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Abstract

Following recent debates on the relationship between 'God', 'ethics' and issues of 'social justice' within sporting locales, this paper contends that Christian ethics and the biblical mandate of social justice have important contributions to make to broader understandings of sport and sports ethics. The aim of the paper is to: (i) map the emergence of the concept of social justice within academic, social and political discourse; (ii) examine the metaphysical anchors of sport ethics; (iii) explore how a Christian framework of metaphysics might be understood within sport and sports ethics, and (iv) highlight how key dimensions of the sporting experience, (i.e., play and embodiment), might impact theological understandings of ethics and social justice. The paper concludes by suggesting that a Christian metaphysical vision has much to offer in reforming sport by grounding it within a Trinitarian theology, borne out of a biblical description of a perfectly 'just', Creator God.

Keywords: sport ethics; theological ethics; Christian metaphysics, social justice

> We need tangible experiences of justice to know the justice of God. And from Pee Wee to professional leagues, sports can provide such opportunities to prioritize safety, practice fairness, and inspire a hunger for justice.
>
> (Hansson, 2018, p. 21)

In a review of the available literature surrounding "theological ethics in sport" Watson and Parker (2014) raise several important themes relating to the relationship of 'God', 'ethics' and issues of 'social justice' within sporting locales. The hope of the authors is that a rigorous theological approach and Christian moral vision of social justice (rooted in an understanding of theological ethics *and* the transformation of the human heart) will allow

athletes to better navigate the ethical landscape of contemporary sport. In sum, Watson and Parker contend that Christian ethics and the biblical mandate of social justice, as understood by both Catholic and Protestant theologians (Gasaway, 2014; Novak & Adams, 2015), have important contributions to make to the understanding and practice of sport and the discipline of sports ethics. This contention is supported by a recent 'position statement' (Watson, 2018) which calls for a continued focus on ethical issues/injustices within the sport-theology field, while at the same time suggesting the need to broaden the research agenda on this subject:

> When Stanley Hauerwas, a theologian and sports fan, wrote the foreword to Christopher H. Evans and William R. Herzog II's book, *The Faith of 50 Million: Baseball, Religion and American Culture* (2002: xiv) he noted that '… a book about the relation of baseball, Christianity, and America 'risks not being taken seriously. The whole project seems too whimsical to be appropriately "academic"' … To-date, there has been more focus in the sport-theology literature on the many ethical and moral problems that persist in sport. While continued critical analysis of sport and its sub-cultures, by theologians and church leaders, is wholly necessary and appropriate, perhaps, moving forwards a broader vision for those operating in the sport-faith domain, should focus on the positive value and 'goods' of sport, what Robert Johnston (2019) has called a *hermeneutic of engagement and appreciation* (versus a hermeneutic of suspicion and separation. (pp. 243,249-250)

In attending to this invitation, our aim within this paper, is to provide a theological and conceptual foundation for studying social justice issues in sport, rather than simply examining specific social justice issues (see the Conclusion for examples). In so doing our intentions are to: (i) provide a brief historical and conceptual backdrop outlining, in brief, how the concept of social justice has emerged within academic, social and political discourse in the modern age; (ii) examine the metaphysical anchors for sport ethics; (iii) enquire how a

Christian framework of metaphysics might be synthesized and understood within sport and the discipline of sports ethics, and (iv) explore how key dimensions of the sporting experience, namely, play and embodiment, might impact theological understandings of ethics and social justice. We argue that a Christian metaphysical vision has much to offer in reforming sport (and advancing the discipline of sport ethics) by grounding it within a Trinitarian theology, borne out of a biblical description of a perfectly just, Creator God (Meilaender & Werpehowski, 2007).

Setting the Scene: Sport, Social Justice and Religion (Christianity)

There is wide-spread acknowledgment of the importance of religion and spirituality in sports across the academic disciplines and within government-funded sports organizations. Indeed, over the last decade there has been an exponential increase in publications on this topic and the organization of related global/international scholarly gatherings. The office of the 'Pontifical Council for Culture' within the Vatican, recently hosted an international conference entitled, *Sport at the Service of Humanity* (2016) which, according to the official report of the conference, had a central focus on social justice research and praxis and inter-faith dialogue (Ellis, 2017). The commissioning of this event at the seat of the Catholic Church is embedded in the Pontificate of the late Pope John Paul II. The profile of the opening speakers at the conference (which included Pope Francis, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, the President of the International Olympic Committee, Thomas Bach, the CEO of Special Olympics, Timothy Shriver, and the General Secretary of the UN, Ban Ki-moon), further reflects the growth of academic and public discourse surrounding the social justice and sport-religion interface. Such growth was similarly reflected in the *Inaugural Global Congress on Sports and Christianity* (IGCSC) which took place at York St John University, UK in August 2016. This conference generated nine journal special editions[1] and a number of books (e.g., Adogame, Watson & Parker, 2018; Parker, Watson & White,

2016; Watson, Hargaden & Brock, 2018). Yet, despite this growth, to-date, no sport-religion publication projects (across the monotheistic traditions) have specifically addressed social justice within the sporting arena.

The term 'social justice' was absent from popular and academic discourse in the West until the 1840s when it was adopted by a Jesuit priest named Luigi Taparelli (Regaldo, 2009). The conceptual roots of the term were however embedded in the thought of two theological heavy-weights, Augustine of Hippo (354-430 A.D.) and Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274 A.D.) long before its wide-spread use by modern ethicists, legal scholars, social theorists and human rights activists (Burgess, 2015). Reflecting the upsurge in academic interest in social justice within the social-sciences, the sub-disciplines of 'public theology', 'liberation theology' and' practical theology'[2] have emerged within the broader discipline of theology. Social justice has been a focal point of scholarly reflection and praxis within these sub-disciplines (see Palmer & Burgess, 2012; Sagorsky, 2017; Rowland, 2007). Within both the social sciences and theology, various models of social justice—distributive, procedural, retributive and restorative—have been adopted (Sabbagh & Schmitt, 2016). For example, within the context of sport, Hansson (2018) notes that:

> Athletes organized for justice—through teams or player's unions—have power. Since baseball's 1968 collective bargaining agreement, professional sports unions have been instrumental in securing distributive justice in the form of salaries, arbitration procedures, nondiscrimination policies, safety protocols, and others worker's rights for players who earns millions of dollars for teams (p. 21).

The need for theological ethicists to engage with such examples of distributive justice (and other forms of social justice) in sport is clear. Prior to our analysis of several key thematic issues, brief descriptions of a number of central terms are necessary: *theological*

ethics (sometimes called moral theology, or Christian ethics), is a branch of Christian theology that defines virtuous behavior and wrong behavior from a Christian perspective (Meilaender & Werpehowski, 2007); *metaphysics*, is the branch of philosophy that deals with the first principles of things (often religious things), especially abstract concepts such as being, knowing, identity, time, space and the existence of God (Loux & Zimmerman, 2005); *social justice*, it is widely accepted amongst scholars and policy makers alike that there is no universal, or all-encompassing, definition of social justice. In addition, binary models of social justice (e.g., secular-religious; progressive conservative; global-local etc.) are fast becoming outdated due to their many theoretical and praxis-based limitations and the inherent complexity of geo-political justice issues. In turn, scholars are beginning to "transcend these boundaries … as … religion is deeply intertwined in political struggles for justice across the world and at all levels" (Baumgart-Osche, Glaab, Smith & Smythe, 2017, p. 1070).

Nevertheless, "social justice" is not without controversy. Many persuasive critiques have been offered of the term. Perhaps the most trenchant secular criticisms are those of the Austrian economist Friedrich Hayek (1967), who argued that the adjective "social" which precedes "justice" was a redundancy "incredibly empty of meaning" (p. 238). Hayek (1976) worried that "social justice" had been politicized to the point that it was often a "Trojan horse through which totalitarianism has entered" (p. 130) society. In essence, the point Hayek was making was that the classic definition of justice, as the virtue "which accords to each and every man his due" (Augustine, 1958, p. 469) should suffice. For Hayek, to insist on more, betrayed a duplicitous motive.

The most trenchant theological critique of "social justice" questions what the appropriate locus of attention should be in promoting justice. Should reformers work on "reshaping themselves" or upon "reshaping society"? Those who doubt the veracity of "social justice", as it is commonly understood, argue the former. They insist that: "We are not

led to undo the work of creation or to rectify the Fall. The duty of the Christian is not to leave the world a better place. His duty is to leave this world a better man" (Gilbey as citied in Akers, 2017, para. 8).

This is the case for at least two reasons. First, any corporate action which ignores the virtues or vices of individuals will be ineffective. As Christ so wisely opines regarding our judgment of others and the world, "first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye" (Matthew 7:5, NIV). You cannot reshape society, when your own soul is disheveled. Second, Christian scripture and tradition insist that one's social obligation to "Love your neighbor as yourself" rests on a prior obligation to love God "with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind" (Matthew 22:37, 39, NIV).[3] Justice demands the measure of truth which only God (rather than mere social reorganization) can provide. "For no matter where one places one's worldly hopes; in the 'classless society,' or in 'education,' or 'the advent of social justice,' or 'healthy choices' death still reigns" (Twietmeyer, 2018, p. 12). A death from which *only God's grace, mercy and forgiveness can save us*.

In this sense the theological critique could be said to be promoting the "transcendence of social justice" by lifting one's focus to a broader horizon, from the merely temporal to the eternal. It is no doubt true that man needs "his daily bread" and that meeting such needs (in terms of access, distribution, etc.) is a matter of justice. However, man does "not live, on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Matthew 4:4, NIV).

Such debates over the value and meaning of social justice will not be definitively settled here.[4] And so, while great ambiguity exists surrounding how to define, or describe social justice, we offer a provocative statement from the 4th century Christian apologist, Lactantius (who became the a religious and political advisor to the first Christian emperor,

Constantine I), as a working definition for our analysis: "the whole point of justice consists in our providing for others through humanity what we provide for our own families through affection".[5] To show how Christian theology might help spur the development of the kind of universal love of God and neighbor that such familial affection generates, our initial task must be an examination of the relationship between theology, metaphysics and ethics, within the context of the modern-day sporting world.

Of Metaphysics and Theological Ethics

A seminal statement on the connection between metaphysics and ethics (and therefore, notions of justice), comes from the ancient Greek philosopher, Aristotle. In the *Nicomachean Ethics,* Aristotle (2002) argued that to identify the good of any particular thing requires that we know its nature or end. For instance, we know that a good knife is sharp because we are rightly convinced that knives are meant for cutting. Similarly, we know that a good basketball needs to bounce because basketballs are for dribbling, that a good eye sees, and so forth. Aristotle's point is that any evaluation of goodness (even in the realm of human actions) depends upon a prior metaphysical commitment (even if unacknowledged) regarding the nature of the thing in question. Justice requires metaphysics.

For Aristotle, the bottom line was that before one can judge the quality of a thing, one must know what it is. Just as we cannot know that a good eye sees, until we know that an eye is meant for seeing, one cannot form an accurate conception of right human action until one has a conception of human nature. That is, what a human being is, and what a human being is meant to do/be. As such, the nature of the human person in relation to the divine nature and justice of God, is the constant measure for a Christian's thought-life and behaviors. As Aristotle rightly insists, absent some account of human nature, ethics cannot proceed. For Aristotle, careful investigation made clear that human beings were 'rational animals'. Our

actions could therefore be judged on, whether or not they were in accord with reason and/or the flourishing of 'rational animals'. [6]

Thomas Aquinas incorporated Aristotelean metaphysical thinking into the Roman Catholic tradition in the 13th Century and his writings have since been used in reflecting on embodiment and social justice topics in sporting contexts by Catholic scholars (see, e.g., Kelly, 2012). In brief, Aquinas argued that all "natures", from which right action is determined, are created by and maintain their existence in God. This is because contingent things cannot be the cause of their own existence (if it was in their nature to exist, they would not be contingent). Nor can one contingent thing be the ultimate cause of something else (even if it is another 'things' immediate cause). For that prior contingent cause, still begs for an explanation. The terminus of this causal chain is God, whom Aquinas argues, is the first (prime) cause and final-end of all contingent things.[7] As Christian philosopher Edward Feser (2009) suggests, "the divine intellect knows the nature of things and the divine will creates in accordance with this knowledge" (p. 182). God maintains the existence of everything and in so doing wills that it be endowed with the nature appropriate to it. Reality exists independent of our personal desires or individual wills. As such, it is apparent to Aquinas, that "what is good for us is good because of our nature and not because of some arbitrary divine command" (p. 183). God is not a divine despot, but rather the very source of our being. God's creative will is rational rather than arbitrary and capricious. Truth and justice, not power, are the arbiters of the good.

Two things are worth emphasizing here. First, the Christian tradition, at its best, is not guided by a blind fideism. Christianity is an authoritative rather than authoritarian religion. Christians follow God because they believe that what He says, through the Bible, the Church and His Spirit, is true; they do not believe what He says is true, simply because God says it. Aquinas' argument, for example, is based on inductive and deductive philosophical analysis

rather than appeals to faith or revelation. Inductively, he follows Aristotle and argues that the nature of things is apparent in our experience of them. Objective reality exists and is (at least to a large extent) within our grasp. Common sense experience of the world shows that "knives are for cutting" and so forth. Since man's nature reveals him to be a 'rational animal', right human action is always in accord with reason, reality and divine justice.

Similarly, Aquinas argues (again following Aristotle), that experience shows that all contingent things have a cause. From this Aquinas deductively argues that the chain of causation must terminate in God. God is the uncaused and necessary being who is, even here and now, the source of all contingent things. Obviously, this is a contentious claim, and more would need to be said to fully defend it.[8] However, the key point, for present purposes, is that Aquinas' argument is based on observation, experience and deductive logic and not on dogma. He is relying not on 'special revelation' (e.g., specific Christian doctrines, such as, the Trinity) but rather on what theologians and philosophers call 'general revelation' (Johnston, 2014). That is, what can be known about God simply through human reason and experience. Theological reflection, rightly understood, is a rational, intellectual and scholarly enterprise. Theology involves both theoretical and practical concerns regarding the proper relationship between God and human beings, including how God informs the pursuit of truth and justice within societies.

Second, God is not the 'great Kantian scold in the sky' nor a 'divine despot' whose whims determine right action. Rather, God wills the truth for us based upon reality (that is, the natures that we have). According to Thomistic thinking, we follow God's commands because they are true, not simply because God wills them. Moral rules do not box us in or limit our freedom. This is because such rules reflect the reality of what and who human beings are. To follow them is to fulfill our natures. To act justly by following God's law is freedom, for in following the moral law, we are more fully human and more perfectly the

creatures we are meant to be. Likewise, to act immorally is to fail *to be* who we ought to be. According to this line of thought, our ethical *obligations* all flow out metaphysical *reality*. As the 20th Century Thomist philosopher Josef Pieper (2011) observes, "the good is what accords with reality; it is obligatory because it corresponds to reality" (p. 16). Again, truth and justice, not might, makes right.

This set of related traditional metaphysical positions is not without its critics. Many contemporary philosophers are metaphysical skeptics who believe that traditional metaphysical claims are not only false, but also are so narrow and rigid, that, at best, they mislead and, at worst, they oppress. As a result, many in this camp would also doubt that Christian metaphysics has much of anything to add to discussions of morality or social justice.

The most popular alternative in sport philosophy to the alleged rigidity of traditional metaphysics is pragmatism. The pragmatist argues for a reduction of metaphysics to a set of 'evaluative tools', which is not focused on understanding reality, but rather 'on working definitions' that can change based on our real world experiences" (Elcombe, 2010, p. 166). For the pragmatist, metaphysical claims should change whenever, "it becomes more useful to think of them differently" (Elcombe, 2010, p. 166). As a result, obligation withers and utility takes root. Such a position is often found to be attractive because it can appear more humble and tolerant than traditional metaphysical claims. Note, however, that although broad claims regarding traditional metaphysical concerns such as 'natures or essences' are rejected by pragmatists, a few 'rigid metaphysical claims' are still smuggled in the back door. The most obvious being that for the pragmatist, 'usefulness' is the unquestioned arbiter of truth and an unequivocal good. Pragmatists never apply their skeptical test of knowledge claims, to utility itself, because they *have no doubts regarding that particular metaphysical claim*. They are never pragmatic about their pragmatism because they have *full metaphysical confidence* in

the assertion that truth is about "experiential and functional possibilities" (Elcombe, 2010, p. 166).

What this shows is that even pragmatists cannot escape metaphysics and the inherent issues of justice which flow from our metaphysical commitments. Recognizing this reality does not settle the debate, nor does it disprove pragmatism. Rather it simply levels the playing field. Perhaps Aristotle and St. Thomas were wrong, but they were not wrong because they were 'rigid' or because they 'believed in metaphysics'. Nor can they be dismissed because they were committed to the truth of this or that 'passé' proposition. Instead, their arguments, like the arguments of the pragmatists (or any other philosophical system or set of assertions) must be tested on their merits. What follows from such insight is that all types of metaphysical claims (even theological ones) deserve careful attention, for truth claims about reality are unavoidable. Metaphysics necessarily shapes human conceptions of how one ought to behave. Therefore, kinesiologists should want to do metaphysics well, which requires that we carefully evaluate all of the available arguments (whether they are theological or not).

The same point regarding the necessity of metaphysical claims holds true for sport. To understand good and just action in sport, one must have some account of the nature and purpose(s) of the games that we play and how they fit into a larger vision of the world. To analyze sport after severing ethics from metaphysics makes little sense, for to do so is "to try to behave ethically *in vacuo* and thereby court moral confusion" (Kretchmar, 1998, p. 20). From a theological point of view, sport ethics not only relies upon Christian metaphysics, but also the resulting models of divine and social justice. Because of this, it would seem both worthwhile and rational to develop (and propose for wider consideration) all plausible ethical worldviews which might impact sport, including a Christian vision of sporting practice.

Christian Metaphysics and Sport Ethics

What, then, are some of the specifically Christian metaphysical claims that might impact sport ethics surrounding ethics and social justice concerns? An often neglected (and misunderstood) aspect of Christian theology is the Christian understanding of the body. It is not uncommon to hear that Christianity encourages a denigration of the body, sexual prudishness, and so forth. If such claims are true, then it seems that the Christian faith would hardly be friendly to proponents of physical activity or sport (see Dailey, 2016; Parker & Watson, 2017; Scarpa & Carraro, 2011). To cite one prominent example, former IOC President Avery Brundage erroneously claimed during the 1960 Olympic Games in Rome that the medieval Church "considered all physical activity not only useless, but perhaps harmful to mental and spiritual development" (Guttmann, 1984, p. 165). Is there any merit to such criticisms?

Any careful consideration of the central claims of Christianity or the history of the Church, shows that the human body is central to theological reflection and life (see John Paul II, 1997; Kelly, 2012; Cooper, 2008, Wright, 2003). Christian doctrines (e.g., creation) assert not only the inherent goodness of the created human body but also its pivotal role in the economy of salvation and the transmission of justice within the world. According to Christian scripture, God created human beings as embodied beings "in his own image" (Genesis 1:27, NIV) and called the whole of creation "very good" (Genesis 1:31, NIV). God has also reconciled mankind unto himself through the Incarnation, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This is not understood by Christians as a singular event of momentary importance. It is, they argue, the fulcrum around which all of human history turns; because Christ's physical suffering, death and resurrection are understood to be the means by which sins are forgiven and by which human beings are saved from the finality of the grave.

Whatever one thinks of its truth, this claim is not an incidental point, but a lynchpin of the Christian faith. As St. Paul points out that: "if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins" (1st Corinthians 15:16-17, NIV). The whole human person (body and soul) is saved by God's redemptive action. It is for this same reason that the Nicene Creed insists on the 'resurrection of the dead and life of the world to come'. As Dante (2004a) so eloquently puts it:

> When, blessed and glorified,
>
> the flesh is robed about us again,
>
> we shall be lovelier *for being whole* (p. 147) [Emphasis added].

All of this may seem somewhat subjective or parochial to the uninitiated. To reiterate, our intent here is not to evangelize, but to clarify. The truth of Christianity is an important but separate question. Within our analysis we demonstrate the impact that the beliefs of a certain population (i.e., Christians) has on a given practice (i.e., kinesiology/sport). Our point is that, one needs to examine Christian doctrine in detail to reveal how erroneous claims are that Christian doctrine and practice is negative in its understanding of the body. To this end, we have briefly reviewed three central Christian doctrines, creation, the Incarnation[9], and resurrection. It is our contention that whether one believes such doctrines be true or not, they are enough to make clear, that "Although some Christians might claim that the human body is evil, it is an un-Christian belief" (Twietmeyer, 2008, p. 459). To the Christian, flesh and blood matter, they are not incidental to who and what we are. Embodiment is inherent to the person, who is, via her embodied life, a vehicle for justice (or injustice) to be enacted in the world.

Our individual value to God comes not merely from our intellectual capacity, spirit, or body. Our value and dignity comes from our "holistic anthropological ontology", that is, our entire being. Unlike proponents of Platonic-Cartesian dualism, Christian anthropology recognizes that human beings are irreducibly sexed, physical, particular and embodied persons.[10] As Robert Louis Wilken (1995) insists, "The legacy of Christian tradition is not, as some suppose, Gnosticism or shame over the body or otherworldliness, but the psychosomatic unity of the human being" (para. 17).

As we can see, physical activity, exercise and sport, are not unimportant for the theologian, practicing Christian or scholar (see Watson, 2018). On the contrary, like every other aspect of embodied human life, sports have moral import that is intertwined with notions of truth and justice. The fact that the body is integral to the self has significant implications for kinesiology. First, the body is not simply a tool that is at our disposal to be used as and when we see fit. Instead, it is the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 6: 19, NIV). It is to be cared for, because your "body" is you, and only you, "body and soul", can care for orphans, widows, the poor, oppressed and marginalized— that is, those who so often lack justice in their lives.

For example, proponents of therapeutic genetic engineering, cosmetic surgery, transhumanism, and gender theory, all traffic in the idea that the body is merely an object or possession of the person, rather than an inherent aspect of the self (Parker L. S., 2012). According to Christianity, such attitudes are deeply mistaken, for "each body is a person, and each person a creature and image-bearer of God" (Cooper, 2008, p. 263). For the Christian, kinesiology has spiritual significance, not in spite of the body, but because of the body, for the body has spiritual import. Therefore, if kinesiologists sell the discipline simply as "the Body Shoppe" (Kretchmar, 2005, p. 54) we run the risk of selling ourselves short and failing to see the intimate link between a right understanding of embodiment and the justice mandate

that permeates the Old and New Testaments of the Bible.[11] Metaphysics profoundly affects our understanding of ethics and the pursuit of justice.

Second, health, rightly understood, is a far richer concept than physiological homeostasis. Instead, health has physical, social, moral and spiritual components (see Dailey, 2019). Moreover, these are not discrete components or variables, but integrated aspects of a single human organism. The spiritual discipline of fasting is a clear example of how this works. In selected or complete abstinence from food, one quickly learns about the whole self, about one's passions and desires, about one's self-control or lack thereof, about what really garners one's attention, about earthly biological dependence and so forth. Similarly, the benefits of fasting impact the whole self, be it on the physical level of improved diet, or the spiritual or moral level of increased self-discipline. As Father Thomas Ryan (2005) puts it:

> [The benefits don't] have to be either/or . . . It can and should be both, because we are not just bodies and we are not just spirits. We are embodied spirits. Enspirited flesh. What is good for me physically is good *for me*. And what is good for me spiritually is good *for me*. There's only one 'me' to which it all comes back (p. 8) [Emphasis added].

Analogously, the lessons of sport, whether virtuous or vicious, impact far more than health. They impact the whole person, including one's opportunity to act in alignment with divine justice in social contexts. In this light, the common motto that 'sport builds character' should be altered to something akin to 'sport shapes character' and/or 'reveals character', for the mark left on the soul can be either generous or corrupt (see Watson & Brock, 2015). Sport has the potential to scar the soul, just as it might scar the body. The job of Christian teachers, coaches, administrators, parents and athletes is to make sure that sport, via training, skill

development, discipline and so forth, encourages virtue including the virtue of justice. Accomplishing such requires an emphasis on more than mere winning. Instead, the focus should be on the growth of the whole person (physical, moral, spiritual, etc.) toward human excellence (defined as those goods in accord without our nature) and ultimately towards God. From a Christian point of view, success in sport is always grounded in the recognition that there is not, "any permanence inherent in human things" (Boethius, 2012, p. 40).[12]

Because Christian theological ethics values embodiment as an irreducible aspect of the human being, and because Christianity sees embodiment as a gift of God, it should be clear why a commitment to Christianity heightens rather than diminishes the importance of ethical and just practice in sport. The Christian conception of the body in not a threat to kinesiology. Instead, the Christian realizes that every aspect of our lives (sporting or otherwise) are beholden to the fact that: "Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account" (Hebrews 4:14, NIV). Of course, any discussion of embodiment and sporting practice necessarily opens up considerations of the role of play within our lives and it is to an exploration of this concept that we now turn.

Embodiment, Play and God

According to the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of a Child (2018), is a 'human right'—which arguably, makes access to play and "playgrounds" an issue of justice. Article 31 of the Convention states that:

> [E}very child has the right to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts … [M]ember governments shall respect and promote the right of the child to participate fully in cultural and artistic life and shall encourage the provision of

appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure activity.

Play is activity pursued simply for its own sake; it is a primal human impulse (Suits, 1977; Huizinga, 1955). Given our embodied nature, sport and physical activity are, when healthy, powerful play promoters. This should come as a surprise to no one. Our senses, our limbs, our skills and so forth encourage not only 'existence in the world', nor even merely 'wonder at the world', but also 'engagement in, imagination about and creativity with the world'. Play is not incidental. It is a function of our nature as psychosomatic wholes. Contrary to 'pop' or 'shallow' notions of Christianity informed by a Platonic disdain for the body, orthodox Christianity has never denied this (Johnson, forthcoming, 2019; Harvey, 2014; Ellis, 2014)

Yet, the spiritual importance of play is not just about human beings. Play also points beyond itself to God himself. This can be seen in two ways. First, to put it in phenomenological terms, our experiences of "deep play" (Kretchmar, 2005) give inductive evidence for a transcendent reality (Moltmann, 1972). Second, in theological terms, the historical fact of the Incarnation and the nature of the Holy Trinity, locates play in a larger context.

One of the most well-known account of play as inductive evidence for the supernatural, can be found in Peter Berger's (1969) classic text, *A Rumor of Angels*. Berger argued that play is one of several "signals of transcendence" which give experiential rather that deductive evidence for the divine. This is because, as Berger put it:

> Joy is play's intention. When this intention is actually realized, in joyful play, the time structure of the playful universe takes on a very specific quality, *it becomes eternity* (p. 58).

Berger (1969) argued that the joyful experience of play, which "can be readily found in the reality of ordinary life" (p. 60) suggests that we live in a meaningful rather than random and chaotic world. This is, Berger continued, why play, in the face of suffering and death, is so moving and intertwined with the notion of justice. By finding play in such places and at such times, a bright light is shed upon the incongruity between human behavior and human obligations, between the all too common mistreatment of "our fellow man" and the demands of justice. As a result, even the 'banality of evil' (Arendt, 1963) can be called into stark relief. Indeed, despite the grimmest of circumstances, or the apparent ubiquity of injustice, the experience of play reasserts, "the ultimate triumph of all human gestures of creative beauty over the gestures of destruction, and even over the ugliness of war and death" (Berger, 1969, p. 60). It reasserts, as William James (1896/1956) argued, that "the eternal things … throw the last stone … and say the final word" (p. 25).

The Christian belief in the historical reality of the Incarnation ratifies and contextualizes this instinct. First, as has already been shown, because it ratifies embodiment. "In Christ", Saint Paul insists, "all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form" (Col. 2:9, NIV). God became man, "the Word became flesh" (John 1:14, NIV). We are neve alone, for in Christ, Emmanuel – that is, "God with us" – has come.[13] Second, the passion, death and resurrection of Christ on the cross indicates that although suffering and injustice are real, it does not have the 'final word'. We are not, the Christian claims, redeemed by an idea, or by a philosophy, or by emotions, or by optimism, or by soaring rhetoric. We are redeemed by Christ's self-sacrificial action *in the world,* by what happened to his embodied self on the cross. To be a Christian is therefore to be called to follow in Christ's footsteps and to seek justice in our social environs. To cultivate through discipleship, through the gospel and through the sacraments, the courage to 'take up our cross' and to follow him *in the world* of human actions and affairs (including sport).

The Incarnation demonstrates that play, physical activity and sport are spiritually important, both for our enjoyment and leisure and for the quest to 'treat others as we ought' in all facets of human existence. For the Christian, "we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all" (Hebrews 10:10, NIV). Our bodies are not some kind of mundane object, but an inherent part of the person. Embodiment is not trivial, but rather, according to Christianity, the very means by which God reconciles himself to the world. Christ's physical suffering, death and resurrection are the means by which sins are forgiven and disciples are called to become, *here and now*, a "new creation" (2 Corinthians 5:17, NIV).Theologian Adam Cooper (2008), puts it succinctly, in Christ, "God has taken up life-giving space *in history*" (p. 262) [Emphasis Added]. Our lives (including our play) must be seen in light of this larger story. Theological history places our entire lives and all our actions – whether just or unjust – into this larger context.

Therefore, bodies should not be understood as mere tools for utilitarian ends. Nor are bodies objects beholden to our desires, whims or technological capabilities. Instead, all of embodied human life (even on pitch, at the playground, or in stadium) has, as Christ's passion shows, spiritual significance. Therefore, as an integrated aspect of human persons, embodiment is bound to normative demands, subject to divine judgment [14] and dependent upon divine forgiveness.

The Incarnation also demonstrates the central importance of the theological virtue of love. In becoming man and suffering for us, Christ *personifies* love and thereby the meaning of justice. God's love for us is concrete not abstract.[15] For he does not merely "lay down his life for his friends" in the sense that he loved those who loved him. Instead, as Saint Paul points out, "God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8, NIV).

Likewise, the virtue of love sheds light on how the Holy Trinity impacts a Christian understanding of play. For if "God is love" (1 John 4:8, NIV) and if God is triune, then experiencing love would necessarily illuminate and point towards the Trinity. The mystery of the three-in-one Godhead can begin to be comprehended, or better yet experienced, on account of the reality of love. As Pope Benedict XVI pointed out:

> The Father is love, the Son is love and the Spirit is love. God is entirely and only love, pure love, infinite and eternal. He does not live in splendid solitude, rather He is the never-ending source of life Who incessantly gives and communicates Himself (Vatican Information Service, 2009, para. 4).

In *Credo for Today*, Benedict (2009) expanded this point by writing about the superabundant nature of God's love for his creation. God simply and continually gives. His love for us, "discards any notion of calculation and is unafraid of lavishness" and thereby calls us to do our best to imitate him by adopting, "the attitude of the lover, who does not calculate, but simply – loves" (p. 15; 17). How radically would sports ethics change if such an attitude were to be internalized by athletes, administrators and fans? How radically would sport ethics change if temporal goods, such as fame, success, honor, money and prestige all took a back seat to the eternal love and justice of God?

Play echoes the reality of love – the love by which all calls for justice must be framed, understood and put into practice. Play echoes love because the player must give him or herself over freely to play, without calculation and without any expectation of reward or extrinsic benefit. Play is superfluous and 'unnecessary' as it has, and can have, no instrumental purpose (Harvey, 2014). We are moved to play by love, which, in turn, reinforces Berger's explanation of human experience and echoes Benedict's point regarding the 'superabundant' nature of God's love. True justice is always pursued on account of a

prior commitment to love. We treat others as we ought by following Christ's example. We will the good of the other, even, if necessary, to the point of suffering and death.

Concluding remarks

It has been our intention in this article to argue for the importance of the disciplines of sport ethics, metaphysics and theological ethics and to explore issues of social justice within the context of a Christian understanding of sport and physical activity. Rather, than examine specific social justice issues in sport (e.g., disability, race, sex-discrimination, violence, doping, etc.), our aim has been to provide a conceptual and theological foundation for others to pursue such tasks. Through brief theological reflections on key issues such as embodiment and play, we have illustrated why and how, 'metaphysical anchors' are necessary when addressing ethical and justice-based questions. Without such anchors (Christian or otherwise) it is impossible to fully understand the meaning of justice, in the realm of sport.

Given that the sport-theology field has grown exponentially over the last decade, one could argue that this area of academic enquiry and ecclesiological practice has 'arrived'. Scholars, activists and representatives of the global Church, who operate in the sport-theology-social justice realm now have the opportunity to expand the field by: (i) engaging and collaborating with scholarly groups, such as, *The Global Network of Public Theology* to heighten awareness of the field and enhance its credibility within the discipline of theology (ii) further integrating the study of theological/social justice issues on sports into school, university, and theology/religious curricula. Especially those courses and programs which address contemporary ethical, legal, political and religious issues. As we have argued, this should be done within a theological framework centered on the Christian obligation to love God above all things and to love our neighbor as ourselves, and (iii) undertaking interdisciplinary and multi-method research (Parker and Watson, 2014) and Church

programmes (see Meyer & White, 2016) that examine (and address) a wide-range of social justice issues in, and through, sports. Examples of such issues include: concussions/CTE in American football (Fainaru-Wada & Fainaru, 2013), soccer, rugby, boxing and mixed-martial arts (Davis, 2018); sport-exercise-dementia initiatives for the elderly (Watson, Parker and Swain, 2017); access to youth sport, recess and physical education (Farrey, 2008); sexual abuse/assaults in sporting environments, including Christian college sport programmes (Krattenmaker, 2017); pressure on female American intercollegiate athletes to abort their children as a condition of maintaining their athletic scholarship (Rovegno, 2007; Hawkins, 2018); sexual objectification of women (e.g., Lingerie/Legends Football League, NFL, US); mentoring and rehabilitating the vulnerable through sports—including those who are fatherless (a crisis of our age) and/or suffer from mental health problems, and those who are incarcerated (Farrell & Gray, 2018; Lamb, 2015; Watson, 2018).

In closing, we hope that by presenting an original contribution to the disciplines of 'theology and sport' *and* 'sports ethics', this exploratory analysis will stimulate others to further purse issues surrounding social justice from a theological-ethical perspective—Christian theology has a lot to offer the study of social justice in the sports realm. Theological commitments, be they born of faith or skepticism, make a difference. The Christian athlete, aware of our "common frailty" (Skillen, 1998, p. 181) sees sport in the light of faith. In the blood of Christ, our failures on the playing field and in life, are never complete, never final, and therefore never a cause for despair. Washed in the blood of Christ, conformed to the triune God who *is* love, Christians find the freedom – even in the face injustice – to play.

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[1]Examples of journal special editions from the Congress include (under construction): *Sport, Ethics and Philosophy*, *Sport and Society: Cultures, Commerce, Media, Politics*, the *International Journal of the History of Sport*, and *Practical Theology*.

[2] Practical theology boasts several specialist refereed journals, e.g., International Journal of Public Theology, International Journal of Practical Theology.

[3] Rightly ordered love, St. Augustine (1997) insists, must recognize that "every human being, qua human being, should be loved on God's account; and God should be loved for himself" (p. 21). Every other good must be understood in reference to these twin realities.

[4] For an even-handed account of this debate, see (Sowell, 2007).

[5]Cited in Bishop James Jones (2016). *A journey around justice*. Ebor Lecture, York Minster, York, UK (in partnership with and York St John University, UK), 23 November, p.10 of verbatim manuscript. Received via personal email communication.

[6] "And if the work of a human being is a being-at-work of the soul in accordance with reason...[then] we set down that the work of a human being is a certain sort of life, while this life consists of a being-at-work of the soul and actions that go along with reason, and it belongs to a man of serious stature to do these things well and beautifully...the human good comes to be disclosed as a being-at-work of the soul in accordance with virtue, and if the virtues are more than one, in accordance with the best and most complete virtue"(Aristotle, 2002, 1098a10-20).

[7] It is worth emphasizing that "first" should not be understood in the sense of a temporal chain, "but rather in the sense of being that on which every member of the series depends for its causal power" (Feser, 2009, p. 89).

[8] See (Feser, Aquinas, 2009; Twietmeyer, 2015).

[9] "For the classical theist, what the doctrine of God Incarnate entails is that that which is *subsistent being itself*, *pure actuality*, and *absolutely simple or non-composite*, that in which *all things participate* but which itself participates in nothing, that which thereby *sustains all things in being* -- that *that* 'became flesh and dwelt among us'" (Feser, 2014, para. 8).

[10] "Plato's error lay precisely in treating the soul of the human being as its constitutive essence, as a complete specific nature on its own, so rendering the body at best incidental to what it means to be human" (Cooper, 2008, p. 92).

[11] Here is but one example: "Wash and make yourselves clean./Take your evil deeds out of my sight; stop doing wrong./Learn to do right; seek justice./Defend the oppressed./Take up the cause of the fatherless;/plead the case of the widow./'Come now, let us settle the matter,/ says the Lord./ 'Though your sins

are like scarlet,/ they shall be as white as snow;/though they are red as crimson,/they shall be like wool" (Isaiah, 1:16-18, NIV).

[12] Dante (2004b) makes this point well in the *Purgatory*:

> Your fame is like the color of the grass:
> it comes, it goes, and it turns brown and dry
> in the same sun that made its seedlings green (p. 121).

[13] Moreover, given Christ's being true God and true man, "we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who was tempted in every way that we are, yet was without sin" (Hebrews 4:15, NIV).

[14] "In the end that Face which is the delight or the terror of the universe must be turned upon each of us either with one expression or with the other, either conferring glory inexpressible or inflicting shame that can never be cured or disguised … All day long we are, in some degree, helping each other to one or other of these destinations. It is in the light of these overwhelming possibilities, it is with the awe and the circumspection proper to them, that we should conduct all our dealings with one another, all friendships, all loves, all play, all politics. There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilization-these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit-immortal horrors or everlasting splendours" (Lewis, 1949, pp. 37,49).

[15] What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead (James 2:14-17, NRSV).

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