” in the sense that it is set apart from the normal everyday world, and like religion may serve to help individuals tolerate the miseries of that everyday world. But it is in the here and now that the participants are finding solace, not in any life after death. And so it is in the here and now that sports may serve to spur on moral change. This can be seen, for example, in television ads that show young girls participating in sports and how this is good for them. The television promotion of the US National Soccer Team does the same. These show that the old prejudices were just that, and that girls and women can and should participate to receive the same benefits men have so long enjoyed.

In religion it is in heaven that everything is just and good, and this goodness depends on God, not on us. We can’t make it good on earth; only God can. In sport, goodness depends on us, not on God. Sport has no God; there is no pretense that the perfect realm of sport is God’s. Sport is a realm of human beings and human creations. Thus for moral change no gigantic step is required. We don’t have to wait for God to do it; it is within our present abilities. Sports reveal who we are and may reflect who we are in society, but it is up to us to recognize our duties to ourselves and others. In this way sport serves a different but compatible function to that of religion. And in this function lies its moral significance.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have argued that sport serves significant moral functions for both individuals and society at large. Sports, as unalienated
activities, provide autonomous agents with a vehicle for self-expression, self-respect, and self-development. There are, of course, different kinds of unalienated activities, but sports are the most available of these. Further, there are all kinds of sports at all levels of participation.

Sports also perform significant moral functions in society at large. In its dramatization and active reflection, sport may spur moral change. But while sports may be the art of the people, they may also serve as the opium of the people.

Sports will continue to be discussed on television, in newspapers, and in other forms of the media including the internet. But the discussions cannot be left to these public forums if, as I have argued, sports are morally significant. This moral significance calls for academics to take part in those discussions, to which this volume is one contribution.

Notes

I have had the benefit of helpful comments and criticisms from a number of students and colleagues, most notably Bernard Boxill, Thomas E. Hill, Jr., Jacob Hale, Kit Wellman, Shirl Hoffman, participants at the Hillsdale College Conference “Who’s on First? Liberal Arts, Christianity or Sports,” where an earlier version of this paper was presented, the Johnston Scholars Honors, and my First Year Seminar students at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

5 Ibid., p. 228.
6 The Latrell Sprewell situation is a case in point.
8 Recall the controversy when George Brett hit a game-winning home run with a bat with too much tar, and further controversy over “super-bats.”
9 Admittedly technology has made some decision making less spontaneous.
10 Roland Thornquist went on to play professional tennis and is currently the head women’s tennis coach at his alma mater, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.
13 Marx, “German Ideology,” in Selected Writings, p. 169.
15 This is why those who most respect Coach Smith are players and other coaches.
17 Ibid., pp. 522–3.
19 C.L.R. James, Beyond a Boundary (New York: Pantheon, 1963).
20 Marx, “Toward a Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right: Introduction,” in Selected Writings, p. 64.
21 Ibid.
22 See p. 2 for an analysis of this concept.
23 Kit Wellman discusses this issue in reading 34.
24 Weiss, Sport, p. 228. Also see Jane English’s essay in this collection (reading 23).
25 Marx, “Toward a Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right: Introduction,” p. 64.