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The Three Goods

One of the advantages of living in an era of reappraisal like our own is that we can see how cultural values have been shaped by the desires and misunderstandings through which people have construed their lives. For the past century and more we have become increasingly adept at discerning the ruses our ancestors used to convince themselves that the world was more congenial to human interests than it now appears to be; we have been less inclined to see that those misunderstandings were often derived from truths that elude us today because we have decided that all values are nothing more than cultural constructs, devices to constrain and channel behavior that might otherwise get out of control and undermine the order upon which society is based. The tendency has been to accuse anyone who finds value in the thought of earlier eras of nostalgia, of a desire for a time or an origin that never existed. This inclination has been helpful in keeping us more critical than we might otherwise be, but it also has its own terrible bias built in: the assumption that

almost anything that derives from the Western past must, by definition, be false and pernicious.

While it is often hard to argue with the notion that social values are created out of a desire to escape the fundamental truths of existence, one wonders how the species could have survived as long as it has if it were so habitually prone to self-delusion. It may be that our delusions are only now catching up with us, that our time on the planet has been relatively brief for a species; in that case it would not be surprising that we have been capable of producing vast delusions at the same time that we have thrived, at least for several millennia. But even if it is true that humans are particularly susceptible to delusion, we do have some grounding in the activities of the planet, and it would be even more surprising if there were no wisdom to be gained from the thousands of years we have been attempting to figure out our place in the scheme of things. One of the problems of our era of reappraisal, however, is that there is far too little space for the kinds of questions that would help us discern the relationship between the ruses that have led to serious misunderstandings of our place in the world and the truth that is also to be found in the same location.

An interesting example of the ways our values develop is the manner in which the distinction between the two kinds of good has evolved: the good of performance, of a job well done, and the good of morality, of what is right and wrong. One might imagine a time when the two were the same, when the word *excellence*, or the Greek word *arete*, covered both areas without hiding an ambiguity. Although we might think that the lack of distinction between our two kinds of good demonstrates Greek misunderstanding or self-delusion, it is just as likely that they perceived something more completely than we do. The excellent performance of an activity is as much an ethical act as the choice to avoid doing something that would cause harm to another, and it makes sense to see the two as fundamentally related, even if we are not inclined to do so. We have erroneously stripped the excellent performance of moral

value even as we have overstated the degree to which our commitments to restraint in the social arena are a function of good and bad, of right and wrong. We moralize in places where the early Greeks did not, and they moralize in places where we do not.

If we assume that the two kinds of good do not employ the same word by accident, then we need to reconsider their relationship more seriously than we have so that we can see how our desires have clouded an earlier sense of the good and discern the ways in which our reappraisal of the Greek manner of construing things allows us a better vantage point on our own times as well. The good of performance and the good of right and wrong are not mistakenly associated by the early Greeks, nor is it wrong to see them as an expression of the same human impulse. Yet when we consider the effects of separating the two, the results have been astonishing, even if we only think of the most obvious examples. On the one hand, we live in societies whose rewards are dispensed almost exclusively on the basis of the good of performance; on the other, we expect those who perform well to lead exemplary moral lives as well. In spite of such expectations, we insist that there is an essential distinction between the way the word *good* is used when it comes to performance and when we think of moral right and wrong.

We are not inclined to think of a self-made billionaire as one who expresses virtue through the economic decisions that he or she makes, for we see economics as a system devoid of moral considerations. We believe the billionaire simply has an acute understanding of certain basic phenomena and is willing to place himself at risk on the basis of that knowledge. If he is right, the payoff is enormous, but it has nothing to do with good and evil. It is simply that which accrues to one who has learned how to exploit his relationship to the social flows about him. His "private life" is another matter, one that has nothing to do with his ability to perform well as an entrepreneur. The billionaire might be held to the standards of the community if his wealth is dependent on purchases other people make,

but this fact has less to do with the moral good of performance than with the desire of communities to keep excess from pushing the social network off center.

At the same time, we repeatedly undergo the morality play of athletics and athletes who excel at their activities and are expected to be exemplary citizens as well. If economic achievement is not thought of as ethical in any way, neither is athletic performance, but if Michael Jordan leads anything less than a straightforward middle-class life, he is said to be failing to live up to the ideal that is demanded of him as a star athlete. But why should we expect his moral life to be in any way related to the quality of his athletic performance, particularly when our values refuse to acknowledge the significance between these two kinds of good? It is not enough to say that Michael Jordan is in the public eye and is someone young kids look up to as a role model, for even if that is true, it fails to address the issue. There is a community standard in play here, the problem of Oedipus, if you will: great athletes like Jordan are given riches beyond their wildest dreams, yet they are also expected to live ordinary lives and fail to do so at their own peril. The wrath of society can quickly turn a cultural icon into a symbol of social shame, and those who find themselves in the public domain must learn to live with the potential cruelty that accompanies godlike status in a community. But that is still another kind of good that according to our own scheme of things should have nothing to do with the good of right and wrong. Why, then, do these contradictions continue to plague our public discourse?

Michael Jordan is the best basketball player of his time, and even that doesn't begin to cover the distinction of his performance; it is not simply that he scores more and has more assists and is more essential to his team than any other player; it is also that the manner in which he does these things is inimitable, is so striking that one can immediately detect his way of shooting a basket or making a steal. And it is not just that he is more eager or quicker; there is something unquestionably special about his behavior on the court that will forever alter the way that people

think of basketball. But how is this *good*, and what does it have to do with right and wrong? Jordan has physical talent, and his consummate expression of the body is an aesthetic good: one finds it fitting that he should be able to articulate the possibilities of the body in the way that he does, and he provides us with satisfaction when he does so. Excellence. The perfect measure of the body in flight. Grace. All of these words apply to what Jordan does, and there is good in what he accomplishes, for it seems wholly appropriate that he should be able to express himself in the ways he does. This, we might say, is the pure good of being, to borrow from Wallace Stevens, the pleasure that is always found when one fully occupies the space available to one with consummate skill. But it has nothing to do with morality. It is secular, not sacred, and the way we have drawn the distinction between secular and sacred prevents Jordan's kind of excellence from being properly related to the other good, the one of right and wrong.

One might think that the pressures upon those who excel to hold to the normal course of right and wrong is simply a mistake, a reflection of a Puritan heritage that was inclined to construe in moral terms things that weren't moral at all. If that heritage saw moral good in economic success, we have come to distinguish between the two domains now; we ridicule the facile ways in which our ancestors convinced themselves that they were members of God's elect because they were so well off and saw their sacred status fully reflected in their secular achievements. Yet that same tendency to see the secular expression of excellence as a reflection of sacred excellence is in play today when we expect Michael Jordan to teach the children well, to show them how to be good people. This could be a mistake, a part of the linkage between sacred and secular that we have so far been unable to cast off, but it might also be one of the vestiges of an earlier way of thinking about things that allows us access to the relationship between the two kinds of good.

Why should Michael Jordan or any other practitioner of excellence feel the pressure to be morally good? Why

shouldn't he be allowed the extravagance of his own *arete*? Shouldn't he be able to define his own sense of good and evil? Are the athletes and movie stars of our era Nietzschean overmen who reveal to us the world beyond good and evil? There are any number of them who think so and who are inclined to assume that the rules of ordinary society don't apply to them. And they may be right, except for those times when our resentment of their extravagance prompts us to pull them down, to bring them to a level beneath us in order to compensate for the time they spent above us as gods. Certainly the fundamentalist strains of our society are inclined to vilify the practices of these "great" figures in precisely these terms, conjuring a future in which all of us will end up behaving like the superstars of our era because we have chosen them as exemplary figures. The fundamentalists believe that because we would like to live beyond good and evil but lack the courage to do so, we celebrate figures who provide us with images of such a life. But this argument fails to make the proper connection between the excellence of Michael Jordan and his exemplary status. We certainly didn't choose to make him exemplary because of his desire to live beyond good and evil, for by all accounts his excesses are rather minor and uninspiring, just what one would expect from someone with his background. And he lacks the charisma that would make us think that it is thrilling to be Michael Jordan and to live beyond good and evil. No, the fundamentalists have it wrong.

What the fundamentalists have right, however, is that there is a connection between the excellence of Michael Jordan on the basketball court and the exemplary life he should lead. He should be a practitioner of *arete* on the court and in his daily life as well, and if he is not, then he fails properly to understand the genius of the movements of his body. And if he doesn't learn to lead an exemplary life on his own, he will be taught by the negative reactions that will follow from his excesses. True, some exemplary figures like to revel in scandal, are proud of the way they can throw their excesses in the face of the bourgeoisie, but even these

figures suffer the pressure of opprobrium and must find ways of dealing with the violent negativity that can come their way when society becomes outraged. If one is pushed into the public domain because of one's excellence, one learns how to develop a persona that conforms to the social behavior that is expected of one, even if only by regularly violating the common standard of right and wrong.

One of the problems with the good of *arete* is that it can mislead, can convince one that the chief virtue of the practice of excellence is that it allows one to have one's own way. The powerful emotional effects that attend the expression of excellence can lead one to believe that the real reason why one enjoys one's excellence so much is because one can ride above all the petty concerns of everyday life and exist momentarily on a godlike level where one's will is all that matters. This problem is intensified in a culture like ours that fetishizes the self and localizes the accomplishments of selves within a private realm apart from any context that might give that self occasion for expression. In such a situation, it is all the more likely that one will come to think of the "thrill of victory" as the expression of joy at making others submit to one's will. This emphasis on the self and its singular importance is one of the main reasons that athletes and others in the public spotlight often lose their way. Not that the tendency to mistake the power of a context for the power of a self hasn't always been a human dilemma, for it is present in Oedipus and Agamemnon, and even in Odysseus. One loses sight of the situation that allows one to express oneself as one wishes and tumbles into extravagance that invariably demonstrates how little one knew about the origins of one's own excellence.



Michael Jordan's physical accomplishments are intrinsically related to a conception of the good, yet we cannot seem to find a point of entry into that domain. Part of the reason for our difficulty lies in our history, in our

scrupulous attempt first to link virtue to social success and then to separate them, first to link the excellence of sport to the good of the community and then to strip the expressions of the body of any relationship to the good whatsoever. One could, like Nietzsche, blame the Christians for depriving the bodily domain of its glory and reducing life to an ascetic mode of nihilistic denial, and there is some truth to this. If we have chosen to see the body as a degraded instrument of our own unseemly origins, we can hardly expect to find it also as that which allows us to express the good. In other words, we can reward physical accomplishments, but we cannot link them to moral good because the body itself is evil. As social success becomes more and more linked to economic success, we are faced with the quandary of how to deal with a tradition that also finds money to be the root of all evil. We handle this by separating the economic domain from moral considerations, perhaps the most astonishing act ever accomplished in Western civilization. People have complained for years how scandalous and erroneous it is for us to assume that science is value-free and to act as though there are disciplines that escape society's natural valuing tendencies, but it has been a long time since we have seriously entertained the notion that the economic domain is quintessentially the place of values. To be sure, we talk about *market* values and assume benignly that somehow the magic of the market will indeed evolve the values we want. But market values are no different than any other kind of social values, and any system that both grants priority to the market and denies that it has anything to do with morality is deeply wrong.

Unfortunately, the tendency to see the economic world as beyond good and evil is even more prominent today than it was a generation ago, largely for two reasons: one, the decline of the communist regimes has left the erroneous impression that capitalism is the consummate expression of human social behavior, a mistake so egregious that it staggers the imagination; and two, the great success of Japan and other Eastern nations at our own economic

game has made us more and more inclined to define everything in the social world in purely economic terms. Quality of life, whatever that once meant, now becomes exclusively a function of standard of living, which is defined in terms of take-home pay. These pressures have combined to give the economic system a kind of omnipotence previously unimaginable, truly beyond good and evil, truly beyond the constraints of social practice. Our main priority has become the need to feed the economic engine, to increase the gross domestic product, an activity that purports to have nothing to do with good or bad beyond the fact that it is better to have more gross domestic product than less. In the United States, the result of these shifts has been that the only difference between political parties and candidates is in the degree to which they feel the need to restrain the "behavior" of the market, and even there the difference is so slight as to be almost irrelevant.

Once we stripped the body and the economic system of the link to the good of right and wrong, we created a schizoid world in which the most fundamental of secular activities, those that manifest themselves through the display of the body and the practice of economy, had nothing at all to do with the sacred, with the world of good and evil. When we severed the two in this fashion, we lost our ability to understand the ways in which the good of excellence is related to the good of right and wrong. It could be that even at the origin of the word *good* there was insufficient understanding of how the two kinds of good are related; this is something we can never know. But our lack of understanding of the origins of the word should not keep us from probing more deeply into this relationship than we have, and one of the ways of doing this is to ask what Michael Jordan's consummate abilities on the court should have to do with a sense of right and wrong. Even better, we could ask why it might offend us to think of Jordan in the way his detractors want us to imagine him: an incredibly egocentric individual who has problems with his golf game and his penchant for gambling. Why should this image of Jordan bother us in the least, and why

should it diminish his accomplishments on the court?

If we assume for the purposes of argument that Jordan is egocentric and that he gambles relatively large sums of money (to us) on golf games, are these facts related to the way we should think of his basketball skills? Not really, although we might wonder why there isn't some transfer of knowledge from the physical capabilities that make him such a great player to the social realm where the question of behavior arises. In the best of cases, the skills of the body can contribute to our understanding of other domains, much as nature in general regularly instructs us in that which we need to know. We have long forgotten what Emerson stated early in his career, that nature is a discipline, and we have also forgotten how to make use of the discipline with which it provides us:

In view of the significance of nature, we arrive at once at a new fact, that nature is a discipline. This use of the word includes the preceding uses, as part of itself.

Space, time, society, labor, climate, food, locomotion, the animals, the mechanical forces, give us sincerest lessons, day by day, whose meaning is unlimited. They educate both the Understanding and the Reason. Every property of matter is a school for the understanding,—its solidity or resistance, its inertia, its extension, its figure, its divisibility. The understanding adds, divides, combines, measures, and finds nutriment and room for its activity in this worthy scene. Meantime, Reason transfers all these lessons into its own world of thought, by perceiving the analogy that marries Matter and Mind.¹

Emerson's language here is clogged by Kantian distinctions between Reason and Understanding that don't fit today, and it is also true that in a real way "nature" has ceased to exist for us in the late twentieth century, but these remarks demonstrate how it continues to be a part of our lives even after we have lost sight of it, for it is indeed nature that disciplines us into the distinctions through which we make sense of life. We begin with the fundamentals, learning about the properties of matter, discerning solidity, resis-

tance, inertia, extension, and so forth; and we transfer these notions to the level of understanding in terms of division, combination, measurement and the like, which in turn Reason makes use of by "perceiving the analogy that marries Matter and Mind."

The terminology has its pitfalls, for Matter and Mind do not remain discrete for us the way they did for Emerson, and Understanding and Reason are no longer faculties of the mind, but these facts are less important than the notion of nature as a discipline, as that which gives us "sincerest lessons" into the way things are. The material world out of which all our distinctions finally come is the basis for that which disciplines our thought and action in every domain, regardless of how much we think our behavior remains unconstrained by the properties of matter and inertia, of extension and solidity. And if this is true of nature, it is equally true for that most obviously natural aspect of our existence, the body, which is also a site of sincere lessons into the discipline of living organisms and what they can and cannot do. We may not take its effects as didactically as Emerson does, but they have precisely the effects he claims for it, and we lose sight of this at our own peril.

In Michael Jordan's case, the discipline of nature is obvious. First, he demonstrates to both himself and others the outer limits of what the body can do in certain situations. His grace and the movements he is capable of express both the wonders of the human body and just how far it can go. Although these motions come "naturally" to him, surely he is as aware of the way they are shaped by the discipline of nature as we are, just as at times he too is surprised to find what his body has done. Each new move, each twist of the arm as he loops under the basket and waits to the last second before he commits himself to shooting from the left or the right side, before he decides to dunk or bounce it lazily in off the backboard, provides a further sense of the extensions of which the body is capable, the measure of its capabilities, and we learn by watching even as Jordan learns by doing. This "good" of the body in action gives one "sincerest lessons" in what bodies can and cannot

do, and that is as much a part of the good and bad of life as it is a measure of excellence. Morality has its origins in this discipline rather than in the metaphysical codes that come from another world altogether, although much of the discipline of nature directly relates to the morality that has developed within the major religions of the West and the East.

Like Michael Jordan, each of us is disciplined into an ongoing sense of what the world is like and what its possibilities are, just as we are disciplined into an understanding of what our own bodies can and cannot do. That our bodies are more adept at expressing themselves one way rather than another becomes obvious over time, even in a society that claims we can all do whatever we set our minds to. Our bodies tell us otherwise: we are only inclined by simple physical disposition to be able to do some things well, even though there is no reason why we can't make use of the lesser capabilities the body also provides us with. Although we are given to thinking that at best we learn these lessons early on in life and then forget them, in fact we are making adjustments in these natural and bodily disciplines all the time. At the very least, we spend relatively few decades learning how most fully to express that which our body is, should we pay attention to it, and then we spend many more decades learning how to adjust to its increasingly diminished capabilities. We tend to think that the "lessons of the body" have been learned by 18 and that is that, but those lessons are never over, and the adjustments we must make to them are never ending. This is the most rigorous of disciplines, and it is one that is moral at heart because it both literally and metaphorically makes apparent to us the ways in which limit, distinction, and choice are built into and out of a discipline that always exists outside of our own invention. We didn't *decide* to have the body we have, although we can choose to allow it to express itself in some ways and not others; we didn't *choose* to be the body we are, although we can again emphasize some of our features rather than others. The discipline of nature and the body is such that it regularly brings us into contact with that which

we most need to know, which is what we should be devoting our attention to at any given moment.

Michael Jordan's actions on the basketball court teach us these lessons as well, just as they do for him. Games like basketball have many "sincere lessons" built into them, but we have chosen to emphasize the less interesting ones. We have our Vince Lombardi quotes about how "Winning is the only thing," and we have other clichés that cover the "thrill of victory" and the "agony of defeat," and we can talk about the "poetry in motion" that is on display when someone like Michael Jordan glides through the air, but we have no proper language to talk about the nature of the contest itself, the *agon* through which the dynamics of every game play out. If, for example, the Chicago Bulls are demonstrably the best basketball team in the NBA in 1992, why is it that they lose at all? If their players and the team as a whole are significantly superior to other teams, why don't they go through the season undefeated? Well, on any given night any team in the league can beat any other team. But why is that? Why should a miserable team with personnel that don't come together as a unit be able to defeat players with much greater skill and cohesion? Because the *agon* itself on any given occasion develops in ways of its own that no player on the court and no coach on the sideline can determine. This too is one of the sincerest lessons of the discipline of nature.

In a recent series, for example, the Cleveland Cavaliers and the Boston Celtics split six very close games, and one would have expected the seventh and deciding game to be as close as the others. Instead, the Cavaliers came out and blew the Celtics off the floor. For all practical purposes, the game was decided in the first quarter, and the last three quarters were beside the point as far as the outcome was concerned. As with any individual game in the league, one could come up with explanations. The Celtics were an older team, and perhaps they were just tired out. Of course if they had won we would have heard about veteran toughness and experience and how it often compensates for slight declines in stamina and physical ability. And in all

honesty one could easily enough imagine a series that ended with the Celtics blowing out the Cavaliers after six tight games. We have our clichés for both outcomes, but we tend not to see that the clichés themselves often are beside the point.

To take another angle, we could say that the Cavaliers won as handily as they did because “they wanted it more,” though it is hard to believe that the players on the Celtics didn’t want it at least as much given their knowledge that there wouldn’t be many playoff opportunities left for them. Still, we will say that the Cavaliers wanted the series more, or that they were “hungrier” for victory than the Celtics, having never made it into the next round of the playoffs before. And there might be some truth to such utterances, just as it might well be that the Celtics were tired out from the six difficult games that preceded the final one. At the same time, one can as easily imagine all this talk about the hungrier ballplayers who “wanted it more” to have been determined by events that had nothing to do with human will. Indeed, I would suggest that most often the things that decide such cases have little to do with the motivations that humans bring to the game: after all, Michael Jordan wanted to win the NBA championship for many years before he finally did in 1991, and no amount of hunger or desire made that possible for him until other factors came together. And if the quality of the personnel around him and the caliber of the coaching staff were essential factors, so too were other things that had nothing much to do with desire or hunger. We say that those who win a major game wanted it more, but that only covers half of it and is a little like saying that the survival of the fittest can be demonstrated by the fact that, by definition, those who have survived were most fit or else they would not have survived.

It could be that the Cleveland Cavaliers came out for their seventh game and everything “clicked.” The shots went in, the game plan they had established flowed smoothly, they were able to move with grace on the court, and the other team didn’t get off to quite the same engaged

level of play. And it could be that this is what led to the blowout and demonstrated the great hunger that the Cavalier players had. It certainly wouldn't take away from their skills or their desire to say that both skill and desire were aided by intangible things that were related to this specific game and no others. Nor would it undermine our confidence in the value of these battles to come to the conclusion that the dynamics of the individual game are beyond human will, that indeed, at their best such games are the consummate expression of the elaboration of the discipline of nature and the body as they unfold according to a prechoreographed dynamic that is based on the arbitrary rules of a game we have created for our own enjoyment. We certainly didn't invent basketball to obtain sincere lessons into the discipline of nature, but that is what the game provides us. The fierce desires that are in play on the court are interesting in their own right, but the *agon* that takes place as the music of the game unfolds on its own and the ways in which those desires respond to the unfolding of the dynamic of the game are far more interesting finally than what any individual player might do, although our own tendency is to single out the superstar and ignore the dynamic that makes him what he is.

Having said as much, however, I must return to another aspect of the discipline of nature that Michael Jordan must also have learned in order to become the great basketball player he is: he had to work hard. For better or worse, one of the most significant developments in the sports of the late twentieth century is that the discipline that is necessary to compete at the highest levels has never been greater. As always, there are dissolute players, but the efforts that go into maintaining the body of an athlete are more rigorous today than they ever were, and Michael Jordan is no exception in this regard. He has had to work long and hard and has had to discipline his life in such a way that it focused on the body and the needs it would have for the competitive level that Jordan wanted to reach. This is only another way of expressing desire or hunger as the terms are used of athletes, and Jordan's great feats on

the court are as much a function of this hard work as they are derived from his innate capabilities or the demands of the game itself. In any given year, there are a number of players who come into the game with great potential and never master that potential for reasons that seem to have mostly to do with hunger, desire, or something more fundamental still in the human disposition. One thinks, for example, of a player like Ralph Sampson, someone with an astonishing combination of gifts for a man his size, a player who was always more in idea than he was, finally, in fact. Why Ralph Sampson never came into his own is no more to be explained than Michael Jordan's overwhelming success is, though desire, commitment, and disposition do have much to do with these particular outcomes.

Michael Jordan brings discipline to his life *and* his body, and without these he would never have been capable of what he has done. The hard work that he has brought to bear on his skills is definitely a *good* in the sense of good and bad. He is, after all, supposed to be a role model for children precisely because his skills alone are not enough. What would be the point of having a role model who was exemplary exclusively as a result of something he was born with? If Jordan or any other athlete is to be exemplary, it is because they are supposed to teach children the "sincerest lessons" about the nature of desire, hard work, commitment, and the ways in which they combine to allow one to "be all that one can be." *That* is the good that Michael Jordan is supposed to put on display every night when he suits up, and it is also the goodness that his everyday acts are supposed to reflect. It is not an accident that great players like Jordan are besieged by requests from dying children who just want to touch or meet the holy icon before they die: there is something sacred about what Jordan can do, and when he fails to live up to the other qualities that go along with being a sacred figure, his reputation begins to tarnish a bit.

Our own morality places a schizoid burden on a figure like Michael Jordan. On the one hand he is a sacred figure to many precisely because his gifts defy the homilies of

our own lives. Hard work and self-discipline are not enough to account for his gifts, even if they have everything to do with Jordan's ability to explore those gifts fully over the course of a long career. Michael Jordan is special because of gifts he had no hand in. The discipline of nature unfolded within the body he was given to provide a human with extraordinary skills. Children want to see him on their deathbed not because he has worked hard but rather because he is touched by the magic of God, has been given a special gift that no one else possesses. True, even then he required parents who were capable of recognizing and nurturing his skills, for without that he would have come to nothing. The work of his parents and their own discipline had to combine to provide him the opportunities that allowed him to make his way as he did. A great many events had to come together properly to make Michael Jordan into what he is, but in the end it is his grace, his theological grace on the court, his magical body, that makes him special to kids.

By definition, however, what makes Jordan extraordinary is what keeps him from being exemplary. He is an example only of those special few who are possessed of great gifts and the good fortune to be able to find outlets of expression for those gifts. We could say that the morality to be found in the exemplary life of Jordan is that he suggests to children and others that they can be like him, but surely that doesn't get at his special charm either, for a great many kids doubtless love to play at being him on their own backyard court without any hope at all of being like him one day. And if there is ego involved in this, as there doubtless is—most everyone would love to be great, to be distinguished, to be memorable—I would argue that it is the magic that gave Magic Johnson his name that the children want. And this is not a magic to "be all that one can be," or a magic to be famous; it is instead the magic of grace, the charm of sublimity, the warmth of the perfect moment when everything in the world is as it should be and we know that life is as good as it could possibly be. *That* is what children want; that is what *adults* want, and

Michael Jordan gives them a taste of that every time he takes flight.

I need to emphasize that this gift of sublimity is a moral phenomenon that has as much to do with right and wrong and good and evil as the Ten Commandments. Michael Jordan is being good when he enacts one of his marvelous plays, not just because his act convinces us of the good of life but also because that act demonstrates what the good is all about: being wholly in accord with that which is, being supremely in tune with the discipline of nature, being a consummate expression of the nature of things from one's place within its flows. This is the most important good, out of which the other goods flow, and Michael Jordan is as significant a manifestation of this good as is any minister or "ethicist." Indeed, one might think that Jordan is a *better* example precisely because his grace is so obviously on display and because it so powerfully charms us into thinking that there is a way to be that is good and appropriate and *fitting*. The origin of morality is to be found here, in the sense of what is fitting, in the context through which we come most fully to understand the discipline of nature and the ways in which it can bring charm to our own lives, if we are able to understand its laws. This is the highest morality in the land, or at least the origin of it, and Michael Jordan probably teaches it better than any other figure at the moment. It is this morality to which dying children respond, quite rightly, for they know grace when they see it and are happy to behold it for what it is rather than expect it to be something more in accord with their own petty lives.



The morality of grace is not sufficient in human communities because not all humans find ways of expressing themselves gracefully, so we insist that our great humans provide the other kind of exemplary life as well: they must demonstrate the good of hard work, of adhering to the social codes, of being nice to their parents and

respecting others while being humble enough to tell us regularly that they themselves are not responsible for their significant difference from us. We demand this good of Michael Jordan too, and he does a fair job of providing it. He *does* work hard and demonstrate the virtue of intense self-discipline. He does evoke for us the exemplary democratic myth: a boy from a modest social background strives to develop his skills, and with the help of his parents, his coaches, and his community, he rises to the status of a superstar, one whose force upon people's lives is far in excess of the origins from which it came. Whether or not an athlete like Jordan should be asked to demonstrate these things to the populace is something worth thinking about, but the reasons why he is called upon to do so are not hard to find. The good of grace in our culture is thought to be of theological origin, and the theological domain provides us with the rules for being good and for avoiding evil that are essential to the disposition of fates within a community. Therefore, those who are possessed of grace must also display these clear distinctions between good and evil that society depends on for its ongoing maintenance.

There is a dilemma here, however, for the demands on Michael Jordan to be exemplary with his grace are different in kind from those that insist he be good and show others how to be good in everyday life. It is not that there shouldn't be a link between the two kinds of good; it is not that Jordan shouldn't be fully capable of demonstrating how his grace on the court is related to the disposition of good and bad in his life, for he should. As Emerson made clear, the discipline of nature gives us lessons in Matter and inertia, and these are translated into categories like division and distinction by the Understanding; these in turn should be translated into the ideas of Reason. There should be a transference from the material to the rational, or to go the other way, there should be a transference from grace to everyday life. The charm of the court should lead to a good everyday life as well. And there is no reason to think that this link is faulty in the least. Our sense of good derives from the lessons that nature teaches us through its

discipline, and we either adhere to those lessons or stray and lapse into the bad. But inasmuch as we have gone out of our way to avoid these linkages, we can hardly expect our graceful superstars to intuit them along with their movements on the court.

Which brings us back to the infelicities in Michael Jordan's life. If his humility in front of the cameras ("I'd like to thank my teammates, my coach, my mom and dad") is just an act, if he is really a totally egocentric individual who demands to be the center of attention, where has his grace gone? If he is reduced to blowing large sums of money on his own vain notion that he is a serious golfer, where has his gift gone? Why can't he properly subscribe to the basic middle-class virtues and avoid these petty sins? First, it should be said that in this respect he is no different from those middle-class folks whose morality he is supposed to represent. Betting on golf is hardly an unusual or particularly tawdry thing to do as far as the middle class is concerned, any more than betting on basketball games is, or buying lottery tickets, or going to Atlantic City or Las Vegas. The only things that distinguish Jordan's acts in this respect are the sums of money involved and the fact that the money seems also to be connected to people who lead less than exemplary lives.

But there are doubtless any number of good businessmen and bankers who associated with people like Michael Milken and Ivan Boesky, and we don't condemn them because they had modest associations with these people. And given Jordan's wealth, thousands of dollars on a golf match is commensurate with the tens or hundreds a more typical individual might put in play. In this sense, Jordan is little different from the minister who has been caught in an affair: the problem is not that he is doing things that his flock avoids but rather that he is doing precisely what they *are* doing—it is just that his special status is such that those who have affairs expect him to avoid these human pitfalls. Those who have grace are supposed to have the sense not to lapse into human frailty, to become silly, to let down their self-discipline and be sucked in by