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Human Dignity as a Way of Living and Behaving in Sports: A Modern Approach in the Light of the Golden Rule and the Possibilities for Sports Pedagogy

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Abstract

*In this chapter, I examine human dignity as an ethical value in sport from a sports pedagogy perspective. To concretize the concept of human dignity for sport practice, I have chosen the approach of the Swiss philosopher Peter Bieri (*Eine Art zu leben: Über die Vielfalt menschlicher Würde*, 2019), who sees human dignity as a “certain way of living a human life.” His concept via the three dimensions of “the other—I,” “me—the other,” and “me to myself” (i.e., to one’s own body in sport) focuses on the relational aspects of dignity. This offers the possibility to associate his concept in practice with one of the most famous verses of antiquity, namely the “golden rule” (Matt 7:12) from the Sermon on the Mount in the New Testament. Using a hermeneutical-descriptive approach, I will, after an introduction to human dignity and sport from a Christian theological perspective, relate Bieri’s approach to sports. Then, I will discuss the bridge to the golden rule, ultimately arriving at a model of interaction in sport combining human dignity, the golden rule, and sports pedagogy.*

Keywords

Human dignity; sports pedagogy; golden rule; sports ethics; imago Dei.

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1. Introduction

I remember the interval training session for long-distance track running with my athletics club in Berlin like it was yesterday.¹ The year was 1991, I was 21 years old, a former top-level swimmer with 53 kg bodyweight, 165 cm height, slender and athletic, but not skinny. I really enjoyed the training on the 200 m indoor track nestled within the huge track-and-field hall used for international competitions. During a break between sets, the coach of a girls’ athletics group from the neighboring club came up to me and said loudly, so that the giggling teenage girls sitting behind him could hear it clearly: “Well, to become a really good long-distance runner, you’ve clearly got a few pounds too many!” Bang! I was speechless, felt degraded and embar-

¹ I am grateful to Dr. Sean Heath for proofreading this chapter. Translations of the German texts are my own.

rassingly humiliated in front of the sardonically grinning younger and extremely thin girls. Since that evening, my relationship with my body and with myself as a valuable human being had been distorted. I know that my experience is not an isolated case. Mobbing, bullying, sexual harassment, but also violence, cheating, doping, commercialization, or alienation are all ethical challenges in today's sports world. One can find those examples from all fields of sports: from top level sports to leisure time recreation and physical education at school.² How can we behave in sports ethically, while also respecting each other and nature? There is no lack of rules and guidelines for the practice of sports, so that at least in official competitions, respectful behavior is formally "ensured" within this framework. In an informal educative as well as in the sports philosophy and pedagogy context, the fair play concept is emphasized and widely discussed as an important ethical ideal both in human interaction, but also in the relationship with one's own body or in dealing with nature during outdoor activities.³ However, "fair play" as a concept is nebulous. Different sports and sports settings seem to have different interpretations, while the academic discussion of the term is equally extensive.⁴ Relatedly, "human dignity" as an ethical category is often mentioned as a guideline in the discussion about challenges in sports, like doping or commercialization.⁵ On the part of sports science, the discussion often focuses on the connection between human dignity and human rights. Most prominent here is the Olympic Charter.⁶ Sports is seen as a tool for the practice of human dignity, but usually without addressing the concrete difficulties in implementing it.⁷ Especially Christian representatives when asked about ethical challenges in the field of sports, including both elite and leisure time sports as well as physical education, mention human dignity as a central ethical category.⁸ In a previous study about religions' attitude toward sports conducted in Norway and Germany, sources from Christian

2 In addressing ethical challenges in sports, Meinberg, in his textbook on sports pedagogy, highlights key issues such as social cooperation, gender, class affiliation, and cultural diversity within the broad field of sports. Eckhard Meinberg, *Hauptprobleme der Sportpädagogik* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1996).

3 Ove Olsen Sæle, *Fair Play: Et dydsetisk perspektiv på idretten* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 2013); Sigmund Loland, *Idrettsetikk*, 3rd ed. (Bergen: Fagbokforlaget, 2023).

4 José Serrano-Durá, Pere Molina, and Alejandro Martínez-Baena, "Systematic Review of Research on Fair Play and Sporting Competition," *Sport, Education and Society* 6 (2021): 648–62, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13573322.2020.1786364>; Reidun Nerhus Fretland et al., "Fair Play i Kroppsøving – Styringsreiskap Eller Danning?" *Nordisk Tidsskrift for Utdanning og Praksis = Nordic Journal of Education and Practice* 14 1 (2020): 23–38, <https://doi.org/10.23865/up.v14.2069>; Sigmund Loland, *Fair Play in Sport: A Moral Norm System*, Ethics and Sport (London: Routledge, 2002).

5 Emanuele Isidori and Mirca Benetton, "Sport as Education: Between Dignity and Human Rights," *Procedia, Social and Behavioral Sciences* 197 (2015): 686–93, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2015.07.060>.

6 The original values of Olympism as expressed in the *Olympic Charter* were to "encourage effort," "preserve human dignity" and "develop harmony." International Olympic Committee, <https://olympics.com/ioc/olympic-values> and <https://www.olympics.com/ioc/olympic-charter>.

7 "We can argue that sports as such illustrates human dignity." Isidori and Benetton, "Sport as Education," 689.

8 Dagmar Dahl, *Zum Verständnis von Körper, Bewegung und Sport in Christentum, Islam und Buddhismus* (Berlin: Logos, 2009), 14–16 and 38–39.

churches were identified as foregrounding human dignity as the main category regarding ethical quality in sports, usually seen in close connection to the *imago Dei* concept from Christian theology: Human beings in the image of God deserves dignity.⁹ However, in a time of secularization, in which the belief in a God and the image of God is increasingly losing its hold in society, the question arises as to whether such an approach still makes sense. In terms of sports-philosophical reflection, both ideas certainly provide fruitful approaches, but are difficult to put into practice in different multicultural settings. There might be an easily applicable guideline without long philosophical discussions and complicated considerations for examining one's own actions in sports. For solving this task from the field of sports pedagogy and sports ethics I want to build a rather unusual bridge from ancient religious ethics to modern sports settings using a cross-disciplinary approach, attaching a modern philosophical concept to one of the most famous quotes in the Bible: The so called golden rule most prominent in Matt 7:12.

One also finds numerous classical philosophical theories on human dignity that use a specific image of the human being as a justification for the special dignity of humanity, but without a direct reference to the *imago Dei*.¹⁰ The question arises as to whether this is still appropriate in times where we have started realizing that an anthropocentric worldview may not be sustainable. Recent ecological research has shown that animals also deserve a similar kind of dignity.¹¹ So How can a theological concept of *imago Dei* become accessible to a multicultural and multi-individual practice like sports and support a universally valid concept of human dignity? A path from orthodoxy to orthopraxy, so to speak? Is that possible?

Franz Josef Wetz argues that human dignity is an "illusion" and postulates that this form of dignity only exists through respect for it and not as a "thing" in itself.¹² The Swiss philosopher Peter Bieri offers here a more optimistic current approach.¹³ He regards dignity as a form of action and behavior, an approach that seems to follow familiar lines of reasoning from antiquity, mostly known from quotations from the New Testament, as, for example, the golden rule in the Sermon on the Mount. In my analysis I attempt to build a bridge from antiquity to the present day applying the philosophical principles from this long tradition of debate and discussion within theology to a sports setting. This reveals the timeless relevance of this important text as a helpful ethical tool in everyday sports practice, even for nonreligious people. According to Christian religious tradition, Christians are defined through their *actions*, whether those be good or bad. Actions and deeds that are experienced as "good" play

9 Dahl, *Zum Verständnis von Körper*, 97–161.

10 Michael Rosen, *Dignity: Its History and Meaning* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), 1–10; Antje Kapust, Oliver W. Lembcke, and Rolf Gröschner, *Wörterbuch der Würde*, UTB 8517 (Munich: Fink, 2013).

11 Christine M. Korsgaard, *Tiere wie wir: Warum wir moralische Pflichten gegenüber Tieren haben* (Munich: Beck, 2021); Martha C. Nussbaum, *Justice for Animals: Our Collective Responsibility* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2023).

12 Wetz, *Illusion Menschenwürde: Aufstieg und Fall eines Grundwerts* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 2005).

13 Bieri, *Eine Art zu leben: Über die Vielfalt menschlicher Würde*, Fischer-Taschenbücher 19837 (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2019).

a vital role in the experience of Christianity. In sports, an action can be experienced as good by an individual, depending on the moral approach and purpose, but can still be assessed as “bad” in the sense of human dignity, which is central to the ethical concept here. Reference is often made to Jesus as a role model of the “perfect, good person,” which is why a christological or action-oriented approach to human dignity is also considered more contemporary from a religious didactic perspective. In this text, I apply Bieri’s approach to selected important ethical moments from sports and at the same time establish a link to what is probably the best-known passage from the Sermon on the Mount, the golden rule (Matt 7:12).¹⁴ To this end, I first present an overview of the general ethical discussion on sports and human dignity by selected Christian representatives. This includes also an explication about the *imago Dei* concept and the link to what is known as the golden rule. The bridge thus leads over to sports education, which is by no means limited to the sports activities of children and young people, but rather encompasses all areas of sporting activity. Finally, I will come to philosophy, Bieri’s approach, and apply it to sports before completing the bridge to the golden rule.

2. Human Dignity, Sports, and Christian Churches

The general discussion about ethical aspects of modern sports is not new in the German Christian churches. In their ethical consideration of body and sports, human dignity is usually mentioned as one of the main guidelines during the last decades.¹⁵ The oldest of the theological texts from this period dealing with sports is from one of the first comprehensive studies from the early eighties, “Sports and Human Dignity” edited by Paul Jakobi and Heinz-Egon Rösch.¹⁶ There are two relevant contributions in that publication that are of interest: Jakobi’s general article about “Sports and Human Dignity” and Frans Enz’s “The Difficult ‘Thing’ with Human Dignity in Sports.”¹⁷ The authors are all clergymen in the Protestant Church of Germany and especially interested in sports; some of them functioned as “Olympia parsons” in this period. Another important document on the timeline is the common declaration on sports and Christian ethos from 1990 edited by both the Catholic and the Protestant Churches in Germany.¹⁸ In the transition from the late 1990s to 2000, Wolfgang Hu-

14 David Käbisch, “Die Bergpredigt,” in *Handbuch Bibeldidaktik*, ed. Mirjam Zimmermann and Ruben Zimmermann, 2nd ed., UTB 3996 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018), 225.

15 Ommo Grupe and Dietmar Mieth, *Lexikon der Ethik im Sport* (Schorndorf: Hofmann, 1998), 237–41, 622–29.

16 Jakobi and Rösch, eds., *Sport und Menschenwürde*, Schriftenreihe Christliche Perspektiven im Sport 6 (Mainz: Matthias-Grünwald, 1982).

17 Jakobi, “Sport und Menschenwürde: Zum Verständnis dieses Buches,” in Jakobi and Rösch, *Sport und Menschenwürde*, 9–18. Enz, “Die Sache mit der Menschenwürde im Sport,” in Jakobi and Rösch, *Sport und Menschenwürde*, 136–59.

18 Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland, Kirchenamt, *Sport und christliches Ethos: Gemeinsame Erklärung der Kirchen zum Sport*, EKD Texte 32 (Hannover: Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland, 1990).

ber, wrote about “The Human Dignity Is Violable: Sports as an Example.”¹⁹ A newer contribution is given by theologian Frank Martin Brunn in his book “Sportethics.”²⁰ There is a whole chapter dedicated to human dignity under the heading “The Respect of Human Dignity as a Leading Vision for Sports Ethics.” Without a doubt: dignity as a category has been considered a decisive marker for the ethical quality of sports from the Christian perspective despite its vagueness, however there is no clear consensus as to its meaning.

This lack of consensus is also true for the phenomenon of sports.²¹ Indeed, What kind of “sports” is meant here? Are we talking about competitive, top-level sports? Physical education at school? Leisure-time sports? Children’s movement play? And finally: What ethical problems are being addressed? Often, as a matter of course, it is initially about the challenges of elite, competitive sports, which has its own agenda and characteristic values: performance enhancement, victory, records and competition.²² At the same time, this kind of sport also functions as a role model through its media presence and thus has an influence on other fields of sport. In recreational and school sports, other aspects come into play, such as integration, body image, skill mastery, interaction skills, and self-confidence. The peculiarity of commercialized top-level sports does indeed harbor ethical challenges that are also significant for its supposed role-model function. Central to this are: doping and performance enhancement, commercialization, violence in both physical and psychological forms, the desire to win at all costs, and alienation.²³ Indeed, a concept of human dignity seems obvious as a guideline for ethical evaluation in all fields of sports practice is desired. However, dignity cannot simply be the only guiding principle for ethical orientation: “[Dignity] depends on already existing substantive standards, which it examines and appropriates with understanding and approval or rejects. If positive ethical impulses are to be set for human action, human dignity must be developed from an image of human being.”²⁴

But this is precisely where the problems arise today: What image of human is meant here? Instead of assuming a certain essence of human beings, Should we not evaluate their actions and life experiences? In this chapter I have chosen to present Bieri’s concept of the human being along with the most well-known Christian rule for human action and implement these concepts in a sports pedagogical sense, relating to action and reflection of sporting situations. The reflection on dignity and the Christian idea of *imago Dei* will be linked together as a contribution to sports

19 Huber, “Die Würde des Menschen ist antastbar: Der Sport als Beispiel,” in *Zwischen Kirchturm und Arena- Evangelische Kirche und Sport*, ed. Ommo Gruppe and Wolfgang Huber (Stuttgart: Kreuz, 2000), 133–50.

20 Brunn, *Sportethik: Theologische Grundlegung und exemplarische Ausführung*, TBT 169 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2014).

21 Brunn, *Sportethik*, 133–146.

22 Annie Blazer, “When Rituals Fail: Confessions of Doping in Elite Sports,” *Religions* 11(2020): 1–15, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel11110605>; Andreas Hompland, ed., *Idrettens Dilemmaer: Rapport fra forskningsprogrammet “Idrett, samfunn og frivillig organisering”* (Oslo: Akilles, 2007), 7–9.

23 Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland, Kirchenamt, *Sport und christliches Ethos*.

24 Brunn, *Sportethik*, 205.

education and ethically responsible sporting action. But before discussing Bieri's approach in connection to the golden rule (Matt 7:12), the idea of *imago Dei* needs some explanation.²⁵

3. A Christian Perspective of Human and Sports, *Imago Dei* and the Golden Rule

Imago Dei—being in the image of God—testifies to a relationship and communion with God and represents the fundamental horizon of human understanding in relation to God. In the original understanding of the term from the Hebrew Bible, this also implies the visualization of creation.²⁶ This places a person in a position of responsibility toward themselves, other people, their fellow creatures and nature.²⁷

Humanity thus fulfills its destiny to be the image of God:

1. When they themselves receive God in love, faith, and recognition
2. When they give other people the opportunity to receive God in faith and recognition, and to experience love
3. When others, because of what a person is or does, give thanks to God for his gifts, greatness, care, and love . . .
4. When it takes care of creation and others in a way that reflects (is an image of) God's love, goodness, and care for all it has created.²⁸

The image of God thus also encompasses the organization of one's own life and actions toward others and creation as a whole.²⁹ I describe here a specific Christian perspective of sports, which has relevance for the discussion. This approach will help to understand how the golden rule can be seen as a kind of practical consequence of the *imago Dei* concept. Christian churches as social actors also see their task as being accessible to people in the field of sports.³⁰ The experience of existential danger and

25 NB! Both the theological concept of *imago Dei* and the "golden rule" can only be roughly presented in this context. For a detailed philosophical, ethical, and theological analysis, reference is made to supporting literature (see below).

26 Jan-Olav Henriksen, *Imago Dei: Den teologiske konstruksjonen av menneskets identitet* (Oslo: Gyldendal akademisk, 2003); Jan-Olav Henriksen, "Embodied, Relational, Desiring, Vulnerable – Reconsidering Imago Dei," *NZSTh* 62 (2020): 267–94, <https://doi.org/10.1515/nzsth-2020-0014>.

27 Henriksen, *Imago Dei*, 134–55.

28 Henriksen, *Imago Dei*, 150: "Mennesket ivaretar følgelig sin bestemmelse til å være Guds bilde:

a) Når det selv mottar Gud i kjærlighet, tro og anerkjennelse

b) Når det gir andre mennesker mulighet til å motta Gud i tro og anerkjennelse, og oppleve kjærlighet

c) Når andre på grunn av hva menneske er eller gjør, takker Gud for hans gaver, storhet, omsorg og kjærlighet . . .

d) Når det ivaretar omsorgen for skaperverket og andre på en måte som gjenspeiler (er bilde av) Guds kjærlighet, godhet og omsorg for alt det har skapt."

29 Henriksen, *Imago Dei*, 134–55.

30 Dahl, *Zum Verständnis von Körper*.

the fragility of life can lead people to a search for meaning in the Christian faith and strengthen them in accepting the challenges of life. According to Jan-Olav Henriksen, all religion is an attempt to interpret human life, to place it in a larger context and to understand its meaning, its purpose.³¹ The former bishop of the Protestant Church in Germany (EKD), Wolfgang Huber, developed an approach to the Christian image of human beings and sports in the context of the cooperation between church and sports organizations in Germany. In a way it can be regarded as an explication of the *imago Dei* for the area of sports, which seems to be the anchor for the Christian perspective on human dignity.

For Huber, sport combines a *natural dimension*, a *personal dimension*, as well as a *social dimension*. The *natural dimension* refers to physicality, to the “action of movement in space and time,” which connects the nature of man with the surrounding nature.³² The *personal dimension*, relates to human beings’ encounters with themselves as a unity of body, soul, and spirit. The *social dimension* considers the aspect of cooperation and competition as interwoven. The three elements of Huber’s sports “serve the development of dignity” and this constitutes its quality. “In its natural dimension it serves the integrity of the human being; in its personal dimension it helps human creativity to unfold; in its social dimension, it promotes human cooperation.” However, Huber also clearly shows the negative reversals of these dimensions when he points to the body-destroying “cult of the body” (natural dimension), “cult of victory” (personal dimension), and the cult of violence as a reversal of the social dimension.³³ Clearly, here as well as in other recent Christian approaches, a holistic understanding of the human being, an equal unity of body, soul, and spirit is assumed.³⁴ Among others, also the former sports and Olympic pastor Klaus-Peter Weinhold described in conversation the Protestant understanding of the human being in close connection to *imago Dei* when he said that their body is “part of God’s creation and is [thus] in relationship to God, in relationship to fellow creatures, and to oneself.”³⁵ People who are not initially familiar with the Christian God need a more action-oriented approach that does not presuppose religious faith. Therefore, I will link biblical texts to the chosen philosophical approach and discuss it in the light of ethical challenges in sports.

Alongside the commandments from Leviticus (Lev 3) in the Hebrew Bible, the Sermon on the Mount (SM) in the Gospel of Matthew chapters 5–7 has been one of the most ethically significant texts in the Bible throughout the centuries.

In examining the influence of the SM, we should look into the following areas: public discourse, language, art, music, literature, curricula in state schools, etc. We can use language, art and music as examples, and in all these areas the SM has had a huge impact.

31 Henriksen, *Imago Dei*, 15.

32 Huber, “Sport als Kult – Sport als Kultur,” in Grupe and Huber, *Zwischen Kirchturm und Arena*, 15–28.

33 Huber, “Sport als Kult – Sport als Kultur,” 20–21.

34 Brunn, *Sportethik*, 201–6.

35 Dahl, *Zum Verständnis von Körper*, 164.

In some respect the history of Adam and Eve, the history of Moses and Jesus' birth and passion narratives have had similar impact. But no other religious or literary text—with the possible exception of the Decalogue—can be compared with the influence of the SM.³⁶

Ernst Baasland even refers to the impact on these different areas with the title of his comprehensive book on the Sermon on Mount called *Radical Philosophy of Life*: “The SM is a radical philosophy of life. The SM entails theology, offers a distinct ethical thinking, but basically the SM provides a philosophy of life.”³⁷ The following verse in Matt 7:12 is particularly well known outside of Christian contexts: “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you, for this is the Law and the Prophets” (NRSVue).

The basic idea behind the golden rule is not new or unique. A similar verse appears in the New Testament in the Gospel of Luke, chapter 6, verse 31. But comparable ideas can also be found in the commandment to love one's neighbor in Lev 19:18 in the Hebrew Bible. As Robert Kvalvaag and Oddbjørn Leirvik point out, similar statements can also be found in other religions and philosophical texts.³⁸ The differences lie in the audiences and the context. Sometimes the message is also expressed negatively, as, for example, in the common German proverb “Do not do to others as you would not have them do unto you.”³⁹ The outstanding feature of the golden rule of the Sermon on the Mount is its history of effectiveness through the centuries.⁴⁰ This version, Matt 7:12, has special significance for the Christian religion, as Jonathan Pennington explains:

It is one of the many memorable phrases from the Sermon that have simultaneously impacted Christian self-understanding and spread its teachings beyond the walls of Christianity into the broader culture. Both within and without Christianity the notion of treating others in love, which is the simplest and most comprehensive paraphrase, is recognized as the posture of Jesus. It has long served as a summary of Jesus's teaching on interpersonal relationships, therefore, for both Christians and non-Christians... The Golden Rule is a prime example of a virtue-ethics vision over against a rule-based ethic, which also explains why sayings remarkably similar to this one are found in moral philosophy even far beyond the Jewish traditions.⁴¹

For the purposes of my approach, the golden rule is an ideal heuristic tool to give the concept of *imago Dei* and human dignity a pragmatic outlet in sports.

36 Ernst Baasland, *Radical Philosophy of Life: Studies on the Sermon on the Mount*, WUNT 454 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2020), 12–13.

37 Baasland, *Radical Philosophy of Life*, 575.

38 Kvalvaag, “Platon, Jesus, Kant Og Den Gylne Regel – Ensidsighet Eller Gjensidsighet?,” *TT* 5 (2016): 342–55, <https://doi.org/10.18261/ISSN.1893-0271-2016-04-06>. Leirvik, *Religionsdialog på norsk* (Oslo: Pax, 2001).

39 “Was du nicht willst, das man dir tu’, das füg auch keinem Andern zu.”

40 Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode: Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik*, 6th ed., *Gesammelte Werke* 1 (Tübingen: Mohr, 1990); Baasland, *Radical Philosophy of Life*.

41 Pennington, *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing: A Theological Commentary*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 266–68.

4. Sports Pedagogy as Reflexive Education for the Ability to Act in Sports

The subject matter of sports pedagogy is multifaceted, as it works both as an empirical-analytical discipline and as a normative-discursive one.⁴² That means both pedagogical action in sports, but also the practice of sports pedagogy, is subject for reflection. This matters for all ages of people who participate in sports, but also for those who do not (yet) do sports. Ommo Grupe and Michael Krüger describe the subject of sports education in concrete terms: “Sports pedagogy is not only concerned with planned and intended educational measures, but also with unplanned, unintended educational effects in and through sports, which often have an even greater impact on education and development than the planned ones, and this is by no means only in a negative sense.”⁴³

Sports education therefore covers a wide field of sporting action, both on a practical and theoretical level.⁴⁴ Eckart Balz and Detlef Kuhlmann emphasize that the “application orientation,”⁴⁵ how sports pedagogical reflection is used can follow different interests.⁴⁶ On the one hand, this can be about increasing people’s sporting performance as a “sporting interest,” and on the other hand, it can be about promoting a person’s development and shaping their life in the sense of a “humane interest.”⁴⁷ In these contrasting approaches, Balz and Kuhlmann emphasize four central decision-making bases for the normative claim of sports education: (1) the pedagogical guiding idea, which refers to the respective image of human being and corresponding values; (2) the individual (i.e., the respective individual prerequisites); (3) the matter at hand, which corresponds to the form of sports or culture of movement forms being considered; and (4) the respective overall context in which a normative decision is to be made.⁴⁸ This means that sports pedagogical reflection must always include the image of the human being and the associated values, such as respect for dignity. Here, individual decisions to act, but also the type of sporting activity and in which framework it is anchored, are central. Stephen Harvey, David Kirk, and Toni Donovan underline in their study *Sport Education as a Pedagogy for Promoting Sport* that “we need ... explicit pedagogical applications that facilitate ethical development in youth sport.”⁴⁹ Practical experiences are also mentioned by Malte Brinkmann who

42 Ommo Grupe and Michael Krüger, *Einführung in die Sportpädagogik*, Sport und Sportunterricht 6 (Schorndorf: Hofmann, 1997).

43 Grupe and Krüger, *Einführung in die Sportpädagogik*, 48.

44 David Kirk, Doune Macdonald, and Mary O’Sullivan, *The Handbook of Physical Education* (London: Sage, 2006).

45 Original, “Anwendungsorientierung.”

46 Balz and Kuhlmann, *Sportpädagogik: Ein Lehrbuch in 14 Lektionen*, Sportwissenschaft studieren 1 (Aachen: Meyer & Meyer, 2006).

47 Balz and Kuhlmann. *Sportpädagogik*, 20.

48 Balz and Kuhlmann. *Sportpädagogik*, 22.

49 Harvey, Kirk, and O’Donovan, “Sport Education as a Pedagogy for Promoting Sport as Ethical Practice,” in *Ethics in Youth Sport: Policy and Pedagogical Applications*, ed. Stephen Harvey and

underlines the importance of practical sports action for values and attitudes when he says “That in practising not only skills can be improved but also abilities and attitudes can be developed and transformed. Moreover, in practising the relation to oneself and to the world is challenged and possibly changed.”⁵⁰ Kristine De Martelaer, Joke Bouw, and Katrien Struyven also emphasize in their study that although there is extensive literature on sports ethics, there is a clear lack of literature on “pedagogical applications or philosophy-in-action.”⁵¹ Regarding sports pedagogy as the reflective center for acting in sports, I want to show that both an ideologically open concept of human dignity, linked together with the Christian perspective of the human being in sports and the golden rule, can help dealing with ethical challenges in sports practice. In the following, I would like to try to concretize the earlier-mentioned sports science research debate about human dignity by building a bridge to Bieri’s philosophical approach.

5. “A Way of Living”—A Way of Doing Sports?—Peter Bieri’s Concept of Human Dignity

In earlier Christian-influenced approaches to the justification of human dignity, recourse is usually made to the theological concept of *imago Dei*.⁵² In today’s world, characterized by increasing secularization, cultural diversity, and expanded knowledge about “nonhuman animals,” such a special position vis-à-vis other worldviews and animals is difficult to hold as a powerful justification without clarification.⁵³ It is therefore interesting to bridge to a nontheologically based approach from philosophy, such as that of Bieri, without the recourse on the Christian image of man. Bieri proposes to look at dignity as a way of living, as a way of acting. Such an approach therefore lends itself well to a pedagogical perspective, as pedagogical reflection intends an impact on one’s action, either related to oneself or to another. He distinguishes three dimensions of experience and analysis: (1) How am I treated by other people. Here the responsibility lies with the other. (2) How do I treat other people, what is my attitude toward them? The responsibility lies with me. And (3) How do I relate to myself?⁵⁴ All three form the concept of dignity by asking two significant questions: What can be taken away or done to someone without offending

Richard Light, *Routledge Studies in Physical Education and Youth Sport* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013) 107–21.

50 Brinkmann and Martin Giese, “Practising the Practice: Towards a Theory of Practising in Physical Education from a Bildung-Theoretical Perspective,” *Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy* 30 (2023): 50, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17408989.2023.2167968>.

51 De Martelaer, De Bouw, and Struyven. “Youth Sport Ethics: Teaching Pro-social Behaviour,” in Harvey and Light, *Ethics in Youth Sport*, 55.

52 Bieri, *Eine Art zu leben*. Brunn, *Sportethik*, 208.

53 Philipp Bode, *Einführung in die Tierethik*, UTB4917 (Vienna: Böhlau, 2018); Korsgaard, *Tiere wie wir*.

54 Bieri, *Eine Art zu leben*, 12–17.

their dignity? What does someone have to do to destroy the dignity of another? For him, such an approach is based on the way we exist:

Our lives as thinking, experiencing, and acting beings are fragile and always at risk—from the outside as well as from within. The life form of dignity is the attempt to keep this endangerment at bay. It is a matter of self-confidently enduring our life, which is always at risk. It is important not only to let ourselves be swept away by things we have suffered but to face them with a certain attitude, that is: I accept the challenge. The form of life of dignity is therefore not just any form of life, but the existential response to the existential experience of endangerment.⁵⁵

In everyday life as well as in our engagement within sports we are confronted with challenges of different kinds. By facing them with a sense of dignity to ourselves, but also to the other, we are enabled to master them.

6. Dignity as a Way of Living and a Guide to Action in Sports: Bieri's Concept Applied

In the following, different aspects that are related to the basic idea of the mentioned three dimensions (the other in relation to me; me in relation to the other; me in relation to myself) in Bieri's concept will be discussed. I put them in relation to sports practice and thus also sports pedagogical action. In the conclusion I draw a line to the golden rule and connect this to the Christian Protestant perspectives on human beings in the context of sports that has been presented thus far. Bieri explicates these dimensions of dignity as a way of living in the following aspects, having in mind the two contrary considerations, which he formulates as questions one could ask: What can be taken away or done to someone without offending their dignity? What does someone have to do to destroy the dignity of another?⁵⁶

6.1 Dignity as Independence/Autonomy (*Selbstständigkeit*)

The human being is subject, self-aware, and free to make his/her own decisions; he/she experiences him/herself with dignity.⁵⁷ The aspect of autonomy and independence can also be seen under Bieri's three premises. The opposite occurs when a person is degraded to a mere object or is humiliated by others and deprived of his/her independent freedom of choice. However, the assignment here is interconnected and situational. Our dignity is in danger (jeopardized) in the way others treat us, but also in the relationship to ourselves. For example, the commercialization of top-level sports has led to the objectification of sportswomen, selling the image of women's bodies and not their skill performances. As advertising objects, they find themselves

⁵⁵ Bieri, *Eine Art zu leben*, 14–15.

⁵⁶ Bieri, *Eine Art zu leben*, 12–13.

⁵⁷ Bieri, *Eine Art zu leben*, 31.

on a fine balance between voluntary decision and coercion on the part of the system. In the context of sports education in youth sports, the topping of age-related teams can be used as an example. Especially common in football is the “topping” of children’s and youth teams. Here, the best players in their respective age-are selected for the elite teams in order to achieve first place in the respective age group league. However, these are not always the children who are among the best players in adulthood. And unfortunately, in this way, many children whose developmental trajectory does not follow standardized models fall by the wayside and lose motivation to do sports. “In practice, topping the team means banning or giving different opportunities to play sports, based on an adult’s assessment of who is the best. The main argument for topping the team is usually to win the match.”⁵⁸ Here, even children are used for the purpose of the one-sided sports game logic that is clearly designed purely for winning, so that the sporting event, originally understood as a game for playing, is pressed into the world of adult top-class sports. Another example in line with Bieri’s understanding is the treatment of horses, our fellow creatures in modern pentathlon. Some will remember the tragic case of the German Olympic participant Annika Schleu, who was ordered by her trainer to mistreat and degrade the horse for the sake of winning by beating and forcing it over the obstacles. In this example, reflecting on the dignity of the fellow-creature, no longer seeing the horse as mere “sports equipment,” has led to a change in the modern pentathlon: from 2024, riding as an element will be abolished. Another aspect of dignity as independence is also self-knowledge, the understanding of one’s own experiences. This is a central point in the sports learning process, which is a complex process due to its physicality, its bodily life. When learning to swim, for example, the guidance to this self-knowledge ensures understanding the experience of one’s own body in the water and thus makes it possible to acquire security and self-confidence in the water. Another aspect of dignity in connection to the respect of autonomy for Bieri is the meeting of others.

6.2 Dignity as Encounter

The encounter with other people is of vital importance for experiencing dignity. The individual human being is the center of his or her experience. Motivations for action, self-image, and self-expression are conveyed in the encounter. Understanding individual motivation stories and thereby showing trust in the other person illustrates the ability to communicate. Commitment and distancing are significant opposites. Distancing occurs when expectations and commitment are extinguished. The other person is no longer important; is no longer a partner. “The other can experience this as an attack on his or her dignity.”⁵⁹ Another important aspect in this context is recognition and appreciation. I am noticed for my performance. Both areas of dignity as encounter have relevance for sporting action. It is obvious to refer to the fair-play principle here. This includes, among other things, that sports partners participate

58 <https://www.idrettsforbundet.no/tema/barneidrett/sporsmal-og-svar-om-barneidrett/>.

59 Bieri, *Eine Art zu leben*, 101.

with commitment. The opposite of this is cheating, deception. If I consciously try to deceive or cheat the other sports participant, be it through illicit performance-enhancing means or through an active obstruction, or sabotage, such as in the case of a deliberate foul.

People have different motivations for participating in sports; it is a sign of respect for others to communicate these motives for dignified cooperation in sports. The aspect of recognition is a central point in Scandinavian sports education when the main goal is the individual mastery of a movement task and has priority over placement, a competition result. This orientation has led to fruitful debates within grading in physical education. Other keywords mentioned in this section in Bieri's book are equality, human beings as commodities, and as objects of pleasure. The latter two refer to the dialogical, relational aspect of objectification already mentioned in the previous section, this time from the perspective of the other. Objectification always requires a subject who looks at the object. This happens when sport modulates into a show sport and, as in the example of clothing in women's beach volleyball or gymnastics, the body of the athlete has been degraded to an object of pleasure. One can rightly ask whether dignity and equality has been trampled underfoot in the process. The latter is especially interesting here in this paragraph in connection with the "Dignity as independence/autonomy." Considering you can now wear nearly whatever you want in beach volleyball, including ankle to sleeve clothing and a hijab, the question rather becomes, why do people continue to wear revealing clothing, intentionally highlighting their athletic bodies.

6.3 Dignity as Respect for Intimacy

Dignified experiences also include privacy, that there are areas of my life that should not be exposed to the gaze of others, things that only concern myself. This separation between what is private and what may be public is an individual preference.⁶⁰ In the field of sports, and especially in physical education, one encounters this challenge to a greater extent in the age of social media platforms. Body shaming and involuntary photos posted online violate the dignity of the person portrayed. In the meantime, there are more and more students who no longer dare to shower naked after sport for fear that precisely this dignity as respect for intimacy can be violated. On the positive side, overcoming shame, such as the fear of failure in sport, can help to strengthen self-confidence and thus also one's own sense of dignity if the student nevertheless takes on a challenge and ultimately masters it.

60 Bieri, *Eine Art zu leben*, 157.

6.4 Dignity as Truthfulness

In the context of sports, this aspect should be seen as an extension of the aspect of the encounter. Lying to the other person, or not being open, which does not have to be a direct lie, impairs the experience of dignity at the latest when the truth comes to light. But this aspect goes even further: it also affects oneself. An individual athlete can also deprive themselves of their dignity by telling a lie about their life or by simply not wanting to admit it. Recognizing that certain sporting goals that have been set too high cannot be achieved seems to play an important role, especially in competitive recreational sports for adults. The variety of excuses after a marathon that does not meet the previously mentioned target expectations, for example, testifies to the desire to maintain a sporting self-image that often does not (any longer) correspond to reality. Another well-known example is lying about doping in amateur and professional cycling.⁶¹

6.5 Dignity as Self-Respect

Dignity as truthfulness is followed by dignity as self-respect, for it is precisely our own self-image that is at issue in the aforementioned point about not wanting to face the truth. A self-image implies not only how we see ourselves, and how we are now, but also how we want to see ourselves and think we should be. We can reflect on ourselves and give ourselves an evaluation. “This evaluation depends on whether we can respect ourselves for what we do and experience or whether we have to despise ourselves.” The “experience of perceived and lost self-respect” relative to the respective self-image plays a decisive role in the dignity of the individual.⁶² In concrete sporting events, for example, the sporting activities of Muslim girls in Western Europe can be mentioned. Their self-esteem and self-image are sometimes in tension between traditional values in the parental home and the peer group in the school setting and can represent a challenge for the experience of one’s own dignity. One has responsibility for oneself, and respect for one’s own physical limits.

6.6 Dignity as Moral Integrity

Dignity as moral integrity is moral action out of consideration for the needs of others. This consideration happens voluntarily, out of one’s own decision, and is thus clearly distinguished from conforming to a moral norm controlled by others, be it religious institutions or fear of authority. There are various examples of this in sports: Be it the Tour de France participants who, in the event of a crash or problems of a competitor, deliberately ride slowly until the participant is back on the bike. Or in terms of consideration for other living creatures and the surrounding nature: refraining from

61 Jack Hardwicke, *Masculinities and the Culture of Competitive Cycling*, Palgrave Studies in Masculinity, Sport and Exercise (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), 123–37; *Icarus*, 2017, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Icarus_\(2017_film\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Icarus_(2017_film)).

62 Bieri, *Eine Art zu leben*, 241.

practicing certain sports or making activities dependent on time and place, such as not climbing during the bird breeding season or alpine skiing in congested areas. Another aspect of moral integrity is the question of guilt and forgiveness. People make mistakes, consciously or unconsciously inflict suffering on others, and violate their dignity, but also their own dignity. The one who behaves with moral integrity is the one who recognizes this guilt and their need for forgiveness. Examples from the world of elite sports can be found most prominently among repentant doping offenders, like in the forementioned example of doping in cycling.

6.7 Dignity as a Sense of What Is Important

The “sense of what is important is ... a dimension of human dignity, because it contributes to the experience that one’s own life has meaning.”⁶³ The question of the personal meaning of life is central to this and has significance for the goal orientation of our actions. For top athletes, participation in the Olympic Games, for example, can represent such a goal for their life as an athlete, giving meaning to their hard training and their renunciation of many pleasures that would stand in the way of their sporting goal. However, this individual experience of meaning can also be called into question and become a challenge to one’s own experience of dignity at the moment when this goal that gives meaning becomes unattainable. This also shows that this meaning, the important things, must also be reinvented again and that it is difficult to speak of an objective meaning of life.⁶⁴ For many successful female top athletes, one goal after the end of their career is often to have children and start a family, which can take over this orientation toward meaning.

6.8 Dignity as Recognition of Finitude

Dignity also means understanding that aspects such as dignity *as autonomy* or *as encounter* are sometimes endangered, whether we are at the mercy of physical and mental deterioration through the ageing process or we are sent into involuntary loneliness due to illness. Both can mean a loss of dignity and show us our finitude.⁶⁵ Respecting and, even more, accepting one’s own existential limits plays an important role, especially in the so-called risk sports. The danger of losing dignity defined by independence, self-respect, encounter, and finding meaning is a significant element there. Possibly it is precisely this balancing act between an intense reinforcement of the experience of dignity and the extreme danger of losing it that makes it so appealing to certain personalities. Another, different consideration in this context can be related to the movement offers for older people. Dignity as a recognition of finiteness calls for enabling older people to engage in sport that takes this very finiteness into account, integrates it into an adequate sporting event, and thus contributes to a dignified end of life.

63 Bieri, *Eine Art zu leben*, 309.

64 Bieri, *Eine Art zu leben*, 311.

65 Bieri, *Eine Art zu leben*, 331.

7. Bridging between Ages and Disciplines: Concluding Discussion and Outlook

Human dignity is an important ethical category in sports. As a guideline for sports pedagogy, human dignity can only be clarified through reflexive concretizations of practical action. This form of practical reflection is a matter close to the center of concern of sports pedagogy, which has therefore also been placed centrally in the figure below. The figure sums up the bridges I intended to build with my analysis in this study between Christian perspective on human beings and on sports, human dignity, and a pragmatic approach to ethical challenges.

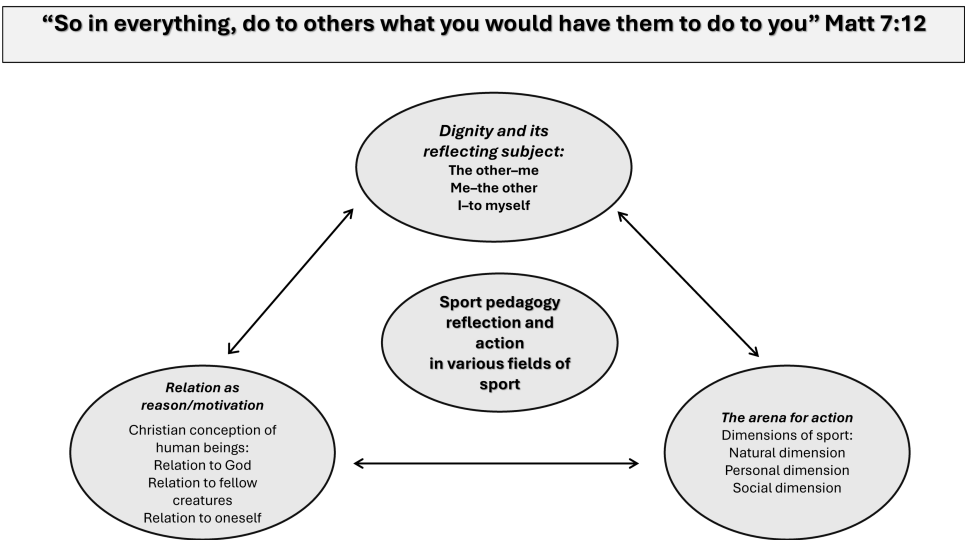


Figure 1: Model of ethical interaction in sports as bridge to the golden rule.

Bieri’s approach to “dignity as a way of life” delivers fruitful reflections when applied to the arena of sports.⁶⁶ Applying this dialogue-based concept enables a concrete practical application and a link to the golden rule from the Sermon on the Mount, the *imago Dei* principle and the reflection on the Christian perspective on sports given by Bishop Huber. The idea of *imago Dei* focuses on the human being’s relations: to God, to the fellow creatures, and to oneself and can be considered as *reason or motivation* for actions. Similar to this, Huber describes the relational dimensions of action in sports: the surrounding nature (natural), the individuum itself (personal), and the fellow creatures/the other (social). Bieri’s main content is centered precisely on the relational aspect. In the ethical reflection of an action, it is precisely the other, in an extended form of thought also the natural other, that is at the center. Using

66 Bieri, *Eine Art zu leben*.

his approach raises such reflective questions as: Can I carry out an action in this way? What consequences does this action have for me, for my fellow human beings, for nature? If this action were taken toward me, Would it be acceptable to me? In other words, Do I feel that my (and the other's) dignity and therefore my value are preserved? Dignity is therefore understood as a positive value that results from the reflected action. The golden rule with its focus on the relationship "me–the other" can be an easy-to-apply litmus test in everyday sports practice. "The other" can be applied on all dimensions of both Huber's approach and also refer to the idea of *imago Dei*. The golden rule represents then a condensed short form that can precede a longer reflection á la Bieri and enables quick decisions to be made on action, as is usual in sports. Another, not unimportant thought in this context: Action always needs motivation. Dignity thus finds its motivation in the presented relational image of the human being and at the same time also offers a source of values. The reflections on these fits well with the dimensions of sport presented and can therefore be useful in the critical reflection on this phenomenon. With the leading thought from the golden rule, the considerations from all three areas offer fruitful impulses for the discussion in sports pedagogy. Sports pedagogy thus has an important role to play at all levels of sport, namely that of a watchdog that critically reflects on sport practice and constantly questions it regarding its ethical quality. Applying Bieri's approach to this reflection and using the golden rule as a shortcut in practical decisions during the sport activity, also on recent discussions about parasports or transgender in sports, will be a helpful tool and shows the actuality of this more than 2000-year-old verse for today's ethical practice.

Further reflection still needs to be done, especially regarding nonhuman animals and the nature around us. In times of climate change and increased knowledge and awareness about the abilities of and bonds with our "fellow creatures," dignity as an ethical concept needs to be applied not only to human beings.⁶⁷ Tormod Burkey is clear in his words when he states, "So far an anthropocentric ethic has not been adequate to get us to take control of those parts of our collective behavior that are threatening the natural services that we and all other species rely on to sustain life."⁶⁸ More research should follow up the thoughts in my study here. After all, the idea of *imago Dei* encompasses the whole of creation and so should the golden rule, too.

Epilogue: Twenty years after the event described at the beginning, I am standing in the swimming hall in my hometown in Norway as a lecturer waiting for the new sports students to arrive. A young woman, who clearly does not fit the typical body stereotype of a sports student, entered the hall, wrapped her big body in a towel and the following phrase pops into my head: "So in everything, do to others what you

67 Christine M. Korsgaard, *Fellow Creatures: Our Obligations to the Other Animals*, Uehiro Series in Practical Ethics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); Karen Armstrong, *Sacred Nature: Restoring Our Ancient Bond with the Natural World* (New York: Knopf, 2022); Nussbaum, *Justice for Animals*.

68 Burkey, *Ethics for a Full World: Or, Can Animal-lovers Save the World?* (West Sussex: Clairview Books, 2017), 79.

would have them to do to you.” I greet her warmly and wish her much joy and success in her sports studies.

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