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Abstract

A common refrain in and outside academia is that prominent sports figures ought to engage more in the public discourse about political issues. This idea parallels the idea that athletes ought to be role models in general. This paper first examines and critiques the “athlete as role model” argument and then applies this critique to the “athlete as political activist” argument. Appealing to the empirical political psychological literature, the paper sketches an argument that athlete activism might actually do more harm than good.

Keywords: role model, athlete, activism, obligation, political psychology

1. Introduction

Colin Kaepernick is both widely criticized and widely praised for his controversial protest during the 2016 NFL season.² Part of the praise comes from the idea that it is good for people to speak out on political issues.³ The hope is that such activism leads to ‘national conversations’ about hard and divisive topics.⁴ Maybe if more athletes spoke out politically, like Kaepernick, people in the US would not be as divided and partisan and could work together to solve real problems. Thus, athletes ought to be role models by speaking out politically. On the face of it, this sounds reasonable and laudable. In this paper, however, I present an argument that

¹ An earlier version of this paper was given at Sports Ethics Conference, hosted by The Rock Ethics Institute and Center for the Study of Sport in Society, Penn State University, April 6-7, 2017. I wish to thank Abraham Khan, Francisco Javier Lopez, and the participants of the conference for their helpful comments and feedback. I also want to thank the journal reviewers for their comments and feedback.

² Mark Sandritter, “A timeline of Colin Kaepernick’s national anthem protest and the athletes who joined him,” *SBNation.com*, Nov 6, 2016, Web: <https://www.sbnation.com/2016/9/11/12869726/colin-kaepernick-national-anthem-protest-seahawks-brandon-marshall-nfl>

³ Jarrett Bell, “More power to 49ers' Colin Kaepernick for taking a stand against social injustice,” *USAToday.com*, August 27, 2016, Web: <https://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/nfl/columnist/bell/2016/08/27/colin-kaepernick-national-anthem-protest-san-francisco-49ers/89485948/>. See also, Domonique Foxworth, “Kaepernick’s protest is as American as that flag,” *The Undeclared*, August 29, 2016, Web: <http://theundefeated.com/features/kaepernicks-protest-is-as-american-as-that-flag/>.

⁴ Nancy Armour, “Why Colin Kaepernick's protests will resonate,” *USAToday.com*, March 2, 2017, Web: <https://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/columnist/nancy-armour/2017/03/02/colin-kaepernick-national-anthem-protest-san-francisco-49ers/98642198/>.

encouraging greater political engagement by professional athletes is not as unequivocally good as it may seem.

Given the parallels between athlete as political role model argument and the more general “athlete as role model” question, I need to examine the latter first. Do athletes have some special obligations or responsibilities to act as role models, in general? Do athletes, given their prominence in our culture, have a greater responsibility to act well or to act in ways to influence others in some positive way?

I focus here on two related issues to these role model questions. First, what is the argument for ‘athletes as a role models’ and is it sound? Second, what light, if any, does this shed on athletes as political role models or political activists?

2. What is a Role Model?

Randolph Feezell, in “Celebrated Athletes, Moral Exemplars, and Lusory Objects,” discusses several important distinctions that need to be drawn before tackling these questions. First, in defining ‘role model,’ Feezell draws a line between a narrow and a broad sense.⁵ The narrow sense of role model is “limited to a particular context in which some person or persons would attempt to imitate the behavior of the role model.”⁶ The role model has a particular or defined role and one’s behavior in that role is the model for others looking to be in a similar role. The broad sense of role model treats the person as a model for much wider situations in one’s life.⁷ To avoid confusion, Feezell suggests this latter, broader sense by termed a ‘moral exemplar.’⁸ Moral exemplars are those “whose lives as a whole are worthy of imitation.”⁹

⁵ Drawing on Feezell’s work, Earl Spurgin draws a similar distinction that he terms ‘particularism’ and ‘generalism.’ See Earl Spurgin, “Hey How did *I* become a Role Model? Privacy and the Extent of Role-Model Obligations,” *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, 29:2 (2012), pp. 118-132.

⁶ Randolph Feezell, “Celebrated Athletes, Moral Exemplars, and Lusory Objects.” *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*, 32:1 (2005), p 21.

⁷ Feezell, p. 21.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

Discussions of the athlete as role model frequently elide the difference between these two senses causing confusion. It might be that an athlete *qua* athlete is and ought to be a role model in terms of the norms and expectations of their given sport, but this tells us nothing about whether or not the athlete *qua* person is a moral exemplar.

A related distinction is between the normative and descriptive use of role model. The descriptive use of role model refers to “one whose conduct (or life) is actually the object of imitation or is at least believed to be worthy of imitation.”¹⁰ The normative use refers to one who is actually worthy of such imitation—either in the narrow or broad sense discussed above.

Using Feezell’s distinctions, we get four possible usages for ‘role model.’ The narrow sense of role model—focusing only on the behaviors specifically related to the role being modeled—can be either descriptive or normative. The broader sense of role model—which Feezell terms moral exemplar—can also be either descriptive or normative. In what follows, the default sense that I am using is the broad, normative sense of role model.

3. The Role Model Argument

Briefly, the generalized ‘athlete as role model’ argument is as follows:¹¹

- I. Prominent athletes, in virtue of their celebrity and prominence, have a special ability through their actions and deeds to influence others.

- II. Other things being equal, if one has a special ability to influence others positively, they ought to do so.

¹⁰ Feezell, p 22.

¹¹ This argument is abstracted from many different versions, including the kind of discussion one might find in popular media outlets such as ESPN. For representative academic sources, see Randolph Feezell, “Celebrated Athletes, Moral Exemplars, and Lusory Objects,” *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*, 32:1 (2005), 20-35; Gill Lines, “Villains, fools or heroes? Sports start as role models for young people,” *Leisure Studies*, 20:4 (2001), pp. 285-303; Sandra Lynch, Daryl Adair, and Paul Jonson, “Professional Athletes and Their Duty to Be Role Models,” *The Ethics of Sport: Essential Readings*, eds. Arthur L. Caplan and Brendan Parent, New York: Oxford University Press, 2017, pp. 229-241; Earl Spurgin, “Hey How did *I* become a Role Model? Privacy and the Extent of Role-Model Obligations,” *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, 29:2 (2012), pp. 118-132; and Christopher Wellman, “Do Celebrated Athletes have Special Responsibilities to be Good Role Models? An Imagined Dialog between Charles Barkley and Karl Malone,” *Sports Ethics – An Anthology*, ed. Jane Boxill, Malden, Ma: Blackwell, 2003, pp. 333-336.

III. Therefore, other things being equal, prominent athletes ought to act in ways that have a positive influence on others.

The general idea is since athletes are in position to influence others in positive ways—to be positive role models (in Feezell’s moral exemplar sense)—then they should do so.

Permissibility, Duty, and Virtue

To evaluate this argument, we need to understand better just what the argument means when it says that athletes *ought* to be role models. There are three main ways to interpret this ‘ought’ claim.

One way is that the ‘ought’ is merely talking about permissibility: it is only arguing that athletes *ought* to be free to be role models. The obligation is on others not to prevent athletes from being role models if they opt for being role models. This seems too weak and trivial to be the right interpretation of this argument. There hardly needs to be an argument for why one ought to be able to be a role model. Even critics of the athlete as role model idea do not, to my knowledge, say an athlete should not be able to be a role model if she wants to be.

A second, and more common, way the ‘ought’ claim might be understood is that it is saying there is a specific obligation or duty for athletes to act as role models. This, by contrast to permissibility, is too strong. It imparts an obligation that is unfair, overly demanding, and likely ineffective.

a. Why the Obligation Interpretation Fails

To see why the obligation interpretation fails, let us look at the first premise.

Do athletes really have the influence we think they have? This is a complex empirical question, but there are some reasons that might suggest this special ability to influence is not that effective or wide-ranging. If Premise I is false, then the argument for an obligation is unsound.

There is some evidence that people choose or follow role models that tend already to match their prior commitments and views.¹² If this is true, then the ability of an athlete to influence behavior beyond the scope of one's prior commitments might be much more limited than we as a culture seem to assume. Where the person identifies with an athlete—in terms of values, religious views, or along some other dimension—the person would see the athlete as a role model for his or her own behavior along that dimension. But where there is discord between what the athlete is modeling and what the person's prior commitments are, we would likely see that the identification with the athlete weakened and so the influence over the person's behavior weakened as well. The person would no longer see the athlete as a role model in this respect and the influence over his or her behavior would be diminished.

Another way to see the limit of the efficacy of the athlete as role model is that there is also some evidence that people are able to differentiate what roles the athlete might be modelling.¹³ By this, I mean that a teenager might see his or her favorite athlete as a role model *qua* athlete, but not as a role model of behavior more generally. The role model is seen as modeling certain traits required for success in the role of a footballer or golfer. But they are not necessarily seen as modelling behavior more generally or beyond role model *qua* athlete. The person might emulate that athlete's batting stance or style of dress, but not thereby also emulate the athlete's off-the-field behavior (for good or ill). As Reuben A. Buford May found in his survey, the young men he interviewed "are discerning in their acceptance or rejection of particular behaviors and attitudes of their role models" (457-58). The influence that a role model might have seems limited and less effective because the person is able to judge and choose what to accept and what to reject; the role model's behavior is not followed uncritically or wholly.

Another way in which we should be skeptical of the claim that athletes have an ability to influence the behavior of others as role models is that there is evidence that vast majority of

¹² Michael D. Basil, "Identification as a mediator of celebrity effects," *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media*, 40:4 (1996), pp. 478-495. See also, Siegart Lindenberg, Janneke F. Joly, and Diederik A. Stapel, "The Norm-Activating Power of Celebrity: The Dynamics of Success and Influence," *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 74:1 (2011), pp. 98-120.

¹³ Reuben A. Buford May, "The Good and Bad of It All: Professional Black Male Basketball Players as Role Models for Young Black Male Basketball Players," *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 26 (2009), pp. 443-461.

youths do not even look to professional athletes as role models.¹⁴ If we have greatly exaggerated the extent to which athletes are even seen as role models, then Premise I seems false. Athletes are not typically in a position to influence others as a role model since most youths do not seem to count them as role models in the first place.

Moving on to Premise II, there are reasons to think it is false as well. It cannot be the case that the fact of having an ability means one has an obligation to use that ability. We have many abilities and it would be impossible for us to develop, use, or enact all or most of them. Since we have to choose which abilities to focus on, we need more than the presence of the ability to ground an obligation.

This premise is also problematic because it puts a lot of the burden on the *ceteris paribus* clause. Most cases are not ones where all other things are equal. In particular, as applied to the case of being a role model, there are many factors that confound this obligation. For example, Earl Spurgin argues that a generalized role-model obligation is overly demanding because it would restrict the behavior of role models beyond the public domain, impugning on the essential value of privacy.¹⁵

Lastly, I think there are concerns about fairness when treating role modeling as an obligation of athletes. For example, it often seems to me that there is more pressure on a young African-American athlete to set a ‘good’ example than on his or her white counterparts. Now, leaving aside the problems of what a ‘good’ example might mean in this context, it seems unfair if this obligation puts more of a burden on some individuals because of their race or gender to be role models.

None of what I have said conclusively shows Premise I or Premise II are false and thus the argument definitively unsound, but it should cast doubt on how far the athlete influence goes, how effective it can be, or how fair the role-model obligation might be. If what I have said above

¹⁴ Spurgin presents some of this evidence in “Hey How did *I* become a Role Model? Privacy and the Extent of Role-Model Obligations,” p. 130.

¹⁵ See Spurgin, “Hey How did *I* become a Role Model? Privacy and the Extent of Role-Model Obligations.”

is accurate then we ought to reject or at least be skeptical of the idea that being a role model is a distinct and special obligation of an athlete.

b. Role Modelling as a Virtue

However, a third way the ‘ought’ claim might be understood is as more of a virtue. It is awkward to talk about an ‘ought’ as a virtue. Nevertheless, my aim here is not to draw a sharp and clear meta-ethical distinction between these concepts. People often use these terms in overlapping and vague ways; that is what it is to be a natural language speaker. There is a natural and meaningful way in which a person might say “Sally ought to be friendly to her co-workers” and not mean that Sally has a duty or assignable obligation to be friendly such that when she is not friendly she is failing to meet that duty. It often just means that Sally would be better off and Sally’s co-workers would be better off if Sally’s habitual way of acting was friendly rather than not friendly. In other words, the speaker is using an ought to indicate a virtue.

Applying this to the discussion here, the claim is that an athlete’s habitual way of acting should be one that has a positive influence on others. The athlete’s obligation is to craft him or herself into a kind of person: one that positively influences others. The obligation is not to act in any specific way, but to develop habitual ways of acting such that he or she might be positive role models. The virtue approach sees the agent as doing something praiseworthy when he or she acts in these ways but the specifics of the how and when of the action are too particular, contextual, and varied to be understood as an obligation that must be met by the agent.

This seems a more reasonable understanding of the role model argument than the obligation interpretation. It is not overly demanding; it is more open and broader in terms of how the role model ideal might be met: one person might be seen as a role model in terms of charity work; another in terms of their academic pursuits; and another in terms of their dedication to their athletic craft.

Another reason to favor the virtue interpretation over the obligation is that it seems more likely to be effective. Understood in virtue terms, athletes are more likely to be authentically motivated to be the kind of persons that are role models. They are not conforming to an

externally imposed set of obligations or expectations, but acting on their own judgment of how to act well. This authenticity means the athlete is more likely to make a connection with the people taking the athlete as a model and so more likely influence this person positively.

While I am sympathetic to the idea that being a role model can be praiseworthy and virtuous, I do think that even here there are some concerns and reasons to be skeptical.

The first is that the idea of a role model is secondary and derivative. It is based on how other people see you and on their judgments of right action. We should be wary of this external locus of moral evaluation. It is reminiscent of Aristotle's critique of honor as the proper account of eudaimonia. He rejects honor in part because it depends too much on those bestowing honor and not enough on the person who receives honor.¹⁶ Similarly, the status of 'role model' is something that depends on the values and judgment of those bestowing the title of role model, rather than that on the athlete's own values and judgment.

Second, though related, the praise we offer for the athlete's action ought to be about the action itself; it ought to be about what he or she *does*. It should not be, at least not primarily, about how other people see that action or how that action might influence someone else to act in that way. The danger here is that we end up encouraging simulacra of virtuous actions rather than authentic virtuous actions. That is, instead of focusing on what it takes to be a good person, the focus is on looking like a good person in order to be deemed a role model.

With those caveats in mind, it is fair to say that while not obligatory, an athlete working to be a role model can be praiseworthy and virtuous. Still the focus ought to be more on being a good person, not being a role model. That may follow from being a good person, but it is not primary.

4. The Athlete Activist Argument

I want to shift the focus from a role model understood broadly to the more specific question of athletes as role models in terms of political activism. Do athletes, given their

¹⁶ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1095b25

prominence in our culture, have an obligation or responsibility to set an example on political issues by speaking out or engaging in activism?

Rephrasing the role model argument, we get the Activist Argument:

- 1) Prominent athletes, in virtue of their celebrity and prominence, have a special ability by being politically active to influence the political views or actions of others.
- 2) Other things being equal, if one has a special ability to influence others positively, they ought to do so.
- 3) Therefore, other things being equal, prominent athletes ought to act in ways that have a positive political influence on others.

Many find this argument for activism persuasive, but I want to suggest several reasons to think it does not work.

Permissibility, Duty, and Virtue

Just like with the role model argument, there are three similar ways to understand the ‘ought’ claim in the argument.

First, there is the permissibility view: athletes ought to be free to engage in political activism. Like with the role model argument, this seems too weak and trivial. Given the broad right to free speech and conscience that most people (should) support, we do not really need a special argument that an athlete ought to be permitted to speak out on whatever issues he or she wishes. Freedom of speech and conscience already protect and support this.

The obligation view says there is a duty of athletes to speak out on political issues. This, again, is too strong. It implausibly requires that prominent athletes be politically active regardless of their knowledge, interest, or concern. It is, I think, a fair assumption, that like most people, athletes are not especially knowledgeable, interested, or concerned about political issues.¹⁷ Moreover, the concerns about obligation I raised in the role model argument extend here

¹⁷ See Ilya Somin, *Democracy and Political Ignorance* 2nd ed., Stanford Law Books: Stanford, CA, 2016.

as well. So, just like the role model argument, such a moral obligation would be unfair, overly demanding, and ineffective.

The last way is the virtue approach. On this view, engaging in political activism, though not a specific obligation, should be understood as something that when engaged in deserves praise: it makes the athlete and those around him or her better. We do not expect every athlete to be a Muhammad Ali or Billy Jean King, but we honor and praise them for it (eventually). We hold such athletes up as examples of both athletic and moral greatness: we might not expect to match their greatness, but it can still inspire and guide our behavior and attitudes.

5. The Anti-Activist Argument

On the surface, this seems reasonable and plausible, but I want to sketch out an argument that suggests reasons to be skeptical of this view. The athlete as political activist might not be as praiseworthy as it seems.

The gist of my claim is that athletes using their sport celebrity to engage in political activism is, in the typical case, more harmful than helpful and thus premise (2) of the Activist Argument does not apply: athletes, in general, do not have a special ability to influence *positively*.

My basic argument is as follows:

- A. Political activism is a kind of political participation.
- B. According to the political psychological literature, political participation tends to be harmful to one's well-being and relationship with others.
- C. Following from A and B, the political activism of prominent athletes will tend to have a negative influence instead of a positive one.
- D. Therefore, Premise (2) of the Activist Argument is not met: athletes, in general, do not have an ability to influence the political views of others in positive ways.

The move to C is doing all the work in the argument. I would bet it is also a move that many probably reject. Moreover, it rests largely on empirical claims beyond the scope of philosophical analysis. Nevertheless, I offer reasons why, if we take the empirical claims as true, it is a legitimate move.

Politics

Before looking at the argument, though, we need to define, at least roughly, what is meant by ‘politics.’ Some use politics to refer to any activity or relationship in which power is exercised. In a textbook on political geography, the authors discuss what they call informal politics and claim “there is no aspect of life which is not political.”¹⁸ Another representative example of this view is literary critic and Marxist political theorist Fredric Jameson who claims that “everything is ‘in the last analysis’ political.”¹⁹ These views are, however, far too broad and sweep far too much into the concept of ‘politics’ to be valuable. They make every relationship and every activity a political one. While proponents readily admit that, this totalizing view of politics undermines essential conceptual distinctions between the social, economic, cultural, and personal. I do not wish to ignore the interplay between these aspects of our lives, but to reduce them all to the political ignores far too much.

To make the case against this view of politics goes beyond the scope of this paper, so I will merely stipulate that I am using a more traditional and narrower idea of ‘politics.’ That is, politics is the process by which certain kinds of decisions pertaining to a community of people are made and then enforced or imposed on the people of that community. In both aspects, coercive power is central. The decision-procedures are about the kinds of things that can or ought to be imposed by force on the community. The enforcement and imposition of these decisions obviously involve or rest on coercive power. This marks off important differences between political institutions, where the exercise of coercive power is central, and other purely voluntary

¹⁸ Joe Painter and Alex Jeffrey, *Political Geography: An Introduction to Space and Power*, Sage: London, 2009, pp. 7-8.

¹⁹ As quoted in Stephen Hicks, *Understanding Postmodernism: Skepticism and Socialism from Rousseau to Foucault*, Expanded Edition, Ockham’s Razor Publishing, 2011, p. 85. Original source: Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*, Cornell University Press, 1981.

institutions in which coercive power ought not to be playing any role. While it is not necessary that the politics be exercised solely through the state, it typically is and so the usage here reflects that. In shorthand, politics is about activities of the state, the exercise of state power, or one's involvement with those activities.

The Harm

The main idea in B—that political participation tends to be harmful to one's well-being and relationship with others, among other things—is that, in general, politics itself makes us worse.²⁰

There are two kinds of harm (making worse off) here. The first might be that the consequences and effects of political policy are in general negative. The second is that the engagement in politics as individuals makes us worse off. I am not addressing in this paper the questions about the negative effects of policy and political decisions. My argument here is focused only on how *engaging* in politics seems to makes us worse: our well-being and relationships to others are diminished and our concern for and ability to discover truth and knowledge is weakened.

My claims are based, in large part, on research in the field of political psychology.²¹ The research suggests that political participation:

- Tends to increase a range of cognitive biases.²²

²⁰ I take this phrase, and partial inspiration for the argument made here, from Aaron Ross Powell, "Politics Makes Us Worse," *Libertarianism.org*, August 5, 2012, Web: <https://www.libertarianism.org/blog/politics-makes-us-worse>.

²¹ See Tali Mendelberg, "The Deliberative Citizen: Theory and Evidence," *Political Decision Making, Deliberation and Participation*, Volume 6, pp 151-93; and Jason Brennan, *Against Democracy*, Princeton University Press: Princeton, NJ, 2016. Chapter 3 in particular summarizes this research, including Mendelberg's. See also Diana C. Mutz, *Hearing the Other Side: Deliberative versus Participatory Democracy*, Cambridge University Press, 2006.

²² Mendelberg, "The Deliberative Citizen," pp. 168-69.

- Tends to increase polarization of positions: participation in politics tends to push people to greater ideological extremes rather than towards moderation.²³
- Tends to decrease already low political knowledge.²⁴
- Tends to make us less likely to approach those with whom we disagree with respect and tolerance and more likely to dismiss them as wrong or evil. We are more likely to see political foes as actual enemies, an out-group to one's in-group, and treat them as such.²⁵

If this literature is accurate, then, political participation makes it harder for us to interact positively with others, engage and understand the world around us, and develop the kind of character and skills needed to live well. This negatively affects one's personal well-being but also has wider harmful effects on social interactions and knowledge acquisition as we isolate and shelter ourselves from those with whom we differ politically.

The political psychology is extensive, and while there seems to be some consensus on the harmful effects of political participation, there is much greater diversity in terms of what the prospects are for ameliorating or correcting these harms. For example, Cass Sunstein, whom I cite as one source for the trend of increasing polarization, sees this polarization as a result of filtering that could be overcome, for example, by more spontaneous exposure to divergent views.²⁶ At the same time, Diana Mutz finds that such exposure, while reducing polarization, also reduces political participation.²⁷ One conclusion to draw from these findings is that the more one learns about opposing views (under the right sort of circumstances), the less polarized and

²³ Sunstein, Cass R., "The Law of Group Polarization," *The Journal of Political Philosophy*, 10:2 (2002), pp. 175-95. See also Diana C. Mutz, *Hearing the Other Side: Deliberative versus Participatory Democracy*, in particular Chapter 4. Mutz also discusses research that points to how often engaging with divergent viewpoints tends to lead to entrenchment and polarization. It should be noted that both Sunstein and Mutz have more optimistic conclusions about the political process than I do.

²⁴ See Somin, *Democracy and Political Ignorance*.

²⁵ Brennan, *Against Democracy*, p 65. Brennan discusses this sort of political tribalism on pp. 39-43.

²⁶ Cass Sunstein, *Republic 2.0*, Princeton University Press, 2007, Chapter 3. Thank you to an anonymous reviewer for raising this point.

²⁷ Diana C. Mutz, *Hearing the Other Side: Deliberative versus Participatory Democracy*, Chapter 4.

tribal one becomes but also the less political one becomes. Other data, referenced above, suggest that the inverse is also likely: the more political one becomes, the more polarized and tribal one becomes. One needs to be humble in the conclusions one draws from this data, but if it is accurate, it does seem to tell us that if we care about our well-being, our relationship with others, gaining and sharing knowledge about the world, then we ought to, as counterintuitive as it seems, avoid politics.²⁸

So, if we take treat these claims as accurate, then (A) and (B), from the Anti-Activist Argument above, together tell us that when celebrity athletes engage in political activism, the result is most likely going to be negative. So, if (A) and (B) are true, then (C) is likely true; and therefore, athletes do not have a special ability to influence the political views of others in *positive* ways. And so, the activist argument would be unsound.

6. Possible Objections

One objection that can be raised against my argument is that the literature that suggests these harms is primarily focused on voting and other more direct forms of political participation. So why should we think these claims translate to athlete political activism? This would suggest that (A) in the Anti-Activist Argument is false or too ambiguous to be applicable to the argument and that athlete political activism is not the kind of political participation with which (B) is concerned.

Certainly, if the findings do not generalize beyond voting and other forms of direct political participation, then my argument would likely fail. Nevertheless, I think there are reasons to think the findings would generalize to political activism.

Activism is political when it is aimed at getting others to think more politically or to put others in a more political frame of mind—to see an issue as a political issue. It might be a

²⁸ Sunstein and others offer ways in which politics might be conducted which reduces or negates these harms. If they are right and such a reconstruction of political engagement is possible, that certainly changes the calculus of my argument. Nevertheless, it is far from clear that such changes are feasible; moreover, these suggestions do not describe current political realities. See Sunstein, *Republic 2.0* and Brennan, *Against Democracy*.

specific call for political action (vote for candidate X) or an activity with political content itself (taking a knee during a national anthem).

To the extent that these sorts of actions increase the framing of the world in terms of politics and to think more in political terms, it will activate the cognitive biases, the tendency towards polarization, and the seeing of the other side as enemies with which the argument above is concerned.

That said, I am not sure it is at all clear where the line is. Surely a call to vote for a candidate is political; but what about an anti-bullying campaign or advocacy against animal abuse? There is certainly a spectrum here, some kinds of activism or advocacy are going to involve a push towards more political thinking and others less so. The more it frames things politically, the more relevant the evidence from political psychology will be.

So, to the extent that an instance of athlete activism fits this, it will be the kind of political participation that the literature seems to be about and thus, likely to be similarly associated with the negatives of politicization.

A second objection to my argument is that even if the harms found in the political psychology literature are real, it may be that there are greater benefits that outweigh these harms. For example, it might be that fighting for one's conception of what is right or just outweighs the harms discussed.²⁹ So, according to this objection, the move to (C) is not warranted in virtue of the positives of political activism outweighing the negatives.

There are several things I want to say about this objection.

First, my argument has room for exceptions. There are probably cases where the benefits of political activism outweigh the harms. My claim is just that those are likely to be exceptions. At some point, I concede, if there are enough exceptions, they are not *really* exceptions anymore and my claim would fail. Nevertheless, given the harms found in the literature, the burden is on those who want to argue that the benefits outweigh the harms.

²⁹ Thank you to Jack Bowen for raising this point.

Second, it can be easy to see the benefits of athlete political activism: the individuals inspired by Muhammad Ali or Billy Jean King or even Colin Kaepernick. The benefits are concentrated and visible: people will point to the athlete as their inspiration. On the other hand, the politicization of sport and its negative effects are a lot harder to see. The costs or harms are subtle and dispersed among all of us, not concentrated in a few visible individuals.³⁰ Unlike the inspired individual that we can point to, it is harder to point to a harm from a particular act of activism by an athlete. Can we measure the increase in cognitive bias or partisanship in one individual after a specific action of activism? Probably not. Nevertheless, these harms can be measured across population and over time—as the political psychological literature seems to do. In any case, if we focus only on the benefits we see and ignore the harms that are dispersed and harder to see, we miss the full story.

I want to distinguish the harm of political participation that is identified by the political psychology literature from the harm that might accrue to an individual engaging in the political activism. At the time of writing this paper, Colin Kaepernick has not been signed by an NFL team. Whether teams are prudential staying away because they do not want to deal with possible locker room distractions or media controversy, or that some teams refuse to sign him for ideological reasons, there is good reason to think that at least part of the reason for his lack of a job to this point is because of his protests.³¹ Kaepernick has been, in some sense, harmed by his political activism: his career and reputation may have been irreparable damaged. As real as such harms might be, the argument here is not aimed at the effects of activism on the agent of the activism per se. The harms in focus here are more about the wider effects of increased political activism on each of us as individuals and on social discourse more generally.

³⁰ The idea of dispersed costs and concentrated benefits is borrowed from economics. See William F. Shughart II, "Public Choice." *The Concise Encyclopedia of Economics*. 2008. Library of Economics and Liberty, Web: <http://www.econlib.org/library/Enc/PublicChoice.html>. See also, Mancur Olsen, *The Logic of Collective Action: Public Goods and the Theory of Groups*, Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA, 1965.

³¹ I say "at least part" because there are also football reasons. For example, while Kaepernick had a promising start to his career, he was not a starter on a poorly performing 49ers team at the start of the 2016 season. He took over in week 5 and the team finished with a 1-11 record with him under center. Nevertheless, even if one thinks that the protests are not the dominant factor in his lack of a job, they undeniably play a role.

Third, it is certainly true that fighting for what one believes to be just and right is an important thing to do. It is central to virtues like justice and integrity. This is why, I think, many praise athlete political activism as such—distinct from the particular cause (within some reasonable bound). Returning to Kaepernick, he took personal and professional risks to take the stand he did. Even those who disagree with his tactics, seem to at least (begrudging) respect that aspect of Kaepernick’s actions.³² Most people regard it as praiseworthy when someone is acting with the intent of correcting injustice. However, while the motivation is right, we still have to weigh the consequences. If the outcomes of the rightly motivated actions have (or are likely to have) a net negative effect, then the action is not as cleanly or clearly praiseworthy. While it may be true that an erring conscience binds, one still has obligations to connect his or her rightly motivated actions to the likely results of his or her actions. The concern I am raising here is that while political activism is often rightly motivated and honestly aimed at a worthy end (e.g. ending police violence), the political psychology literature suggests it may often miss the mark or make political environment in some way worse.

Lastly, I do not deny that sport itself can be a powerful force for creating positive social and political change. Indeed, I wholeheartedly endorse that idea. But this seems to me to work best when it is an *organic* result of the activity of sport and not from political activism as such.

For example, I do not believe the typical white fan accepted African-Americans in Major League Baseball primarily because of political activism;³³ they accepted it (eventually) because Jackie Robinson was great. Seeing Robinson play the game and be great taught white Americans, slowly and in subtle ways, that race should not matter for playing baseball—and that taught

³² Michael David Smith, “Anquan Boldin on Kaepernick: Respect his opinion, even if you disagree,” *NBCSports.com*, August 28, 2016, Web: <http://profootballtalk.nbcsports.com/2016/08/28/anquan-boldin-on-kaepernick-respect-his-opinion-even-if-you-disagree/>.

³³ This is not to ignore or downplay the importance of the activism that led to Jackie Robinson being on the field in the first place. Such activism surely had influence on the elites and individuals like Branch Rickey. But that activism did not (or likely did not) touch or directly influence the thoughts of the typical white baseball fan about integrated baseball. Such fans probably rejected such activism at first (to the extent they were even aware of it) and only later came to accept integration after seeing Robinson and African-Americans play. I thank Mark S. Dyreson for raising this as an objection to my contention during the question and answer period of the presentation of an earlier version of this paper at the Sports Ethics Conference, Penn State University, April 6-7, 2017.

them, slowly and in subtle ways, that race should not matter for membership in society. When the sport is in the foreground, it is about sport: the achievement, the competition, the greatness, the excitement. It was this, I contend, that changed the hearts and minds of the typical white fan.

When the activism is in the foreground, on the other hand, it becomes about politics, not the game. And, if my argument is correct, this politicization of sport brings with it the harms of political participation that need to be balanced and weighed against the possible gains.

Here is another example. Nelson Mandela famously used sport as a means for uniting South Africa after apartheid.³⁴ He recognized its power to affect and unite people: young and old, black and white, rich and poor. As a political figure, his action is fraught with political overtones; nevertheless, Mandela's actions that seemed to have the greatest positive impact were the more purely sporting moments. For example, Mandela's donning of a Springbok jersey and hat at the Rugby World Cup signaled to both Black and White South Africans that post-apartheid unity was possible. This act of fandom, according to many accounts of South Africans, seemed to do more than political speeches, protests, legislative acts, or public forums for transforming skeptical South Africans.³⁵ It might be that Mandela was merely playing at being a Springbok fan purely for political reasons. But notice the outward act, the act that moved people, was one of sport fandom and not of politics.

There is, no doubt, much more needed to support my contention that what has typically made sport an agent for social and political change is the stuff of the sport itself rather than overt political activism. A few examples and my interpretation of them is obviously not sufficient. In the end, it is an empirical question about causal factors for social and political change and is beyond the scope of this paper. If my account of these examples is wrong here and the overtly political has a much stronger impact than I have seen, then this is a reason to reject my thesis. If my accounting is correct and the authentic or more organic sporting acts are more powerful for

³⁴ See Cliff Bestall, Director, *The 16th Man*, ESPN Films, 2010; and John Carlin, *Invictus: Nelson Mandela and the Game That Made a Nation*, Penguin Press, 2009.

³⁵ See both Bestall, *The 16th Man*, and Carlin, *Invictus*.

long-lasting social change, then that is a good reason to focus more on creating authentic sporting moments rather than encouraging political activism.

7. Conclusion

So if the political psychology literature is accurate and it extends to political activism on the part of athletes, then their activism tends to make them and us worse off.

Therefore, while athlete activism is permissible, we ought to be much more judicious in praising or encouraging it. Athletes ought to make sure that given the likelihood of harmful effects from politicization of sport that their activism is really worth the cost.