
Foreword

SPORT IS EVERYWHERE. FROM massive global spectacles such as the Olympic Games or the World Cup to everyday dramas on the school playing field or in the park down the street, from the back pages of newspapers to the heart of many people's leisure activities, sport is a major preoccupation of the modern world. Sports stadia are routinely described as the cathedrals of our time, sports stars receive adulation as demi-gods, and sports teams generate passions and allegiances that are quasi-religious in nature. Yet from a casual scan of the topics which Christian ethicists take it upon themselves to deliberate about, it would not be easy to tell that sport was of much human or moral significance. To be sure, the matters to which ethicists do attend are scarcely unimportant—sex and death, life and love, money and power, war and peace, people and planet. But the fact that pervasive cultural phenomena such as sport are not probed with the same level of theological seriousness as is routinely devoted to social and political ethics, bioethics, sexual ethics or environmental ethics, is something so striking as itself to be worthy of investigation. To be sure, other reflective disciplines have begun to take up the challenge, and there are burgeoning literatures not least on the philosophy and sociology of sport. But theological thinking in the area is only just beginning to gather momentum. Clearly there is plenty of work to be done.

Sport ought also to be of particular interest to Christian ethicists because of what it tells us about the nature and limits of human capacities. This is evident when we turn to think about which ways of enhancing human physical and mental capacities we regard as legitimate, and which ways we find questionable. It is one of the striking facts about contemporary sport that just at a time when there seem to be fewer and fewer justifications for

questioning performance enhancements within the terms of our dominant philosophical traditions, nevertheless the public culture still remains profoundly sceptical of doping in sport. In cycling, athletics, weightlifting and a whole host of other sports, doping is widely regarded as cheating. Yet in the face of some contemporary accounts of morality, it might be tempting to dismiss such attitudes as atavistic relics of intellectually unsustainable distinctions between normal and enhanced bodies. Unsurprisingly a number of philosophers are inclined towards this conclusion. But equally we might consider working the argument in the opposite direction, using the conflict between popular instinct and philosophical reasoning as a locus for examining the cogency of our theoretical commitments. We might analyse what lies behind our revulsion against doping, and see what this tells us about our fundamental understandings of what it is to be human.

Michael Shafer's book is therefore just the kind of exploration we need. Michael is a passionate enthusiast for sport, both as a participant and as a spectator: he is a bottomless fund of information about a whole range of sports, from track and field to motor racing, from basketball to mixed martial arts. (He is even willing to indulge the English preoccupation with cricket, a game that goes on so much longer than baseball that George Bernard Shaw was led to quip that the English, not being a very spiritual people, invented cricket to give them some idea of eternity.) However, much more than that, he is passionate about Jesus, and about bringing Christian thinking to bear on sport. When he embarked on this project, he intended to address particular questions about the ethics of biotechnological enhancements in sport, as a case study within the broader field of human technological enhancement. But he soon discovered how the theological study of sport is a field in its infancy. So he had to do a lot of background foundational work on the nature of sport, its relationship to play, to competition, and to leisure, as well as on the history of Christian attitudes towards sport. Only when that had been done was he in a position to address the questions with which he had started out. The result is a highly instructive and very welcome theological exploration of what our everyday concerns about doping tell us about the nature of sport, and beyond that, of what our care about sport tells us about our own nature as human beings—as those who are cheered on by the watching crowds to run with perseverance the race marked out before us and so to win the prize for which we are called.

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