Torbjörn Tännsjö argues in this writing that his excitement over sporting events, like the Olympic Games, is not based upon respectable enthusiasm. It is based on fascism—a fascism which is, at root, nationalistic. What is worse, he says is that this “fascistoid” enthusiasm is the very root of our admiration of individual athletes.

The basis of nationalism, Tännsjö states, is a focus on abstract entities, such as flags, emblems, and even nations. In celebrating such entities, individual athletes acquire a secondary status and they become replaceable.

The problem, Tännsjö argues, is that only individuals, not abstract entities, have value. In placing entities over individuals, like when we endorse nationalism, we indulge a fetishism that gives life to lifeless symbols. And so, he asks, is nationalism concerning sports of this nature?

Tännsjö argues that nationalism in regard to sports is only harmful when political nationalism is strong. But commercialism and the money accessible to individual athletes have begun to render the nationalism of sports innocuous. Our interest is now in individuals and their personal accomplishments. Herein lies a more dangerous fanaticism, he declares, which is at bottom nazi: love of strength and contempt for weakness. While nationalism is only accidentally associated with Nazism, contempt for weakness (and praise of strength), in contrast, are at its very core.

In celebrating our winners and condemning our losers, we morally evaluate athletes. Winners are better people; losers, inferior. The former deserve more of the good things in life, while the latter do not. This is Nazi ideology.

To remedy this severe problem, Tännsjö believes that we ought to resist moral evaluation of athletes—especially our praise of strength and our condemnation of its lack. And, even though our immediate feelings toward winners and losers may have their roots in human constitution, we should look to education in order to stay such dispositions.

Try to answer the following while reading: Do you think our attitude toward competitive sport today is Nazi in the manner Tännsjö states? What are the three main objections Tännsjö anticipates toward his thesis? Does he...
adequately address them? Why does Tännö believe that the contempt-for-
weakness thesis may have its roots in biology? What are the moral implica-
tions of this, if so?

INTRODUCTION

Already looking forward to the Olympic Games in Sydney at the turn of
the millennium, I try to recollect what happened last time in Atlanta.
How did I react? I realize that once again I was swept away with enthusiasm
and admiration for those heroic athletes who had stretched the limits of what
is physically possible for humans to achieve. Some have run faster than any-
one has done before. This is true of Michael Johnson. Others have excelled
and shown that, contrary to what should have been expected, they are—
still—invincible. This is true of the greatest of them all, Carl Lewis. My query
is: Is my enthusiasm for Johnson, Lewis, and all the other athletic heroes,
respectable? Upon closer examination, my answer is no. My enthusiasm is
not respectable. On the contrary, it is of a fascistoid nature. So the problem is
really what to do about it. The problem is pressing, for my attitude toward the
Games is not exceptional. I share it with a great many other people who walk
this planet. This is why the games were so widely broadcast.

Many people have pointed out that there is something unhealthy in
much of the public interest in team sports on an elitist level. There was a
time in many European countries when the Workers’ Movement fought
actively against the growing interest in sports. This concern has withered,
but the rationale behind it remains relevant. As a matter of fact, team sports
have often been used by nationalist governments to create a chauvinist zeal
in their own populations. This zeal has rendered easier the formation of total-
itarian government, oppression of minorities at home, and imperialist adven-
tures abroad. National sports teams have become emblems of their
respective nations. These facts are rather obvious. It is also obvious that
some of the interest that most people take in elitist sports events is nourished
by these kinds of nationalistic sentiments. The interest as such reinforces the
nationalism. This is indeed a vicious circle. But what about the public inter-

est in the individual athletes in the Olympics? Should it be condemned because it reinforces an unhealthy nationalism?

To some extent it certainly does. Even individual athletes may become the target of these kinds of sentiments. Johnson and Lewis have reinforced U. S. nationalist sentiments. I am, on my part, more interested when a Swede succeeds in the Olympics, than when someone else does. But this cannot be the only source of my interest in the Olympic games. For my main interest is in the achievements of people like Johnson and Lewis. So perhaps much (the main part) of my admiration for their achievements is, after all, respectable? Perhaps much of the general interest taken in the games is respectable?

If this were the case, there would be room for optimism. For it seems to be part of the received wisdom that nationalism within sports withers. When big business in the form of international enterprises enter the arena, in the manner of sponsoring, advertising, and selling and buying television rights, national governments have to go. Often, the foreign NHL professionals do not bother to take part with their respective national teams. Instead of nationalism and interest on the part of the public in one’s “own” team, admiration comes for the achievement of the outstanding individual. Local teams turn into corporations. And these corporations are seen as places where the outstanding individual can excel. However, this interest in the achievement of the outstanding individual is really no better than our (perhaps outmoded) nationalistic interest in the fate of “our” own team. Or so I will argue in this paper.

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.

Note that my thesis is not that there is anything fishy about the motives of the athletes themselves. I say nothing about this. Nor do I condemn those who organize sports events, those who train young people to become members of the athletic elite, or those who profit from the games, and so forth. In the present context, the exclusive target of my criticism is what goes on within the enormous, world-wide public, watching sports, usually through television. My interest is in the values entertained by you and me, we who tend, over and over again, to get carried away by such events as the Olympic Games.
Traditional Team Sports on an Elitist Level

Before developing my main argument, let me briefly comment on why it is a bad thing to have nationalistic values expressed and reinforced by publicly broadcast sports events. If this is a kind of danger in relation to elite sports that is becoming outmoded, and so it seems to be, it might be interesting to reflect on what it is we are getting rid of. When we see this more clearly, we are on firmer ground in our investigation of the new kind of danger we exchanged for the old one.

The main problem with nationalism is its orientation towards abstract symbols: the flag, the team (seen as an emblem), and yes, even the nation conceived of abstractly. When such entities are celebrated, the individual tends to become replaceable. The nation can get strong, it can be successful, even if each and every one of its citizens suffers. This individual suffering need not matter in the very least to the nationalistic ideology. In a similar vein, when the team becomes a representative of the nation, its individual members tend to become replaceable. When our football or soccer heroes are successful, we cheer for them. When they fail “us,” we despise them.

This way of regarding our sports stars as representatives of our country, conceived of abstractly, fits with a common view of the military force. It may easily spread and permeate all the relations between people in a country. Young women are treated as potential instruments that shall safeguard the strength and survival of the nation; young men are viewed merely as potential soldiers, and so forth.

One might object that this is only a description. What is actually wrong with celebrating abstract symbols? Why not stress the interests of the nation rather than the interests of individual beings? Why not stress the survival of a race or species rather than of individuals making it up?

The answer is, as far as I can see, that abstract entities as such are of no value. What matters, ultimately, from a moral point of view, is what happens to individuals capable (at least) of feeling pleasure and pain. Only individual values are genuine. In order to be good absolutely, something must be good for an individual, capable of feeling (at least) pleasure and pain.

This is not to say that there exist no positive examples of nationalism. The U. S. struggle, say, for national independence was a worthy aim. But in those times, nationalism had a content. It was possible to see over and above the flags and the marches a point to the struggle, a point relating, in the final analysis, to respectable individual interests (in avoiding oppression, of various kinds). Even so, the flags and the marches are dangerous things. When
the struggle is over, they tend to stay with us and live their own lives in the form of fetishes.

I will not try to argue the point in the present context that all respectable values are individual. I have discussed it in detail in *Hedonistic Utilitarianism* (2). It is here simply taken for granted. This means that if someone claims that the strength of his or her nation is of value in itself, he or she makes a value mistake. This mistake is dangerous if it leads to actions where individual interests actually get sacrificed for the sake of abstract, symbolic values. And this kind of sacrifice is the rule rather than the exception when a nationalistic ideology gets a firm hold of the members of a nation—in particular, if the nation in question does not face the least threat from any other nation.

Even if this be conceded, it might perhaps be argued that the kind of nationalism fostered by the public interest in team sports events is innocent. It might even be argued that nationalism in relation to sports is a good replacement for political nationalism (i.e., the kind of nationalism that is truly dangerous). It is better if people live out their nationalism in front of their television sets or on the seats around the sports arenas, than if they channel their nationalism through political parties and movements. Only in the latter case does their nationalism pose a real threat to important values.

I do not believe that this argument is tenable. The nationalism fostered by our interest for our “own” national team, and the nationalism we exhibit on the political arena, tend to reinforce each other. In particular, in periods where political nationalism is strong, what happens on the sports arenas tend to become politically important. There is only a small step from being a soccer hooligan to joining a fascist organization modeled on the Hitler Jugend. I will not develop this line of thought, however. The reason for not developing it has already been adumbrated. I think the common observation, that nationalism is becoming less and less important in relation to sports, is correct.

Why is nationalism within sports becoming less important? This has to do with commercialization and internationalization. The best sportsmen and the best teams earn enormous amounts of money. They can afford to allow themselves a considerable independence from political authorities and interests. They can take liberties with their own sports organizations. They rely rather on their own impresarios than on elected authorities of the Olympic Committee. However, when the old nationalism gives way, it gives way to something no less problematic. Let me now develop this main theme of my paper.
CONTEMPT FOR WEAKNESS

Nationalism, or chauvinism, has sometimes been thought to be a defining trait of nazism. However, in his seminal book, *Our Contempt for Weakness*, Herald Ofstad has argued, convincingly it seems to me, that the nationalism of the Nazis was only a contingent fact. To be sure, Hitler put the German nation before all other nations. And he put the so-called Aryan race before all other races. However, the hard core of nazism was different. The hard core of nazism was a contempt for weakness. This is shown by Hitler’s reaction when the Third Reich broke down. In Hitler’s own opinion, the defeat showed, not that there was something basically wrong with the Nazi ideology, but that there was something basically wrong with the German Nation. The German Nation had proved to be weak rather than strong. So eventually Hitler came to feel contempt for it (1:p. 24).

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, when we base our interest in sports on a more direct fascination for the individual winners of these events—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).

Obviously, in my argument, a premise is missing. It is one thing to admire the person who wins the victory, who shows off as the strongest, but another thing to feel contempt for those who do not win (and turn out to be weak). I believe, however, that in doing the one thing, we cannot help but do the other. When we celebrate the winner, we cannot help but feel 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.

This is not to say that those who win the contest feel contempt for those who don’t. It is one thing to compete and to want to win and quite a different thing to admire, as a third party, the winner. My argument relates to those who view sports, not to those who perform. Those who perform may well look upon each other as colleagues. They may feel that they are doing their job, and that is all. The winner may well feel respect for the loser. Or the winner may entertain any other feelings. It is not part of my project to speculate about this at all. My argument does not relate to the responses of the athletes; it relates to our responses to what they are doing. We, who comprise the public *viewing* the sports events, are the ones who admire the winner and feel contempt for the looser. If we are sincere in our admiration, and we...
often are, we cannot help but feel contempt for the losers. We would be inconsistent if we did not feel any kind of contempt for the losers, once we sincerely admire the winner.

To see why this is so we ought to think critically about why we admire those who excel in the Olympics. Our feeling is based on a value judgment. Those who win the game, if the competition is fair, are excellent, and their excellence makes them valuable; that is why we admire them. Their excellence is, in an obvious manner, based on the strength they exhibit in the competition. And the strength they exhibit is “strength” in a very literal sense of the word.

But our value terms are comparative. So if we see a person as especially valuable, because of his excellence, and if the excellence is a manifestation of strength (in a very literal sense), then this must mean that other people, who do not win the fair competition, those who are comparatively weak, are less valuable. The most natural feeling associated with this value judgement is—contempt. It is expressed in the popular saying: Being second is being the first one among the losers.

Contempt can take very different forms, of course. It may be of some interest in the present context to distinguish between three forms of contempt. First, contempt can take an aggressive form, as was the case with the Nazis. They wanted to exterminate weakness (by exterminating those who were weak). Second, contempt can take a negligent form. We try not to think at all about those for whom we feel contempt. We “think them away.” We treat them as nonexistent. We do not care about them at all. Third, contempt can assume a paternalistic form. We want to “take care” of those “poor creatures” for whom we feel contempt. Common to all these reactions (all based on the idea that some individuals are of less value than others) is a tendency not to treat those who are considered less valuable with respect. They are not treated as full persons.

The surer we are that “we” are among the strong ones, among those who are valuable, the more prepared we are, I conjecture, to adopt the paternalistic reaction to those whom we consider weak. The more we fear that we might really belong to the weak ones, I also conjecture, the stronger our inclination to treat the weak ones negligently, as nonexistent—or even aggressively, with hatred: We want to exterminate them (i.e., make them nonexistent).

This is what is going on when enthusiastically we stay up half the night watching the athletes compete. To be sure, to some extent what takes place
does so only in a symbolic way. We admire Carl Lewis for his excellence, and
we feel some contempt for those who fall behind. However, we know that we
would never stand a chance of beating Carl Lewis. Does this mean that we
realize we are among those who are weak? It means, probably, that we fear
this. But many of us believe we have other skills that compensate for those
Carl Lewis possesses. Even if we are not physically as strong as he is, we may
possess other kinds of strength. We may excel in respects that are (in our own
opinions) more valuable than “strength” in the literal sense of the word.

But what if we do not? I believe that some of us may fear that we might
fail on all relevant accounts. Those of us who do, I conjecture, are those who
cheer most loudly for people like Carl Lewis.

What respects are relevant? This question is not possible to answer in a
general manner. The Nazis had one (rather vague) notion about what kind of
strength was important. We may have a differing view. As a matter of fact,
each person may have his or her own opinion about this. But there is really
no need to give a general answer to the question: What kind of strength is
important to exhibit? As soon as we hold one opinion or another about it, we
are vulnerable to the kind of argument I want to level in the present paper.
Any person who is eager to be strong, who is prepared to feel contempt for
those who are weak, and who fears that he or she may belong to those who
are weak—any person who feels that those who are in any sense “strong” are
better than those who are “weak”—are open to the criticism that he or she
has fallen pray to the core of Nazi ideology.

There is a kind of betterness that is moral. A person, S, is (morally) bet-
ter than another person, P, if and only if S is more praiseworthy, admirable,
or deserving of the good things in life than is P. This notion is given a fascis-
toid twist when moral betterness is conceived of in terms of strength.

But must we feel contempt for those who are less successful (valuable)?
Can we not just admire them less? I think not. For there are normative
aspects of the notion as well. Those who are less valuable have to stand back
when some goods (and evils) are to be distributed. And when resources are
scarce, treating one person well is tantamount to treating another person
badly. In a sports situation, this is clearly the fact. The setting is competitive.
Olympic medals (and the money and reputation that go with them) are a
scarce resource.

If we want to be sure that we do not get carried away by our admiration
for winners, we ought to resist the very idea of moral excellence and better-
ness. In particular, we ought to resist the idea that moral excellence consists of strength.

To be sure, the idea of moral excellence in general and of moral excellence as (at least partly) a matter of strength of some kind, is an idea with deep roots in the history of philosophy, playing a crucial role for example in the ethical thinking of Aristotle. Yet an ethical theory can be constructed without having recourse to it. The utilitarian tradition, for example, bears witness to this.

Of course, even a utilitarian must concede that a life can be better or worse, for the person who lives it, depending on the content of the life, as experienced “from inside”; but this does not mean that a person can, as such, be (morally) better or worse. A certain kind of character can be more conducive to happiness than another kind of character, and should for this reason be encouraged; however, this has nothing to do with moral worth. In particular, it has nothing to do with strength of any kind. And the idea that strength is a proper grounds for admiration, the idea that underlies our fascination for the winners of sports events, is one that we ought to resist.

**Objection: Similarities in the Arts and Science**

Those who are prepared to concede that there is something to the argument stated above may still want to protest. They may want to argue like this. Even if there is something fishy about the reaction of the sports public to athletic achievements, it is unfair to single out sports for exclusive concern. After all, even within science and the arts we meet with the same phenomenon. Some people exhibit an unusual scientific or creative skill (strength). They make important contributions to science or create valuable pieces of art. They are then met with admiration. Does that not mean we value these persons in a manner similar to the way we value successful athletes? And if we do, does this not mean we think of those who are less successful in these areas as less valuable? Do we not exhibit contempt for weakness, then, when, for example, we give Nobel Prizes and the like to some “outstanding” persons?

At least to some extent I think this argument sound. And to the extent that it is sound, we ought to be ashamed of ourselves. But I think it sound only to some extent. For, to be sure, when we become enthusiastic about scientific and cultural achievements, we need not have scientists or artists as the focus of our attention. We can admire Frege’s theories and Mozart’s operas without feeling that Frege and Mozart are valuable persons. We can
value the *products* of their ingenuity, not their genius itself. We can say truthfully that what they produced is of the utmost value but still retain the view that *they* are not more valuable than anyone else. They are merely *instrumental* to things of importance in themselves.

To be sure, even within science and the arts there are ugly manifestations of the phenomenon I have criticized within sports. Some people tend to get carried away with their admiration for lonely, heroic “geniuses” in the development of human science and art. Philosophy is not free from this phenomenon. There are people who speak with admiration of philosophers such as Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Wittgenstein, not because of any clear thoughts they have absorbed from the writings of these philosophers, but because they feel confident that these philosophers are especially “deep” and “inspired” thinkers. All this, like the actual Nazi ideology, is part of the legacy of the romanticism of the 19th century. However, while this phenomenon within science and the arts may be seen as a kind of corruption, it belongs in a more essential way to sports.

We can and we ought to admire the *products* of skillful scientists and artists, not these persons themselves, at least not because of their skill. (Perhaps some of them deserve our admiration because of their moral qualities, but Frege is not among those.) However, we cannot but admire the winning athletes themselves or else give up our interest in watching sport. Or can we? Why not consider the sports as simply a (very popular) part of human culture, where the results (products) of the individual achievements are what count?

**Objection: We Admire Results, Not Athletes**

I believe that there may be something to the objection that sport is not very different from art. In both cases there is excitement over the results of people’s strivings. However, while the results are often, and should always be, the main focus of our attention within the arts, sports are different. There is an aesthetic aspect even to sport, to be sure. Some people are met with admiration not only because of their strength, but also because of the beauty with which they perform. Juantorena ran more beautifully than anyone before him. Why not say that it is the beauty of his running we admire, not himself? We admire the beauty in his running in the same way that we admire the beauty in a piano concerto by Mozart.

This line of argument is tenable to some extent. The Juantorena example is not a very good one, however. Had Juantorena not also been, for the time
being, the fastest, we would not have remembered him for the beauty in his way of running. In the final analysis, what counts is who breaks the tape. But in some team sports, such as soccer, the aesthetic dimension may be considered more important. I believe that it might be of considerable importance, particularly among skilled audience members. After a match, they can discuss for hours the beauty in a single rush, irrespective of the outcome of the match where it took place. However, even their interest in the aesthetics of the play tend to be secondary, in the final analysis, to the outcome of the match. Remember that during the Chinese Cultural Revolution, there was a period when soccer competitions were reviewed with no mention of the outcome. At least among the majority of the sports public, this policy met with little approval and soon had to be changed.

As a rough approximation, then, we may say that, though there is room in science and the arts for admiration both of scientists and artists for their skill (their metaphorical “strength”) and for their results, within sports there is room only for admiration of performers. The “results” they produce are not genuine; they are mainly results of measurements, measurements intended, first of all, to establish who won. 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.

Take away our admiration for the winner of the genetic lottery, who has proved his superiority in a big sports manifestation, and you take away most of our interest in the manifestation. This is true in particular for those of us who are not experts in the field and who tend to get carried away only now and then when we are informed by media that something remarkable is going on in a sports arena (like the Olympics).

But could it not be argued that what we admire is not really the excellence of the winner but what the winner has achieved given his natural endowments? And would not this kind of reaction on our part be morally more acceptable?

There is a grain of truth in this objection. And this grain of truth explains that there is a public interest in such things as female competition, competition between seniors, competition between handicapped persons, and so forth. When someone wins the Olympics for handicapped persons and we admire him or her for winning, we admire the achievement (given the constraints). In spite of the obstacles, this person made quite an achievement, we concede. However, the relatively weak public interest in such competitions,
as compared to the interest in competitions of the absolute elite, shows that this kind of public interest in sports is of minor importance.

As a matter of fact, I suspect that there is even an element of contempt for weakness underlying many people’s interest in this kind of handicap sport—but that it takes a paternalistic form. We do not take those who perform in handicap competitions seriously. We encourage them to go on but only in order that they develop into something less worthy of our contempt. In any case, if we are forced to choose, what we, the vast majority of us, want most to watch, are competitions involving the absolute elite, not the Olympics for handicapped people.

Moreover, even if we are prepared to admire people who have worked hard, at least if they succeed in the competition (and the ability to work hard need not be anything that must be explains with reference to genes), I believe we will admire even more a person who excels without having worked hard for it. If a middle aged member of the audience who never exercised unexpectedly walked down from the stadium and joined the Olympic 10,000-meter race and, because of superior natural talent, defeated all the finalists, the success would be formidable. Our admiration for this person would be unlimited. It is talent (which can be genetically explained), not achievement, we admire most. The point of the contest is to show who has the most superior talent.

This elitism of ours is also revealed by our way of reacting to doping. We want the competition to be fair. We are not prepared to admire Ben Johnson only because he has run 100 meters faster than anyone before or after him. Why? We suspect that Carl Lewis is genetically more fit than Ben Johnson. This is why we condemn Ben Johnson. He cheated.

But how do we know that Carl Lewis did not cheat too? Perhaps he was only more clever and got away with it. If doping were allowed, we would avoid this problem. We would not need to fear that the winner was not the strongest individual. If everybody were free to use whatever drugs they find helpful, then the crucial test, the competition, would show who is most fit. The competition is then fair.

For this reason, it is not at all implausible that doping, the deliberate use of drugs intended to enhance our strength, will rather soon be permitted. At least it is plausible to assume that drugs that do not pose any threat to the health of those who use them will be allowed. This seems only an extrapolation of a development that has already taken place. After all, there was a time when training was looked upon with suspicion. No one questions training
today, and all athletes engage in it. Then came a time when massive training, on a professional basis, was condemned; I can vividly recollect the disdain with which swimmers from Eastern Germany were regarded by Western media during the 1960s. These days are also gone. Today, all successful athletes train on a professional and scientific basis. To the extent that all have the same resources at their disposal (an ideal we are far from having realized, of course, because of social differences and differences between nations), the competitions remain fair. But if training, even on a professional and scientific basis is all right, then why not accept doping as well, at least so long as the drugs used are not especially dangerous to the user?

If we were to permit such performance-enhancing drugs, we would no longer need to entertain the uneasy suspicion that the winner used prohibited drugs and managed to get away with it. We could then watch the games in a more relaxed manner.

A special problem, of course, is posed by the possibility of genetic engineering. What if those who win the Olympic Games in some not too distant future are not winners in a natural genetic lottery but genetically designed to do what they do? Would we still be prepared to stay up half the night to watch them perform? Would we still be prepared to admire those who make the greatest achievements? Would we still be prepared to cheer for the winners?

My conjecture is that we would not. Interestingly enough, then, genetic engineering may come to pose a threat not only to elitist sport but to the fascist ideology I claim underlies our interest in such sports.

**Objection: Contempt for Weakness is Human Nature**

A fourth objection to my thesis that our admiration for sports heroes is at its core fascist needs to be addressed. Is not our admiration for strength, and a corresponding contempt for weakness, only natural? Are these feelings, moreover, not natural as well? Hence, is not a criticism of them misplaced? Since our nature is given to us by evolution, and since that nature dictates that we admire strength and feel a contempt for weakness, it hardly seems fair to criticize the possession and expression of these kinds of feelings.

This objection is flawed, but it renders necessary some important distinctions. It may be true that most of us are, by nature, competitive. We compete with each other, and we enjoy doing so. But there is nothing wrong in this, or at least, this competitiveness is not the target of my criticism. The competitiveness might go to an unsound extreme in certain circumstances, of course, but I do not intend to say that our competitiveness, as such, is
immoral. Our competitiveness engenders important achievements, and it is a source of excitement and joy. It is also, of course, a source of disappointment and dissatisfaction. However, this is only as it should be; without some disappointment and dissatisfaction our lives would feel rather empty. I can readily concede this, for my criticism, in the present context, is not directed against competitiveness as such, nor to competitiveness in sports. I accept that scientists compete in a struggle to be the first to solve a certain problem, and I accept that athletes compete to win an important race. What I protest against is the admiration we show for the winner, be they scientists or sports heroes—and the corresponding contempt we feel for the losers. This reaction of ours, is not the natural pride felt by the winner himself, is immoral. And the stronger our enthusiasm for the winner (and the stronger our corresponding contempt for the losers), the more immoral our reaction.

However, is not also this admiration for the winner, and the corresponding contempt for the loser, only natural? Well, this may depend on what we mean by calling a disposition “natural.” Here we need another distinction.

One way of talking about “natural” dispositions is as follows. A certain disposition is “natural” if nature (evolution) has provided a species with it in the form of a blind instinct. If this is how the disposition is given to the species, then there is no room for blame when individual members of the species act on it. There is no point in blaming the lion for preying on the antelope. Under the circumstances, the lion can’t help doing what it does. And it cannot help finding itself under the circumstances, either.

Another way of taking the idea that a certain disposition is “natural” is as follows. Evolution has provided the species with the disposition, but not as a blind instinct. Individual members of the species tend to act on it to be sure. And there exists a good evolutionary explanation why they do. However, sometimes they do not. When they don’t, we need an explanation for this fact, an explanation cast, not in terms of evolutionary biology, but rather in cultural or psychological terms.

It seems highly implausible that our admiration for strength and contempt for weakness is natural in the former sense. Human beings are not driven by instinct when they cheer for the winners of the Olympics. If people choose not to do so, then they often succeed. Some people do choose, for one reason or another, not to join in, when the public hysteria is raised by main sports events. And they succeed in not joining in. So this is a possible course of action.
However, it might well be that we need an explanation why they do not join in, and the explanation may have to be case in psychological or cultural terms. For snobbish reasons, say, they do not want to go with the crowd. Be that as it may, they can stay out of the events and they do.

So it might well be that our admiration for strength and our contempt for weakness, exhibited most prominently in our reaction to sports, is natural in the sense that is has been given to us by evolution: It takes education of some kind to avoid developing it. From an evolutionary perspective, it might have been advantageous to show contempt for weak individuals. It might have been advantageous to cheer for those who are skilled in aspects that relate to human survival. To borrow a phrase, if you can’t beat them, join them. In particular, it might have been advantageous, alas, to despise handicapped children, not to feed them—and even to kill them, rather than to raise and nurture them.

This does not show, however, that such admiration for strength and contempt for weakness is morally acceptable. On the contrary, such kinds of contempt are not acceptable. They are morally evil. And to the extent we can through education counteract the influence of them, we ought to do so.

This raises an important and strongly contested question. If contempt for weakness is immoral, in particular when it is directed against individuals who are “weak” in a very literal sense of the word (people who are physically or mentally handicapped), does this mean that selective abortion (of fetuses with defective genes) is not acceptable?

It does not. It does mean, however, that some grounds for selective abortion are not respectable. It is not respectable to abort a fetus because one feels a “natural” contempt for the kind of handicap one knows it will be born with. Instead, one ought to convince oneself to accept and treat with respect individuals with this handicap. However, in rare circumstances, it can be obligatory to abort a fetus selectively, because one knows that the child it will develop into, if carried to term, will lead a miserable life, one filled with pain and devoid of pleasure. But then the abortion should not be carried out because of contempt for this (possible) child but, rather, out of compassion.

There may also exist selective abortions that are morally legitimate on the account that they save the family from unnecessary burdens, or, simply, because it allows a healthy child to be born rather than a handicapped one.

However, in all these kinds of selective abortions, as has been repeatedly and correctly noted by representatives of the handicapped people’s movement, there is a risk that we might well be acting on an immoral con-
tempt for weakness, rather than on a morally admirable compassion. Selective abortions provide much room for rationalization and wishful thinking. This is something we should always keep in mind.

**Conclusion**

I conclude, then, that 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. There are relatively innocent (paternalistic) forms of this contempt, but there is always a risk that they might develop into more morally problematic kinds, where we choose not to acknowledge those who are weak, or to reject them as unworthy of our respect, or worse yet, to seek their extermination (as did the Nazis).

It is true that sports are not the only place where this admiration for strength and a corresponding contempt for weakness is exhibited. We see the same phenomenon in the sciences and the arts as well. And when we do, what we see is no less morally depraved than what is exhibited in our enthusiasm for the winner of the Olympics. However, there is a rough but crucial difference between sports, on the one hand, and science and the arts, on the other. In sports, admiration of the winner is essential. If we do not admire the winners, and admire them *qua* winners of a genetic lottery, there is no reason to watch the games at all. For the aesthetic dimension of sports, however important it might be as an additional value, commands very little interest of its own. If our admiration for strength and contempt for weakness were somehow purged from sports, there would, I contend, be little reason to watch them. There will be little reason to watch sports competitions.

This is not to say, of course, that there will be little reason to take part in sports. We can all take joy in the exercise and excitement they provide. There is always someone to compete with. (If with no one else, one can always compete against oneself.) But if we get rid of our unhealthy enthusiasm for strength and corresponding contempt for weakness, no one will be able to arrange the kind of Summer Olympic Games that we witnessed in Atlanta in 1996.

**Recommendations for the Future**

Suppose we are now convinced that there is something wrong with our enthusiasm for sports heroes like Carl Lewis and Michael Johnson—what should we do about it?
Well, our enthusiasm for sports is much like an addiction. How do we defeat addictions? There is little help in imposing sanctions and using force. We cannot compel a person not to smoke, at least not if there remains a physical possibility for him or her to continue the habit. The only way to make someone give up a bad habit is to convince the person in question that the habit is bad. Then a possibility opens up that this person might, himself or herself, overcome the habit. This may take a lot of strength, skill, time, control, and cunning. However, eventually many people succeed in giving up even deeply entrenched bad habits. I suppose that something of the kind is what we ought to do with regards to our enthusiasm for sports heroes.

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.

**ENDNOTES**

1 My neologism fascistoid should be understood in analogy with the word schizoid. Just as something schizoid tends to or resembles schizophrenia, something fascistoid tends to or resembles fascism.

**REFERENCES**