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Teamwork in sport

In his analysis of teamwork, Gaffney goes beyond presenting a purely instrumental and pragmatic conception (whereby an individual is more likely to achieve their aims if they work with others towards a mutual goal) and states that teamwork is a moral virtue in itself. It is this that I wish to dispute. I will present a case which demonstrates that teamwork can only be considered morally good in particular instances that are dependent upon other moral factors, and argue that there is nothing intrinsically virtuous about the concept of teamwork itself. As such, teamwork is morally neutral. In this, I will highlight aspects of teamwork which are considered undesirable; where feelings of resentment and contempt can develop and where an ethos that condones and sustains abusive practices can be fostered. Ultimately I will argue that when stripped to its essence, teamwork is purely an instrumental tool by which to achieve the (sporting) ends of success and victory. Any moral value that is attached to it comes from the way in which it is used and not from the tool itself.

One of the fundamental tenets of good sport is that a contest should be constructed in such a way to allow for the fair testing of relevant characteristics (Loland 2002). So, if the contest is a 400m running race, then the test should determine who is able to run the fastest over 400m. Likewise, if the contest is a cycling race then it should determine who is able to cycle fastest over a set distance along a specified route. In this respect, victory should be meritocratically awarded to the individual who is most successful in performing the test. This aspect of sport is antecedent to Gaffney's first principle of perfectionism whereby one must try to win. Good sport therefore, is based on a test of relevant characteristics whereby the outcome is dependent on who is able to perform this test the best. However, the notion of desert and perfectionism is not always the case when it comes to working within a team.

Let us imagine that the two best riders in a cycling team (let us call them *Team Instrumental*) are both top ranked cyclists and each have the capability to win races. According to the conception of sport previously outlined, the winner should be determined by who is the fastest cyclist on the day of racing. Yet in this case, victory will not be meritocratically determined and these two riders will not have the same opportunity to win. Instead, the rider's likelihood of winning is determined by *Team Instrumental*'s Sporting Director. She decides which rider will attempt to win the race and which team members will be used to support them[1]. It may be the case that rider #2 is most able to win (and would do so were the race a time trial) but she is told by the Sporting Director that she must aid rider #1 and sacrifice her own chance of winning. In this instance, rider #2 is explicitly ordered not to try her best to win; rather she must aid another rider in her pursuit of victory. This contradicts Gaffney's first principle of perfectionism. Gaffney may respond to this by arguing that teamwork requires a temperance of one's own aims and that #2 should assist #1 to victory for good of the team, and that they are working together for team victory rather than individual victory. Yet such a response seems inadequate. One might question why the good of team usurps the good of the individual. If a central principle of good sport is perfectionism, then thwarting an individual's pursuit of it in the name of 'teamwork' seems to undermine it.

Gaffney may well respond further that cycling is exceptional when compared to other 'team' sports since riders compete both as individuals and as team members. The few other sports that are similarly constructed are motor racing and some middle- and long-distance running races. Yet, there are many examples within team sports where the principle is similar: for instance, many invasion sports (such as soccer, hockey, rugby, etc.) are constructed in such a way that the freedom and potential of players is curtailed by others. One can give the example of a soccer player who is told that she must remain in defence and not push towards

the goal to attempt to have a shot herself, or the rugby player who is told that she must play in the front five; a position which seldom handles the ball and rarely scores.

An objection to this view points out that successful sport is dependent on players abiding by a set structure and recognising the different roles within a team, as chaos will otherwise reign. Here, Gaffney cites further principles of community and equality, in that though the specific roles may differ, athletes work together to achieve a mutual goal: bringing to mind the phrase 'no player is bigger than the team'. There is a further assumption that such recognition of collective efforts facilitates mutual respect, and perhaps even friendship. This seems to support the view that teamwork is therefore a moral virtue. Yet, the relationship between teamwork and respect is not mutually dependent. Teamwork can often foster negative attitudes and a lack of respect towards others. Let us return to the example of *Team Instrumental*.

Rider #2 believes she is the best rider in the team and resents having to perform the duty of 'domestique'[2] for #1. Similarly, Rider #1 has been the dominant rider in the team for several seasons and is resentful of #2's challenge to her authority and status. Both riders feel negative towards one another and the relationship between #1 and #2 is antagonistic at best. Moreover, these negative feelings result in the attempt by both riders to denigrate each other's position within the team by playing Machiavellian-style politics amongst the rest of the team. In this situation, there is certainly no love lost between the two teammates and both would feel a degree of *schadenfreude* if the other were to get a puncture or fall during a race. The necessity of being on the same team certainly does not engender friendship.

One might argue that despite such enmity there is still a level of mutual respect. Both riders begrudgingly recognise each other's talent and ability but each seeks to undermine it. On this level, teamwork is merely a veneer that hides an underlying animosity. It serves an

instrumental purpose for riders #1 and #2 in that it supplies them with a professional contract, status and recognition but it does not facilitate other positive qualities that are often associated with teamwork; namely solidarity, friendship and true respect. As such, teamwork plays a purely instrumental role in ensuring other ends for the individual; it is not an end in itself.

These examples demonstrate that the existence of others within a team deserves particular attention as it highlights a paradox. That a team necessarily comprises of a collection of individuals means that the presence of others cannot be ignored. Gaffney intimates that teamwork is beneficial in the way that it helps to develop the individual, and points to Mead's (1962) relational construction of the self as a way of understanding this. Mead's theory states that the individual can only be understood in terms of their relation to others. However, an alternative interpretation of the presence of others is provided by Jean-Paul Sartre and is articulated by the phrase 'hell is… other people' (2000: 223). This recognises the insidiousness of being with others whereby we are constantly engaged in maintaining control over our image and the way in which others see us. For Sartre, the unique human capacity to define and redefine ourselves creates a tension in the presence of others, as they seek to limit this freedom by defining us in a way that is not of our choosing. To use Sartre's terminology, a 'being-for-itself' (a subject) is aware that others always see her as something - a 'being-in-itself', or an object. So others may label an individual as a 'weak player' or a 'coward' or equally as a 'team-player' or 'match winner'. Regardless whether these labels are seen as positive or negative, for Sartre, to accept these labels ascribed by others is to fall into Bad-faith. This conception of Bad-faith differs from the Kantian one outlined by Gaffney which demands us not to view others as objects. Instead, Sartre places responsibility on the individual to resist the labels that are given to us by others. The reason, as Sartre notes, is that "the ethics of duty is the ethics of slaves" (1992: 268) in which imperatives (such as those

issued by Kant) necessarily, and by definition, reject the freedom of others and reinforce a transcendence (or way of being seen) by another.

In the case of *Team Instrumental*, the riders who accept and happily play their role of 'domestiques' can be said to be guilty of Bad-faith. The rider that happily plays the part of 'domestique' in fulfilling the role of support rider and team-player is under the same illusion as Sartre's waiter who enthusiastically and committedly serves drinks and accommodates his customers' requests (Sartre, 2003). This rider listens to the Sporting Director with keenness and carries out orders without question; after all, a 'domestique' is what she *is*. In contrast, the riders that see teamwork purely as an instrumental tool are able to better resist falling into Bad-faith. Yet, they will necessarily find themselves in an ongoing 'battle of transcendence' to avoid being pulled into the 'drain hole' (Sartre, 2003: 279) caused by the presence of others and their attempts to turn the subject into an object. Rather than helping to create the self, as Mead and Gaffney suggest, the presence of others can be seen as a way of limiting the individual. The existence of others, exacerbated by being part of a team, merely serves to make it more difficult to remain authentic and in Good-faith.

In the examples given so far, Gaffney might assert that there is little evidence of teamwork despite the existence of a team. Teamwork, he is likely to say, is not simply being a member of a team, and a reluctant member at that; it requires a commitment to the team's endeavours. So let us turn once again to *Team Instrumental*. Let us imagine that the animosity and resentment felt between riders #1 and #2 is noticed by the Sporting Director who releases #2 from her contract. After all, one might argue, if two members of the team are unable to work together in pursuit of a common goal, it is not teamwork. As a result the team is now comprised of nine riders, all of whom are content with their roles and all of whom are committed to the team's goal of getting rider #1 over the finish line first. Rider #9 is the newest member of the team. She is wholly committed to the other team members and to the

team goals. She is happy to fulfil the role of 'domestique' and willingly puts to one side her own ambitions for the sake of the team. This attitude, Gaffney would undoubtedly argue, is the one upon which teamwork depends. Being a committed member of a team is virtuous as it limits selfishness and egotism whilst still driving towards athletic excellence and competitive success. Yet let us also imagine that within *Team Instrumental* there is a culture which promotes the success of the team over the well-being of the individual. In this culture, riders are expected to do anything required for team success. Although a keen and enthusiastic team member, rider #9 expresses concern at the expectation that she engages practices that she thinks are unethical and perhaps illegal. The consequence of her reluctance to embrace the team's culture is that she finds herself side-lined and ostracised. Her commitment is questioned by the rest of the team and the Sporting Director suggests that she is not really the 'team-player' that she indicates. So, persuaded by her love of cycling, the threat of losing her professional contract and the fear of not being part of the team, #9 decides that engaging in these illegal and dubious practices is the sacrifice she must make if she is to aid her team to victory. Though this conception of teamwork corresponds to the one set out by Gaffney, there seems to be little that is virtuous about it. As the team's name suggests, the attitude it holds is one of instrumentalism; the players are treated as objects (or instruments) to attain the goal of victory.

It seems then to take sport seriously, most notably at the elite or professional level, it is necessary to see others as objects that can help or hinder your aims. Nowhere is this more-so than in the role of coach or team-manager whereby one's future is dependent on victory. It is perhaps here where the usefulness of teamwork can be seen most. I have previously argued that a coach must view her players as 'beings-in-themselves' in sporting contests (Ryall, 2007). She has the role and responsibility of deciding who plays and in which position, in an attempt to achieve victory. She must decide which players will best meet the challenge and

developing teamwork is an instrumental tool that assists her in doing this. The reason that cyclist #2 was released from the team was that she would not fulfil the role of 'domestique'; she was not willing to work purposely as part of the team. Coaches need teamwork to oil the machinery for success. The way it is used is dependent on other factors and virtues that the coach may hold, but it is not a virtue in itself.

It has been suggested that the concept of 'teamwork' is more ethically problematic than Gaffney suggests. Though he might be right in arguing that teamwork reigns-in explicit and overt self-interest and egotism, it may simply push them to a deeper level by masking other vices such as resentment and contempt. It seems difficult, if not impossible, to reconcile the drive for excellence with a genuine respect for others. Indeed, Tuxill and Wigmore (1998) suggest that respect for others may be intrinsically impossible or self-contradictory in sport. Although they were specifically referring to sporting opponents; at an elite level, where there is a ruthless competition for places, it could equally apply to one's own team-mates.

Such a conception of teamwork may appear cynical and distasteful. After all, it is one of the key values of sport espoused as part of the Muscular Christianity movement in the late nineteenth century, and continues to be promoted by educationalists and politicians today. I have not argued that teamwork cannot be a way of promoting particular (positive) values. Gaffney is correct in saying that working with others towards a mutual goal can develop and highlight characteristics and traits that we value in others. However, this does not make teamwork itself a virtue, as it can also mask and aggravate other qualities that are not as positively regarded.

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NOTES

[1] In cycling, energy savings can be made of up to 30% by using the 'slipstream' of other riders. Therefore, team events often designate one rider to be 'towed' along by other teammates using this method in order to conserve energy for the latter stage of the race.
[2] The role of 'domestique' is a supporting one which often means far more than simply aiding a teammate to victory in the race itself.