

Preface

This book is about tensions between equality and excellence that have arisen in Western culture since the eighteenth century. Meritocracy—the idea that careers are open to talent, that the best man wins the game, that the race is to the swift—is one of the most important modern ideas invoked to solve these tensions. It does so in principle, but as I show over the following chapters, we moderns remain puzzled about what it might mean with regard to the details. What is talent? Does the best woman win any games? Why is the race to the swift and not to the dexterous or smart? How do you get talent? Speed? Smarts? Underneath those questions is my assumption that modernity is meritocratic—or at least sincerely tries to be—and that the value is worth pursuing.

The book came together during the 2004–5 academic year, when I was the A. Bartlett Giamatti Faculty Fellow at the University of Michigan's Institute for the Humanities. This aspect of the book's genesis has a fortuitous connection to its substance: The second known occurrence of the adjective *meritocratic*, the *Oxford English Dictionary* tells us, appears in Giamatti's 1989 book, *Take Time for Paradise*. Not only does Giamatti's book appear in the following pages, but what he says about the role of sports in modern culture significantly informs my argument about why it is worth paying attention to sports and physical culture when we think about enduring questions in political theory. So it is thoroughly appropriate that my first debt is to the memory of Bart Giamatti: it was an honor to hold a fellowship in his name. This isn't cheap talk, either: chapter 2 shows that I take seriously the idea of honor.

Still, there's honor, and there's everyday reality, but here those, too, came together: my year at the Institute for the Humanities was the best year of my professional life so far. I owe much thanks to director Danny Herwitz, both for logistics and for intellectual substance: his comments on the chapter on dueling were extremely helpful. The

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other fellows made intellectual life generally rewarding; George Hoffman and Sue Juster became friends who have helped make this book what it is and certainly much better than it would have been. Each has read much of the book and has remained supportive and offered invaluable suggestions.

The University of Michigan Press has offered a good home for this book and treated it well. Jim Reische was such a committed editor that he remained involved with the book even beyond his tenure at the press. The book is much better for his involvement. Jim also found two excellent anonymous reviewers, whose comments I found extremely valuable.

The ensemble of people who have helped me is so large and their influences so varied that I cannot name them all, although I am nevertheless grateful to each one. I acknowledge my gratitude to Elizabeth Ben-Ishai, Mary Dietz, Lisa Ellis, Linda Gregerson, Barbara Herman, Katherine Ibbett, Steve Johnston, Sharon Krause, Roger Michalski, Rob Mickey, Scott Page, Claire Rasmussen, and Bernie Yack. A conversation with Jasjeet Sekhon late in the process helped me better formulate my conclusions.

The political theory faculty at Michigan have been wonderful colleagues, interlocutors, and friends. Don Herzog, Arlene Saxonhouse, and Elizabeth Wingrove read and commented on parts of the manuscript and offered great support. Elizabeth deserves particular credit for helping me realize what this book is about; she is perhaps the most incisive reader and commentator I have known, and I am proud to have her as a colleague.

I have the luxury of sharing a home and a life with a brilliant theorist and even better writer. I cannot possibly enumerate the ways in which Danielle LaVaque-Manty has contributed to this book, so let me just acknowledge my debts by dedicating the book to her. Also on the home front, Zook, Plug, and Gertie have been a source of inspiration, energy, and perspective.

Parts of the book have appeared elsewhere: a paper related to chapter 1 was published as “Kant’s Children” in *Social Theory and Practice* in July 2006; a version of chapter 2 was published in *Political Theory* in 2006; and parts of chapter 5 came out in the *Disability Studies Quarterly* in June 2005. I gratefully acknowledge permission to reprint the work here.