

### **Abstract**

Professional sports have become an integral source of relaxation in United States society. The need for athletic entertainment has been a part of society as early as the ancient Greeks and the Olympics. The issue, though, is who the athletes were, as Roman gladiators were typically slaves, bought and sold with intentions of fighting for sport. As the United States was structured around that of Rome, the structure of professional sports are built upon the same platform. The modern philosophies of liberalism and rationalism allowed the United States to modernize a similar environment to that of the Roman Empire and their gladiators.

## **Fight to the death: Comparison of Roman gladiators and modern-day minority professional athletes**

### **Introduction**

The more I've learned at university, the more I've begun researching on my own, leading me to become more disgusted with the norms our world seems to be obsessed with. I took an interest in professional sports and began to see how the business models created in these leagues have been left unchanged for a few thousand years. Some of the earliest professional athletes, other than Greek Olympians, were the Roman gladiators. Prisoners of war, or slaving men (and in rare cases women), who were forced to fight for the entertainment of others. In my mind, these athletes, or slaves, have not had their roles change since the times of the Roman Empire. In this paper, I will be presenting how the modern philosophies of liberalism and rationalism invoke the same system of entertainment the Roman Empire once held.

### **Roman Gladiators**

For how well-known gladiators are, the life they lived was a life worth escaping. Gladiators were either prisoners of war or slaves, purchased for the purpose of fighting. As these gladiators were from various ethnicities, their background would determine what type of gladiator a person would become, including their armor, weapon, and style of combat (Alchin). As for the lifestyle of gladiators, it was lavish compared to that of the average Roman citizen. Roman Gladiators had twenty-four-hour care, all their meals were planned, their housing was free, and medical care was always available (UNRV). Due to this luxurious lifestyle, men were jealous and envious of the gladiators, especially if their wives took interest in them (Alchin).

Nonetheless, gladiators had many of their citizen rights revoked, including their right of free speech and their right to vote (UNRV). While gladiators were relished in society as modern-day pop stars are, their overall experiences and livelihood were inhumane, as they were forced into this position for the rest of their lives. While fighting in an amphitheater, the audience wanted the life a gladiator had, they dreamed of their lifestyle, but when met face-to-face with these warriors, audience members viewed them more like animals than other humans. An interesting concept to think about: how/if these views on athletes have altered since Ancient Roman times.

### **The Consequences of Liberalism**

The embodiment of free will empowering individual Americans supports the notion for equality, yet the treatment of BIPOC [Black, Indigenous, People of Color] athletes divides this philosophy. The struggles caused by liberalism is a broad subject to inspect as the concepts of liberalism itself have evolved as centuries have gone by. As with all examinations, the philosophies provoked, and the utilization of these ideas are not mirror images of one another. In fact, I view the ideas and usage of liberalism as incoherent. This collision, in my belief, is caused by the freedoms liberalism creates for different social classes. The following paragraphs will break down the groundwork of liberalism, the history of the philosophy, and magnify my hypothesis as to why there are difficulties pushing the visions of liberalism is – as of now – fundamentally improbable.

### **Liberalism Fundamentals**

Before we can understand the confines liberalism has barricaded itself within, we must first recognize the foundations on which the philosophy positions itself upon. Liberalism as a philosophy and agenda are two separate entities. The liberalism I will be focusing on can be

separated into these primary objectives: the assumption of free will, the assumption of essential equality, and goods (Jorgensen). In a simplified manner, liberalism is the principal freedom is founded upon. These core principals, though, are solely founded upon the interpretation of the receiver, defining liberalism differently based on the audience (Bell 686). As redundant as it may seem, the ideas of freedom are free to be interpreted. This is where the initial problems within liberalism come to fruition: liberalism is whatever the believer decides it to be. Each of these objectives contain their own individual problems due to the free interpretation of ideas. The defining issue of liberalism is how to form a coherent, inclusive interpretation for each essential condition.

### **Assumption of Free Will**

Before understanding free will, the phrase needs to be separated into the two ideas that creates the theory: freedom and will.

As Frankfurt states, freedom “is fundamentally a matter of doing what one wants to do” (14). With this definition, a medium is created between what a person wants and what a person does. This is a factor that separates human decision-making from other creatures, the ability to decide between our needs and wants. Even though animals may have their own needs and wants, they are unable to decide between them. As basic and broad as the definition is, it helps narrow down the definition of free will.

The will is a challenging topic to simplify. The easiest definition of the will is “that he is free to want what he wants to want” (Frankfurt 15). Our will allows us to envision our desires and keep reaching for them, a dream, more or less. This is what defines the line between humans and other creatures, the ability to chase our desires that materialize as mental images and ideas.

The assumption of free will can be defined as, “the power of acting without the constraint of necessity or fate; the ability to act at one's own discretion” (Oxford Advanced American Dictionary). As humans, each of us are filled with personal motives and desires, we have the cognitive ability of making decisions. We are able to choose what we *do*, while keeping our personal desires to ourselves (Frankfurt). By Frankfurt’s definition, humans, as provided by free will, are given the ability to conceal the motives behind their actions, or generally disregard their motives altogether. By this idea, we can theorize how free will itself is a causation of deception and blatant lying.

For example, imagine there’s a romantic partnership between Jackie and Aaron, two humans I have created for the sake of this example. Jackie’s parents are very skeptical and untrusting of people in general, especially Aaron. Whenever Aaron is around, Jackie’s parents dramatically alter their demeanor, attempting to convey a new, justly portrait of themselves. Jackie understands the fake image her parents are portraying, but cannot do anything to change the situation. Jackie’s parents have no *need* to commit these actions, yet they do so to reflect a false narrative of themselves. The cynicism is present and remains unaltered. However, in the minds of the parents, they are bettering themselves so Aaron will trust them. This is a small-scale simulation of the one-way relationships free will has the ability to create, a system where one individual envisions the betterment of themselves, while disregarding the leash they have roped around the neck of the others around them. This is a problem that remains unaddressed in society, as it is difficult to physically view the phenomenon in real time.

### **Assumption of Essential Equality**

I consider myself to be a very “woke” person; the views I hold as a soon-to-be college graduate could get me banished from my rural hometown. Having even a slight grasp on

essential equality is one of the many reasons why. Essential equality can be split into two categories: “natural law”, which is inclusive every human having the rights to life, liberty, and property, while “law-abiding equality” recognizes the dictates of natural law (Hunt). This separation signifies there’s a difference between the equality of humankind and equality as dictated by political regions.

If we use John Locke’s ideas of equality, we solidify the overarching concept the idea: the ownership of oneself, which provides the individual with the right to life, but does not guarantee other rights (Locke). Other rights people are typically granted are rights of due process by law and avoidance of cruel and unusual punishment, grounding universal rights of anti-slavery (Hunt). Locke is not concerning the likes of political equality, such as the right to vote, among other rights. Thus, by Locke’s theory, if equality is solely based on the ownership of oneself, there should be no exclusions via race, social class, religion, etc (Crowder). Locke’s theory goes further, stating the superstition of humans having universal access to facilities is an integral component to essential equality (Hunt). This statement, to me, is quite misleading. Sure, if humans have access to the same physical goods, society appears equal on the outside. However, Locke’s theory does not show any prioritization to equality in ethics, or any unseen forces. Essential equality addresses the basic needs for physical equality; nonetheless, the theory of equality finds itself in a one-for-all or all-for-one scenario. It’s either everyone obtains equal rights, or no obtains equal rights. Quite the radical scenario for a theory only trying to better society.

## Internal and External Goods

Internal and external goods are, just as they're stated. Internal goods are seen within the individual, while external goods are noticeable to all. Beth Jorgensen bonifies the meaning of internal goods:

“We do not, for example, play music merely to earn cookies, gain prestige, or attain some other material or social benefit. Instead, we perform for personal challenge, appreciation and improvement of the art form; the internal goal is the excellence of the performance itself, that which is in itself good for the musician, her community, and the nature of music.”

As for myself, I am a writer with a specialization in poetry. Whenever I'm writing, it's not for any monetary gain, renown or notoriety, all my poetry is used to express inward emotions I have trouble speaking aloud. The primary purpose of skills such as creative writing or music performance is to better oneself and their abilities. Yes, a professional musician or professional writer will profit monetarily from their talents, but each talent a person possesses has this same power. A teacher, for example, receives a salary for instructing their students. Though the teacher is paid, they chose this career path for a reason, to better the upcoming minds of future generations. It's the excellence and pride the human mind envelopes itself in when a worker is passionate about their field of choice that forms an internal good.

External goods, to no one's surprise, are the opposite of internal goods. Instead of a virtuous task of excellence that come with internal goods, external goods are designed for effectiveness (MacIntyre). These goods are not meant for the greater good, but rather the physical gain of capital instead. With internal goods, each person partaking in the trade of internal goods will receive their own personal, equivalent excellence in return, as the amount of

excellence is incomparable to others. Countering this, external goods are comparable to others. One could say, in terms of material goods, the average stockbroker has much more external goods than the average social worker.

### **Liberalism and Minority Professional Athletes**

From paragraph to paragraph, I will be explaining how the individual fundamentals of liberalism affect minority professional athletes, as each fundamental causes a different effect.

In my example of free will, we could see how the actions of an individual's free will cause interruption and mislead another person's life. Our free will allows us to act in ways that openly benefit us, even if that means another person falls. Those opposed to my ideas may state, "what if a person is naturally virtuous and is trying to better those around them as well?" Luckily, I've reviewed this counter argument and propose my own.

In the NFL [National Football League], around 70% of the players are black (Cooper), this statistic does not account for other non-white players either. Furthermore, the average salary of an NFL player is \$860,000 USD (spotracc), which, in reality, is a large sum of money compared to a typical U.S. worker. While NFL players are making money, 95% of coaches, assistant coaches, and owners are white (Cooper).

While these minority players may be generating all this wealth, a stereotype is being cemented. As the players continuously make more money every year, their predominately white owners and coaches are structuring a norm: minority athletes are meant to be players and whites are meant to be coaches and owners. With more money comes more power for the owners, making professional athlete player unions obsolete, as owners have the ability to excommunicate any player that is not partaking in their vision. The same rope that was around Aaron's neck is



around the neck of every non-white professional athlete. Owners and coaches assault the emotional appeal provided via extreme financial gain and downgrade the player's earnings by weakening the player's internal value. If only 5% of owners and coaches are non-white, why seek out a highly unobtainable position? This is the reaction I believe owners and coaches intend on players having, whether they're actively thinking of the situation or not, this stereotype has been embedded into the professional sports business.

Similar arguments can be used for the lack of essential equality in the professional sports world for minorities as well. The differential between BIPOC manager positions and BIPOC player positions is exponential, as shown by the 95% to 5% difference. There's not only an inequality of players in sports, but of shown (or lack-there-of) respect. A clear example of this can be seen in MLB [Major League Baseball]. As stated by Baltimore Oriols' outfielder Adam Jones, as Jones recalls "being called the N-word multiple times" while playing in Boston (Renegade). Furthermore, U.S. Congressman James Clyburn's daughter recalls being constantly heckled as homecoming queen by white fans, whom she noticed had bumper stickers promoting University of South Carolina's running back George Rogers, an African American football player, stating, "It's all right for us to entertain, but they don't want us to represent them", as the same fans heckling her were cheering the white baseball players (Renegade). As essential equality is more of a one-for-all or all-for-one theory by Locke's fundamentals, there is clearly a separation between races in the baseball world. Those heckling Adam Jones and James Clyburn's daughter view these athletes as nothing more than roman gladiators, slaves that their sole purpose was to entertain the masses, while the audience did not care for the physical harm coming to these warriors.

Diversity and inclusion go hand-in-hand with theories of essential equality. Being invited to the conversation of equality is diversity, but being interconnected within equality is inclusion (Dudley, et al). Both situations I outlined are examples of diversity, not inclusion, as the person's involved are not receiving all the benefits they *should be* granted. I see two different groups here: those who believe minorities allowed in sport leagues is inclusion and those who do not. When you have two cliques such as these competing against one another, it's impossible to shove them together as a single, agreeing body.

One could argue these athletes are viewed as external goods to whom view diversity as inclusion. Rather than being perceived as human beings, these athletes are undoubtedly expendable. Once an athlete takes a stance the public does not agree with, their humanity is taken away by the public. Look at LeBron James for example, one of the greatest NBA [National Basketball Association] players in recent decades. When discussing current president Donald Trump on a podcast, James said, "The number one job in America, the point person, is someone who doesn't understand the people, And really don't give a f— about the people" (Willis). After this incident, Laura Ingraham, a Fox News host, remarked in response, "It's always unwise to seek political advice from someone who gets paid \$100 million a year to bounce a ball... keep the political commentary to yourself or as someone once said, shut up and dribble" (Willis). Comments like these remove one of the most important aspects of our humanity, a voice. Laura is, more or less, insisting James to be silent like those around him were.

If this is the case, what's the difference between, say, a white electrician voicing their political beliefs on a Facebook post and LeBron James vocalizing his views on a podcast? The difference is Michael Jordan. As the most renown basketball player in history, all black athletes are compared to him. Jordan's quote, "Be like Mike" grew inside the minds of all people. Jordan

was not vocal in politics, he was specifically unvocal around civil rights' matters (Wright). Since Michael Jordan, all black athletes are held to this accountability of "Be like Mike", keeping their mouth zipped and focusing on winning championships instead of politically and socially helping those in need. While Michael Jordan was an avid gambler, cigar smoker, and visibly abusive towards his teammates, these actions do not belong to being like Mike, as they do not support anyone's argument against athletes in politics.

The entirety of professional athletes staying out of politics is an argument worth having, but the debate is considered dead if white and BIPOC athletes are treated differently. Liberalism grants us the freedom the human brain grasps for, but this freedom can infringe upon the livelihood of another, which, in this case, is BIPOC athletes being treated with the equality white athletes hold.

### **Rationalism**

The theories of rationalism can be traced back all the way to Pythagoras in the 6th century, but modern rationalism stems from the 17th century. One of the broad claims of rationalism describes a natural, elite class ruling. This is a dramatic twist from the fundamentals of liberalism, describing an equality for all vision of humanity. Much like liberalism, western civilizations were founded upon this philosophy. As the 18th - 21st centuries passed, the consequences of early modern rationalism are still felt in society. It is under my suspicion that rationalism grew under the notion of "one race is fit to rule all", even if this was not the intention of the founding philosophers. Rationalism has created an "us vs. them" mentality in the black and white communities of the United States (Valls). This has resulted in the discrimination of BIPOC athletes in the modern era.

## **Frederick Douglass**

To trace back the culture wars occurring in the United States, we must interpret where the culture wars became viably relevant. Frederick Douglass was one of, if not most prominent voice to address this war. Prior to the culture war acquiring its name, Douglass envisioned the problem between slaveholder and slave (Bromell). Douglass points out, “The slaveholder, as well as the slave, is the victim of the slave system. A man’s character greatly takes its hue and shape from the form and color of things about him” (171). It’s not the person themselves who is evil per se; rather, the conglomeration of actions we commit and lessons taught construct our identity. These identities, Douglass realized, flourished due to the social ideas of the separated slaveholder and slave cultures, a phenomena labeled as American and Black Jeremiad.

## **American Jeremiad**

Jeremiads form when societies believe they have horribly failed (Murphy). More so, Jeremiads work tirelessly to pinpoint moments in the past where society began morally declining (Murphy). The American Jeremiad, in summary, is the “[a] mainstream and deeply American way of thinking about the nation’s past, present, and future” (Jorgensen). This American way of thinking can be translated to be the thinking of white puritans. These puritans viewed themselves, and America, as the saviors of the world, planning to pilgrimage back to Europe and spread their teachings of the newly found Kingdom of God, while criticizing those who held different moral and spiritual beliefs (Howard-Pitney). These puritans viewed themselves alone as God’s chosen people, morally higher above the rest of the world, hoping God would bring obedience and order back into the world. By forcibly showing the world their sins, those following American Jeremiad would be returning the world back to God (Jorgensen).

An interesting concept, nonetheless, putting a name to someone else's flaws as you are under the impression you know best. While this view was shared by many puritans, this cultural group was not the only one representing America. These puritans, try as they might, were unable to spread their superior ways, as the implementation of slavery was crucial to their Jeremiad. American Jeremiad was prevalent in the southern states, while Black Jeremiad found its home within the northern states.

### **Black Jeremiad**

The Black Jeremiad played a crucial role in slavery reform, as it aroused guilt in white Americans, as it states the concept of slavery itself is sinful in the eyes of God (Howard-Pitney). This foundation, along with the right to freedom, liberty, and the promotion of African Americans to act for equality is a counterargument against American Jeremiad. A counterargument, though, is only viable when/if the opposing side is open to conversation. As we've already learned, American Jeremiad is cemented in the idea of moral superiority, so there's not much conversation to be had. As the northern states grew to accept Black Jeremiad, the separation of ideas between the north and south became clear, causing the Civil War (Howard-Pitney).

More importantly to this conversation, in the modern era, Black Jeremiad has adopted a new defining meaning, for African Americans to be/do better. This message is much different, as before, Black Jeremiad directed the blame of racial inequality on slaveholders, not themselves. This transformation has created a "fishbowl effect" in the BIPOC community, as there is now a split between minorities believing they should better themselves and those unaccepting of minorities should be bettering themselves (Jefferson-James). The solidified

argument of Black Jeremiad becoming fractured leaves the modern-day culture war with three opposing sides fighting.

### **Meritocracy**

Meritocracy inspires systems revolving around platonic rationalism, as it's a system where merit or talent is the basic way in which the population is sorted and reward (Castilla, Benard). The belief – held by advocates of meritocracy – stresses in a true meritocratic system, each body, no matter whom they are, has an equal opportunity to socially advance and obtain rewards without questions of race, gender, class, or other non-factors in meritocracy (Castilla, Benard). There's an overlying issue with this, though. Meritocracy, in a sense, is attempting to remove a person's background from the productivity they are able to produce. While factors such as race, gender, sexuality, and such may not outwardly influence the effort and talent a person puts in, it does. Our backgrounds are the deciding factors in our personalities, the people we become. If the initial opportunity proposed by meritocracy is not equal, this negatively impacts the “freedom” meritocracy attempts to justify (Tan). There is no equal playing field all individuals begin from. Notably, meritocracy creates an environment that preys upon jealousy. As workers are granted larger amounts of pay and rewards, those who feel deserving but were not granted the same rewards can trigger biases towards the rewarded workers (Castilla, Benard). A system meant to create equality has instead become a system of inequality, anti-freedom, and envy.

### **Rationalism and Minority Professional Athletes**

The concepts of American/Black Jeremiad provide crucial evidence as to how minority athletes are treated in the United States. American Jeremiad, as discussed, is decided by superiority, as if there is no ruling force, there must be a problem within the system. This same concept includes representation as well. The NBA, as an example, appears to be contrary to this position. The NBA has a public image that contradicts racism, as the representation of Blacks in the league is over 72% (Griffin). As a group that was once opposed to the freedom of slaves, what impression does this muster, and why do so many advocates for American Jeremiad continue to watch the NBA? Even though the frontal image of the league is held by a Black majority, the whole purpose of the league has become “making Black men safe for (White) consumers in the interest of profit” (Griffin). This logic is parallel to that of a colonial slave. The business of profiting off and exploiting the Black male body is still contextually alive and well.

The difference in definitions of meritocracy in the NBA is prevalent as well. An example of this difference can be seen in the 2004 incident between the Detroit Pistons and the Indiana Pacers, known as the “Malice at The Palace”. In this fight between players, a white fan dumped a cup of water on Pacers’ player, Ron Artest. Artest proceeded to enter the stands and attack the fan, scaring the fan and all those attending the game. Rachel Griffin summarizes thoughts of the event with the statement, “...when black players came off the court and went into the stands, blackness became uncontrollable, spilling into the safety of white space... the black bodies of the players... were represented as “violent beasts” going after the “innocent” white fans”. If meritocracy is based on removing backgrounds for equal opportunities, why would this occurrence be labeled as Blacks attacking Whites? Envious fans have this barrier in which they are able to vilely act out, while Black athletes are expected to keep their professional

demeanor stabilized. Events such as this show the separate definitions of equal meritocratic opportunities, as skin color is the first noticeable, labeled distinction, leading to a divergence of interests between the groups, making up an “Us vs. Them” mentality.

### **Conclusion**

The more I researched, the more I read, more and more similarities between the United States professional sports model and that of the Roman Empire became apparent to me. Honestly, it makes me sick. My university has taught me the importance of caring for those around you, whether you are close to them or not, and I hold that lesson higher than any technique or other idea I have been given the privilege of learning. I cannot reiterate how disgusted typing this paper has made me. Systems meant for ancient era slaves are war prisoners are still active in the year 2021, with little work being done to dismantle them. I only hope that one day, I will play a role in changing these systems for the better.



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