

Olympic Meddling

By Theodore Dalrymple

Perhaps I am a little paranoid, but I feel that I am often, and increasingly, under moral siege by small coteries of people who believe themselves to be so well-meaning that anyone who differs from them must be a moral defective.



Diego Velázquez – El bufón el Primo, 1644

A prime example of moral bullying is the Paralympics that have just opened in Paris. In public, there are everywhere expressions of enthusiasm; in private, I hear very little

enthusiasm expressed for them, and even severe criticism of them. Many people find them distasteful but would no more say so publicly than an atheist would declare out loud in Mecca that there is no God, and that therefore Muhammad could not have been his prophet.

If you were to say openly that the Paralympics are distasteful, and even absurd, you would at once be accused of all sorts of character defects, if not of actual crimes (the distinction between moral defect and crime is eroding fast in the Western world).

If you deprecate the Paralympics as a public spectacle, you will find yourself accused of gross insensitivity to the needs of the handicapped (or whatever is the correct label for them this month), of wishing to hide them away, of ableism, of stereotyping, or even of promoting actual violence against them. If you point out that many people you know feel the same as you, you will be told that this only goes to show how much work remains to be done to change attitudes toward the handicapped.

Let us imagine for a moment Olympics for over 80s or even over 90s: They could certainly be arranged. It might even amuse some people to see old people run a hundred yards, fall over, exhaust themselves, or set world records that are five or ten or twenty times longer than those set by athletes in the prime of life. Could anything be funnier than watching 85-year-olds trying to box? Or a 90-year-old high jumper?

Is it not a triumph of the human spirit for the very old to continue to compete as younger people do? Is there no prejudice against the old, that they are incapable of doing what the young do, that they must sit dribbling in armchairs, simply waiting to die? Do we not hide the very old away because they are not as pleasing to look at as the young? What better way to destroy this stereotype of and prejudice against the old than a grand festival of sport to be call the

Gerontolympics? (The age categories might be contentious.)

It should be obvious, I suppose, that no one could object to old people (as old as you like) playing tennis or pursuing any other athletic activity that they choose, though I think that many might be inadvisable for them. Good for them if they can still hit a ball over the net in their ninth decade! But this does not entitle them to public notice, or implicitly to demand our interest and admiration just because they have overcome or not succumbed to undoubted handicaps.

In the days when circuses still had performing animals—dogs that jumped in succession through fiery hoops, seals that balanced beach balls on their noses and batted them to each other, elephants that paraded round the arena in a circle trunk-to-tail, lions that jumped from obstacle to obstacle at the crack of a ringmaster's whip—there were achondroplastic dwarfs who ran round being absurd, with boots half as long as they themselves were tall, with faces thickly painted, in ridiculous costumes, humiliating themselves for a laugh from the audience. Even at a very young age, this left me feeling uneasy: Were the dwarfs as intellectually and emotionally stunted as they were physically stunted? Did they not have feelings like ours, among which was a desire for dignity? Being by nature pusillanimous, I am sure that I laughed as everyone else laughed; I kept my reservations to myself, and perhaps was not unique in this.

But who now would laugh at such dwarfs? Surely the magnificent portraits of the 17th-century court dwarfs in the Prado Museum in Madrid painted by Velasquez should be enough to persuade anyone of the full humanity of such dwarfs, and that laughing at them as they made themselves ridiculous for exiguous pay was cruel in the extreme.

In the 19th century, Honoré Daumier, not only a great artist—one of the greatest, in my opinion—but a great man, whose immense humanity was evident in all his work, which

certainly did not exclude humor, produced a picture of a woman so fat that she was exhibited at a fair as a freak by a thin and weedy manager or impresario, her infinitely sad way of making a living. True enough, fatter people are now to be seen in every American town or city, but at the time her obesity was so extraordinary that it was worth paying money to stare at, as a freak of nature. Although Daumier had a wonderful appreciation of life's comedy, here he is not laughing: He is implicitly criticizing the thoughtless sensationalism and exhibitionism of his time.

For myself, I wonder whether we have progressed very far from Daumier's time. Of course, I know that people will object to the comparison, and say the two cases are very different, indeed completely so: that we of the enlightened 21st century, unlike the benighted 19th-century gawping clientele of the fat lady and her manager of Daumier's picture, are motivated by—well, by what exactly? Our concern for the sorrows of the handicapped? Our desire to deny that there are tragic situations that are not amenable to or simply dissoluble by a little ideological goodwill?

My best friend as a small child was a paraplegic, one of the last children to suffer the effects of polio before immunization became general. We were inseparable; and my friends and I included him in everything we possibly could include him in, for example in games of cricket, as far as he was able to participate. But neither he nor I would have thought to include him in a competitive team, nor demanded or wished for the recognition of others for our broad-mindedness, our lack of prejudice, our failure to stereotype him. The Paralympics are yet another manifestation of dissolution of the boundaries between the private and the public—the former being where real and genuine feeling resides.

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