

SPORT, OLYMPISM AND TWO LIFESTYLES

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ABSTRACT

Research background and hypothesis. The study analyses two lifestyles: asceticism and hedonism. Spiritual and moral dimension of our lives form a wider background and the field of sport, especially renewed olympism, affect the closer one of our reflections.

Research aims were to compare both lifestyles and to make the character of their relation clear; to map the real role of asceticism in the sports sphere and to integrate both lifestyles into a certain meaningful whole.

Research methods. Our methodology is philosophical, involving conceptual analysis and the application of the outcomes to sports practice.

Research results. Both concepts have usually been considered as contrary or polar. Yet our analysis leads into persuasion that they are in dialectic relation with many mediations and “bridges” between them. Spiritual and moral dimensions play an important role in the topical reflections.

Discussion and conclusions. Many authors warn about the close junction between sports and asceticism. The role of hedonism is analyzed much less. We tried to find some balanced position within the framework of the integrated whole. The final part of the study tries to show that the topic ought to be joined with a horizon of meanings. Promoting “reasonable asceticism” can be one aspect of *raison d’être* of today’s sport in this postmodern world with the supremacy of hedonistic orientation.

Keywords: asceticism, Pierre de Coubertin’s attitudes, hedonism, meaning of life.

INTRODUCTION

Is the ethos or “philosophy” of modern sport ascetic? Why was the motto of the new Olympic movement – “Citius, altius, fortius” – regarded as an *antiascetic* one by P. de Coubertin¹? The emergence of a sport during the 19th century with its target on the improvement of *bodily* skills and fitness (in the first plan) was a new phenomenon. Such target had its own reasons. Some of them are as follows:

The reemergence of the concept of *kalokagathia*. For example, Miroslav Tyrš in the Czech Republic began to renew and promote it in about 1850. He felt that the new life of that old Greek ideal needed much more attention to the problem of the human body (combined with beauty). We are sure he was

not the only thinker of this kind in Europe in those days.

The deterioration of the level of physical skills and fitness. In the second half of the 19th century a new class of so called “contented young gentlemen” arose (not speaking about renters in general). Jose Ortega y Gasset was the author of the term and said that they were people taking surplus of means from the world, not sharing its anxiety (Gasset, 1930). Their style of life called for both compensation of the absence of physical effort and for entertainment. Sport could satisfy both.

Maybe a new “opium of mankind” was needed? It required a body! Ready and trained body! P. de Coubertin even spoke about a new *religio*

¹ See his talk “Olympia” in Paris, March 6, 1929 (Müller, 2000, p. 569).

athletae – and the body was certainly not the only “ingredient” of it².

Anyway, a new “fraternity of the body and the mind” started. And where did the struggle between them run? In which type of ideology did concentration on soul and spirit and rejection of the body prevail? The answer is clear: in *christian* doctrine. *Asceticism* (its special sort) became a dominant feature in it. Now, from this point of view, we can better understand P. de Coubertin’s anti-ascetic “label” for renewed olympism.

Yet, as the *sphere of asceticism* is considered, we must study more what asceticism really is and what its contexts and background are.

ASCETICISM

From the historical point of view, the Greek word *askesis* means “exercise”. The first features of asceticism can be found in the Orphics (B. Russell speaks about “an ascetic sect” – see 1979, p. 39), and through the “proud asceticism” of Heraclitus we can continue to Socrates, Cynics etc. The comparison of the above mentioned Stoic, Christian and East (not speaking about the others) approaches to asceticism would exceed the range of our article, so we can only summarize the whole history.

We can find two main attitudes: a) saying NO to lower values and rejecting damaging influences or things, and b) saying YES to higher values and positive “building” of the appropriate virtues and skills. Of course, with the necessary portion of *askesis* in both relations.

We can apply it to modern sport in two aspects:

1. Attitude to the body: a) rejecting inappropriate food; sexual abstention; fight against other “temptations of the body”, and b) active training towards physical perfection (*corpus lacertosus*³!) or real body building; the best alimentation and health care; “opening the body” for a flow of (A) energy without barriers and (B) optimal or other experiences. The latter effort is not possible without “cooperation” with the higher elements of our being (see below). We speak about the bodily anchored experiences, and sport is a very proper field for it, especially in comparison

² The other were „public-spiritedness, thoughts and art“ (1918). See (Müller, 2000, p. 44).

³ P de Coubertin’s Latin term from an attempt to create a new olympic motto in 1911: “Mens fervida in corpore lacertoso” (An ardent mind in a trained body). See (Müller, 2000, p. 175; 213).

with some therapeutic methods where “anchoring” must be arranged artificially (such as a technique for focusing (Gendlin, 1978)).

2. Attitude to psychical, moral and social factors: a) the struggle against different sorts of entertainment and lack of concentration (“temptation of mind”); reduction of external negative influences and impressions (to gain full independence and self-control). The great teachers here are the Stoics with their *ataraxia* (a balanced state of mind). The training of cultivation/sublimation of all negative emotions and passions with the focus on sports achievements ought to be mentioned here as well. Let us remember the Stoics again with their *apatheia* (circa an internal state of quiet – the result of our struggle with weaknesses). Please do not confuse it with modern apathy – it is usually the result of our passiveness; and b) positive relation with higher values in these areas of human being is a sphere for so called *internal askesis*. It includes special training of concentration, memory, will, imagination etc.; focusing on moral and social values. Permanent and systematic (sports) work with ascetic rationalization of the whole lifestyle can be also mentioned here.

It is evident that the doors for the *spiritual* dimension of our topic are open here. “Per aspera ad astra”! We can speak about the techniques of meditation, but especially about a new area of very special experiences (optimal, flow, limit, deep, plateau, peak⁴) which are able to open new dimensions of our lives.

Today many sports teams or training groups are not far from monkhood. Sexual abstention or special diet before important competition, full subordination to trainer or other leader – we can see an analogy with the orientation on the virtues of abstention and obedience to religious orders. R. S. Kretchmar, a well-known philosopher of sport, warns about this connection in his chef d’oeuvre (2005) and uses the name “spiritual athletes” even for monks (living according the rule of St. Benedict (!), as they “well understood the connection between physicality and spirituality, austerity and tranquility” (Kretchmar, 2005, p. 250). Ralph Barton Perry compared the lives of modern Olympic athletes to the Puritan “moral athletes” (Perry, 1944, p. 255–256).

The group of female runners of the despotic Chinese trainer Ma Junren is maybe the most

⁴ Studies by A. Maslow (1971; 1994 etc.) and M. Csikszentmihalyi (1990 etc.) are also full of inspiration for the sports.

known case of strict asceticism in the field of sport. We can find many cases of ascetic commitment among athletes of the four professional leagues in North America (baseball, basketball, football, ice hockey) as well: "... dedicated athletes deny themselves sex, alcohol, tobacco, food, sleep, physical comfort, and other pleasures." (Overman, 2011, p. 171)

Some results, especially in elite sport, look as if they are achieved without special ("ascetic") effort. We speak about situations from so called "zone". It is a special state of euphoria or easiness. It was described by J. Douillard (1994) in the field of sport and can be ranked among peak experiences⁵. Yet we are persuaded that state is not attainable without a previous period of "ascetic" training – it is hardly unattainable for "common" people.

HEDONISM

It is obvious that pure asceticism is not real in our lives. Can we imagine permanent fasting? And what about a permanent eating? We are sure that pure *hedonism* is also not real. The Greek word *hedone* means "pleasure" and is linked to a doctrine of Epicurus. We can find very different approaches concerning pleasures in the course of history: from the primitive pursuit of bodily lust to considering the highest pleasure in finding personal, scientific or religious truth, or as crowning creative acts with success; from Aristippus, who said: "Act to maximize pleasure now and do not worry about the future," to John Stuart Mill with his qualitative hedonism. And again, we can only summarize the history trying to find quintessence in it.

We can collate the "strategy" of asceticism with a similar one of hedonism in two main attitudes: a) saying YES to the chosen types of pleasures blissful feelings, delight or enjoyments, and b) saying NO to all types of pain, displeasure, distress, discomfort or difficulties. Some extremes, like ecstasy, lie out of classical hedonism and were condemned already by Epicurus. Here we can find ourselves at the same point rejecting lower values by asceticism. There is no coincidence that both Epicurus and the Stoics were using the same term *ataraxia* (see above).

Is there any place for *hedone* in the sports area? One type from B. Crum's classification of sportive sub-systems (1992) is directed straight to

hedonism with its focus on "exclusive pleasure". It is *lust sport*, special form of so called S-sport (sun, sea, sand, snow, sex, speed and satisfaction). The author warned about the risk of seeking fun and satisfaction at the cost of others in lust sport. We mean that it is a general problem of hedonistic orientations of life: they are egocentric, if not directly egoistic.

Can we find *hedone* in other sorts of sports sub-systems also? What about elite sport? It is obvious that qualifying for this category is not possible without outdoing oneself and without overcoming pain or stress (attributes of asceticism). But even top training has its own parts of strain and relaxation. The life of elite athletes has also its own periods of maximum training before some important competitions and periods of "post festum" with a celebration (quite popular after some successful performance): etc. Periods of asceticism and periods of hedonism are longer periods of the former and a shorter periods of the latter. Some portion of hedonism can be taken as a reward. We can also consider a hedonistic aim achieved through ascetic means. "Ad astra" (only) "per aspera". The concept of "long-run hedonist" (Edwards, 1979, p. 24) can be interesting in our context. It can be characterized by this motto: "Act to maximize pleasure over the entire span of your life." A calculation leading to the predominance of pleasure over pain is necessary in this form of hedonism; not saying that pain is not part of our lives. How can we argue against proper and acceptable pleasures leading to further enjoyment?

AN INTEGRATED WHOLE

Let us try to integrate both aspects of (not only sportive) life into a wider framework of the whole of human life. The best types of "strategies of life" from our point of view were given us by Aristotle (2009, 1095 b, P. 15–19):

1. *Bios apolaustikos* – orientation on pleasures and self-indulgence is the leading motivation.
2. *Bios politikos* – orientation on active life (especially political, ethical and practical) is the leading motivation.
3. *Bios theoretikos* – especially philosophical contemplation is the leading element here.

The second type (also known as *vita activa* in the Latin language) is of great value to Aristotle, but the most valuable is the third one (also known as *vita contemplativa* in the Latin language) – he spoke about "divine lifestyle".

⁵ For the close relation between peak, flow and zone experiences see M. Bednář, 2011.

According to Aristotle each type has its own representation among people. We can also imagine the development (or struggle) of all these types in one person. *Bios apolaustikos* in youth, *bios politikos* in the middle period of life and *bios theoretikos* in the period of growing wise (if it will come...).

Athletes are most familiar with *vita activa*, aren't they? But why could they not share a little more *vita contemplativa* as well? We think it is a great task for the philosophy of sport to show them this dimension of life and to teach them how to join it with other dimensions in *one organic whole*. Golfers have their hole-in-one; we can speak about "whole-in-one"... If we can speak about the "sportification of the society", why not take the highest form of social life and speak about the "spiritualization of sport", or better of sports life as a whole? Achieving this high aim should be predicated by the right criterion of happiness or bliss (*eudaimoniá*) in the meaning of life. There is a task to anchor sports activities not only for the sake of the body but also for the wider aim or meaning of life. A horizon of bliss should be surrounded with a horizon of meaning. Hedonism and asceticism are seen only as *means* from the point of the latter horizon. Here we can use the results of research (and personal experiences) of well-known V. E. Frankl and his *logotherapy*⁶. Let the analysis of it and possible application in the field of sport be the topic for a further research.

CONCLUSION AND PERSPECTIVES

Observing relevant literature from R. B. Perry (1944) to S. J. Overman (2011), we can see the dominating line of junction between sports and asceticism. An opposite attitude – the junction

between sports and hedonism – is seen among the critics of postmodern life and some observers of the contemporary sports area. It is the egoism, hedonism, and mercenary inclinations of sports figures that appear most salient. Yet we agree with Overman: "Athletes as a group receive a great deal of notoriety in the popular media for their personal indulgences. But the very fact that famous athletes are held to a higher standard of behavior than other young adults speaks to the abiding moralism in contemporary (...) society." (Overman, 2011, p. 174) Sexual affairs of "exemplary and model" Tiger Woods are a perfect example both of split personality and pressure on the best athletes. But can we speak of hedonistic life orientation or lifestyle in this and similar cases? We do not think so. The better explanatory principle can be taken from Jung's teaching of archetypes, and especially the Shadow in our case. The more perfect we are, the bigger shadow arises in our unconsciousness – and the situation is ready for a conflict.

We could see that pure types of ascetics or hedonists are not possible to find both in a common or sports lives. We are a very special "mixture" of both types and *their relation is dialectic*, not polar. Yet one type is usually a leading one – we can expect stronger orientation on asceticism in the case of athletes. It is a task both for sports theory and practice to promote this orientation. To promote "reasonable asceticism" – without all extremes, of course. It can be also one aspect of *raison d'être* of today sport in this postmodern world with the supremacy of hedonistic orientation.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This study was supported by the Research Grant MSM 0021620864 – active life style in a biosocial context /Czech Republic/.

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⁶ *Logos* is used here as "meaning/sense". See e. g. V. Frankl (1964).

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SPORTAS, OLIMPIZMAS IR DU GYVENIMO BŪDAI

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SANTRAUKA

Tyrimo pagrindimas ir hipotezė. Tyrimo metu analizuojami du gyvenimo būdai: asketizmas ir hedonizmas. Dvasinės ir moralinės gyvensenos dimensijos kuria mūsų gyvenimo ir sportinės veiklos pagrindą, o šiuolaikinis olimpizmas ypač veikia mūsų apmąstymus.

Tikslas – palyginti du gyvenimo būdus ir aiškiai apibūdinti jų ryšį; išsiaiškinti asketizmo vaidmenį sporto srityje ir integruoti abu gyvenimo būdus į prasmingą visumą.

Metodai. Tyrimo metodologija yra filosofinė, ją sudaro konceptualioji analizė, kurios rezultatai taikomi sporto praktikoje.

Rezultatai. Paprastatai į abi koncepcijas žiūrima kaip į priešingas arba poliariškas. Atlikta analizė leidžia teigti, kad tarp jų yra dialektinis ryšys su daugeliu tarpinių grandžių ir „tiltų“ tarp jų. Dvasinės ir moralinės dimensijos yra svarbios pagrindiniams apmąstymams.

Aptarimas ir išvados. Daug autorių įspėja, kad tarp sporto ir asketizmo yra glaudus ryšys. Hedonizmo vaidmuo mažiau nagrinėjamas. Tyrimu stengtasi rasti pusiausvyrą šioje integruotos visumos struktūroje. Šiai temai reikia suteikti daugelį reikšmių. „Protingasis asketizmas“ gali būti vienas iš šiuolaikinio sporto egzistencijos pagrindų šiame postmoderniame pasaulyje, stipriai orientuotame į hedonizmą.

Raktažodžiai: asketizmas, Pjero de Kuberteno nuostatos, hedonizmas, gyvenimo prasmė.

Gauta 2012 m. sausio 30 d.
Received on January 30, 2012

Priimta 2012 m. kovo 13 d.
Accepted on March 13, 2012

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