

## God and Games

BY FRED EDWARDS

### “If God does not exist, everything is permitted.”

THE ABOVE QUOTE, commonly attributed to Fyodor Dostoevsky, not only was never written by him (see a lengthy examination on the Secular Web at [www.infidels.org/library/modern/features/2000/cortesil.html](http://www.infidels.org/library/modern/features/2000/cortesil.html)) but the claim is false. That falsity is demonstrated daily: first in the ethical lives led by millions of nontheistic people all over the world, second in the nature of sporting events.

Yes, sporting events. We all know that it's impossible to play any sort of game without obeying rules. So all games have them. But where did these rules come from?

Well, people simply made them up. The rules of baseball, basketball, boxing, football, golf, tennis, soccer, and so on are just arbitrary human conventions without any foundation whatsoever in theology or metaphysics. These rules appear nowhere in any of the holy books of the world. Philosophers haven't grounded them in *a priori* truth nor have mystics discovered them lurking in the eternal essence of ultimate reality.

Moreover, everybody knows this. Yet that doesn't keep the overwhelming majority of team owners, players, sportscasters, and fans from accepting, obeying, and seeking to enforce these godless rules—literally and absolutely—with a tenacity and precision that would put a religious fundamentalist or a theocratic dictator to shame. Not only are there various sorts of referees and umpires who police and adjudicate during play but there are special panels, commissions, agencies, and corporations that rigorously maintain and vigilantly enforce a precise set of standards affecting owners, players, and others. Recent bans on performance-enhancing drugs are only one example of this. Player misconduct during the game has always been addressed. And to properly handle outcomes, various technologies have been devised such as instant replay and the photo finish.

Yet a player who follows the straight and narrow on the field might nonetheless, between games, break the biblical commandment against adultery. How is

this possible? The commandment against adultery is supposed to come from God himself, yet the rule in football against “holding” is terrestrial and human. Granted, the football rule is enforced in the best ways humans have been able to devise while the supervision of the divine command is left mostly to the inefficiency of the Almighty. But why is this disparity of enforcement even in place?

The answer is that humans are more inclined to police and obey their own rules than they are the rules of an external power. And there's a simple reason for this. If the rules are imposed by a dictator—whether domestic, foreign, or heavenly—they violate personal sovereignty. But if the rules are created and enforced “with the consent of the governed,” people are more willing to take ownership of them. After all, if you can't obey your own rules, whose rules can you obey?

Furthermore, with all the games people play, it ought to be apparent that we humans are by nature a rule-making species. We also seek to enforce our rules, sometimes with video surveillance, at other times by claiming that those rules come from a surveilling god. This latter is a common gambit when human surveillance is difficult. Thus we invent laws, ethics, and social conventions and work to maintain them.

All of which suggests that, if humans do not exist, everything is permitted. ☐

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