"Is Our Admiration for Sports Heroes Fascistoid?"

Tannsjo

Questions

• When we watch March Madness, the World Series, or the Superbowl, is our enthusiasm for the game and the athletes honorable?

• When we admire athletes, is this admiration respectable?

• Do we ever get too excited by an athlete's poor performance?
  • Might being a fan be something unhealthy?
Strategy

• Tannsjo argues that admiring sports athletes and sport teams is not honorable
• It is not honorable because the fan admires strength, the winner, or the overcoming of weakness
• This aspect of fandom mirrors fascism

Sports and Nationalism

• Sports have been used for nationalistic purposes
  • National sports teams "represent" their country
    • Nationalism: patriotic sentiment bordering on chauvinism
    • Chauvinism: excessively prejudiced loyalty or support for one's own cause, group, or gender/sex/race
  • Evidence: We seem more interested when a team/individual from our country wins an Olympic event than when a team from another country wins
The Decline of Nationalism in Sports

- To certain extent, nationalism in sports has declined
  - In part this is due to the "internationalization" of sports
  - It is also due to the commercialization (corporatization) of sports and sports teams
    - Some athletes don't play for their country's team because they are committed to a professional team and league (based in a different country)
    - Tannsjo thinks the commercialization of sports and teams leads to a similar nationalist zeal among fans

Tannsjo's Thesis

- "My thesis is that our admiration for the achievements of the great sports heroes, such as the athletes that triumph at the Olympics, reflects a fascistoid ideology. While nationalism may be dangerous and has often been associated with fascism, what is going on in our enthusiasm for individual athletic heroes is even worse. Our enthusiasm springs from the very core of fascist ideology." (430)
  - Tannsjo's thesis is not about the athletes, but with the fans
Fascism

- Fascism:
  - authoritarian and nationalistic right-wing system of government
  - extreme, authoritarian, or intolerant views or practices

What's Wrong With Nationalism?

- Tannsjo thinks that nationalism's problem is that it focuses on abstract symbols to the detriment of individuals
  - Nationalist symbols include flags, teams, and even the "nation" conceived as an abstract symbol (e.g., "America—the land of the free and home of the brave")
- Nations can become strong and powerful and yet the people of that nation can suffer
  - Nationalism might glorify the nation while victimizing its citizens
What's Wrong With Glorifying Abstract Symbols?

- "abstract entities as such are of no value" (431)
- Morally, it is individuals that matter
  - Individuals can feel pleasure and pain
  - Abstract entities are not sentient, conscious beings
- "Only individual values are genuine." (431)
- The problem with nationalism is that individuals and individual values may be sacrificed to serve the interests of abstract, nationalistic symbols

Contempt for Weakness

- Nationalism is, arguably, the defining trait of Nazism
- Harald Ofstad argues that nationalism is not the core fact of Nazism
  - The core factor of Nazism is a contempt for weakness
- Hitler thought the defeat of the Third Reich was not due to a failed ideology but rather due to the weakness of the German people
Tannsjo's Thesis: Restated

- "My thesis is: When we give up nationalism as a source of our interest in elite sports activities, when we give up our view of individual sportsmen and teams as representatives of ‘our’ nation, we when we base our interest in sports on a more direct fascination for the individual winners of these events—when we move from something that is only contingently associated with nazism (nationalism) to something that is really at the core of nazism (a contempt for weakness)....When we celebrate the winner, we cannot help but fell contempt for those who do not win. Admiration for the winner and contempt for the loser are only two sides of the same Olympic medal." (432)

Value Judgments and Contempt

- Admiration and contempt are value judgments
  - Those who win are valuable and excellent
  - Those who lose are weak, less valuable, and contemptible

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<tr>
<th>Losers</th>
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Forms of Contempt

1. **Aggressive form**: those who are weak are to be exterminated

2. **Negligent form**: we shouldn't even bother thinking about those who we find weak and contemptible; these individuals "don't exist" to us

3. **Paternalistic form**: we think we should take care of the poor, contemptible creatures
   
   - All three forms have a similar feature— all three tend to treat those less valuable with little to no respect; "They are not treated as full persons." (433)
   
   - If strength is treated as having normative value, then weakness will be a moral bad

Psychological Aspects

- If we are confident that we are not among the weak, then we will tend to treat those who are weak paternalistically; as individuals needing taking care of

- If we fear we might be among the weak, we are more inclined to treat those we see as weak as nonexistent or even more extremely as individuals to be hated or exterminated

- If we do not have another arena in which we feel we excel, then we may be inclined to be the loudest and most ardent sports fans in order to compensate for our own weaknesses
Zero-Sum Games and Moral Betterness

- Zero-sum games are games in which for every winner there is a loser
  - Zero-sum scenarios extend beyond games and apply to situations in which there are limited resources
  - For someone to gain some resource (because they are praiseworthy or deserving) means that someone else will not (because they are not as praiseworthy or valuable)
  - If moral betterness is determined with reference to strength, then these types of valuings become fascistoid

Objection: Analogies to Success in Arts and Sciences

- One might argue that we admire artists and scientists because of their creativity and discoveries, so why not athletes?
  - Tannsjo agrees in part
    - What we can and should value are the products artists and scientists produce
    - We should not think that artists and scientists are more valuable than those who do not produce artistic and scientific discoveries
    - All individuals have equal moral worth, regardless of what they produce, how strong they are, or their victories
  - Sport fandom is different: "However, we cannot but admire the winning athletes themselves or else give up our interest in watching sport." (435)
Objection: We Admire the Results

- One might argue that there is a sense in which we watch sports and athletes and appreciate the beauty and grace they exhibit
  - It is not the strength of the athlete we value but the beauty of his/her performance
- Tannsjo thinks this is true—to a point
  - Ultimately, what matters in sports competitions is who wins, regardless of any aesthetic appreciation
    - A beautiful sports performance is second to an ugly win
- Sports fandom is different: While artists and scientists can be valued independently of what they produce, athletes can only be valued by their performance
  - What athletes "produce" in their performances are valued by wins and losses
    - "But winning (a fair competition) is only a means. It is a means to prove excellence. So what we admire in sports is really the excellence shown by the winner." (436)

Valuing Excellence and the Elite

- At times, we might value what an athlete has achieved given his/her natural endowments
  - However, there is little public interest in female sports, handicapped competitions, senior citizens, etc.
- Why?
  - Because what most people want to watch is the excellence of the elite athlete; a competition finding out who has the most superior talent
Superior Talent and PEDs

- The problem most people have with PEDs is that we fear that those who take the drugs really aren't the strongest, fastest, or most superior athletes
  - This demonstrates that what we value is a test of strength
- Tannsjo thinks the consequence of our valuing strength is that PEDs will be permitted so that we can value the strongest among an entire field of enhanced athletes

Superior Talent and Genetic Engineering

- While Tannsjo thinks PEDs will likely be permitted, he does not think that will be the case with genetic engineering
- With genetic engineering, it is no longer the winners of the genetic lottery who we value for their strength
  - With genetic engineering, the winners will be those who were designed to excel
- Tannsjo does not think the average fan will be interested to see who the "designed" winner is
Objection: Contempt for Weakness is Human Nature

- One might argue that the contempt for weakness and the admiration for strength is only natural
  - While many humans are competitive by nature, Tannsjo is specifically addressing the admiration fans feel for the winners of competitions and the contempt for the losers
  - It is the admiration and contempt felt by the fans that is the issue
- Sport fandom is different: There is no evolutionary instinct to admire and cheer for winners
  - At best, we admire winners because of psychological or cultural factors
  - But, this does not show that this admiration is morally acceptable

Conclusion

- "...our enthusiasm for our sports heroes is fascistoid in nature. It is not respectable. Our admiration for strength carries with it a fascistoid contempt for weakness....In sum, we ought to realize that our enthusiasm for sports heroes is fascistoid in nature. That is why it is no exaggeration to say, in closing, that if we are to grow as moral agents, we need to cultivate a distaste for our present interest in and admiration for sports." (439-40)