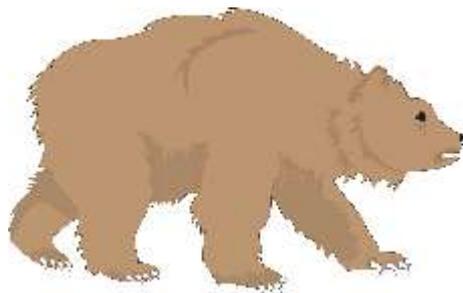


Ursus Philosophicus

Essays dedicated to Björn Haglund on his sixtieth birthday



The winner takes it all

Stellan Welin

It is the year 2040. Sten Tung, the young but already well-known athlete in running, was facing a decision. In his position it should really be simple to make that decision. It annoyed him that it was troubling him.

Sten Tung had since his early youth been very good at running. He looked down at his well-formed muscular legs and bare feet. They had served him well and already brought him victories in nearly all the races in “classical style” in which he had competed. It was time for a new phase of his athletic life. He wanted to compete for the big prizes and the dazzling winning awards.

This was really what he had wanted all the time. Why was he reluctant? Should he really say no? Should he give up a promising career and the chance of becoming rich and famous just for some kind of silly nostalgia. He once more looked down at his bare legs and feet. “To hell with them” he thought, rose and went to the appointed meeting with the psychologist and the ethicist of the athletic team.

The meeting was just a regular counselling session mandated by the states for all young athletes about to move into the real competitions. It was more than 20 years after the time when athletics was changed once and for all when the results from the Para-Olympics for “handicapped” athletes running with mechanical artificial limbs surpassed the ordinary Olympics. The artificial legs and feet of the athletes without “natural” legs were better in all respects. “Natural legs” simply could not compete with the new artificial ones. So what was more natural than removing your original legs and giving yourselves new artificial ones? This was what Sten Tung was about to do. But he still hesitated.

The counselling session was not very exciting. It was the usual. The psychologist explained very carefully that the new artificial limbs were as good as the natural limbs even from a psychological point of view. Sten would still “feel” his feet and toes and so on. The connection between the artificial sensors and the “natural” nerves was very good.

They could even help him with programming some of the internally bodily sensations from his legs and feet. This was not very difficult and everything would of course be paid for by the club. The psychologist also asked Sten Tung if he ever had any problems with his artificial heart. Sten had to admit that it had served him very well.

The ethicist, who was a religious person, explained to Sten Tung that exchanging the natural limbs for better artificial was somehow part of God's plan for humankind. The creation was not fixed. Humans were invited to participate in the creation, making themselves more like God's image and leaving some of their human imperfections behind. The ethicist also explained to Sten Tung that he should really get rid of the old conception of what it means to be human. Aristotle was wrong – as was the Thomists in the old Catholic Church, the feminists and a couple of other philosophers who stressed the intimate connection between being human and having (or being) a body. After all Plato was right. The important thing is the mind. The body should be seen just as an instrument for the mind. The ethicist, who had an annoying fondness for philosophical “knock-down arguments”, also said that anyone can understand what it means to wake up one morning in someone else's body but no one understands what it means that someone else wakes up in your body.

So it went on. At the end Sten Tung happily and eagerly agreed to have his natural legs removed and became the proud owner of the absolutely newest and most efficient artificial legs on the market. He lived forever happily after this and won many races and even received the Kasemo-Thomsen-Gold prize honouring the early pioneers in biomaterials who dared to step outside the so called natural human realm.

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