

THE ESSENCE OF OLYMPIC MAN: TOWARD AN OLYMPIC PHILOSOPHY AND ANTHROPOLOGY*

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Abstract. Sport philosophers should develop a new philosophical anthropology of the creative achieving and of the achieving personality and should apply this partially new philosophical anthropology to sport, science, art, play, and to any creative action, as well as to education. This is a difficult task, man being characterized by many essential traits. He is at the same time *homo faber*, *homo cogitans*, *homo agens*, *homo loquens*, *homo ludens*, *homo laborans*, *homo creator*, *homo compensator*, or even *homo competens* (the competitive being). No single one of these characteristic features offers a clean-cut criterion of what man really is. The present paper attempts to sketch some basic ideas along these lines.

Key words: achievement, *homo performer*, achieving being, free action, Olympic philosophy, sport.

According to the goals of the founder of the modern Olympic Games, de Coubertin, as stated in the basic principles of the International Olympic Committee, the Games are intended to gather the world's youth at a great sport festival held every four years to create international respect and goodwill and help build a better, more peaceful world.

The Olympic Games thus undoubtedly have suprapartisan political influence: They may have no directly effective peace mission as it is sometimes alleged but they constitute a symbol of a better and more human world, an understanding among the athletic youth crossing all national and cultural boundaries: All this furnishes the values and goals of the Olympic Movement with the identity and union of a truly international and intercultural movement. They are a fascinating symbol of the unity of humankind in its higher aspirations. In this, even ambiguity and vagueness of many components within the Olympic Idea can and did lead to a social gathering and uniting impact and toward a real social effect of multicompatibility and multiidentifiability of the Olympic Movement (cf. Lenk 1964). It is certainly inappropriate to overcharge the Olympic Idea with a direct world peace mission and with immediate political functions. Rather, some of its social functions can be interpreted as an indirect though far-reaching symbolic impact or political neutrality drawing on and developing an all-human value system, which offers extant public opportunities for young athletic representatives of different nations enabling them at least to meet and

* First published in *International Journal of Physical Education* 21, 1984, No. 2, pp. 9–14.

learn to know and in part understand each other. In this sense, the Olympic Games and moreover, the Olympic Movement generally fulfil an important symbolic role and function for an ideal unity of mankind.

In our age of television and telecracy the Olympic sport show would fascinate hundreds of millions of spectators via direct colour TV coverage to all countries. In this “telecratic” inspection system some of the athlete’s personal and, at times, even human rights of his or her private personality, seem to be in danger of falling victim to a tendentially all-encompassing televisor, to the mass media camera-eye of Big Brother. This is a tendency not to be ridiculed since Orwell's year 1984, indeed. Olympic Games of the future will increasingly be faced with such “telecratic” problems – not only in mass media and commercial respects. Commercial, political and public information needs will rather frequently conflict with the athlete’s rights. We have to develop – and this aspect implies philosophical work properly – a kind of protection program for the athletes to secure their rights against the managers and constraints of the public media including their manipulative and alienating effects. “Telecracy” is and will remain, even grow, to be a major problem of the Olympics and top-level athletics in the future. In addition, the postulated athletes’ rights program has to pertain to their sovereignty and freedom of decision-making as against autocratic officials and coaches. The athlete – as a person with specific human rights have to be protected. Only this way the athlete can really – in a humane sense of the word – fulfil the mentioned paragon function as an ideal model.

But coping with media problems, political and commercial questions will certainly not suffice. Nor are the Olympic Games just an affair of symbols, of the protocol and ceremonies like the opening, closing and victory ceremonies. The Olympic Idea and the Olympic spirit are much more and further-reaching than just external symbols. They should remain alive and have to be adapted to modern requirements, e.g. to the open-minded critical intellectuality of today’s younger generation.

It is high time: S.O.S.: Save Olympic Spirit!

Ceremonial change by itself cannot bring about this necessary reform. Some outdated components of the Olympic Idea as, for instance, exaggerated nationalism, winning at any price, compulsive manipulation, the traditional totally autocratic style of coaching, the dictatorship of officials, other-direction in motivation etc. have to be eliminated or at least mitigated. In addition, we can hardly expect the new positive concepts, these enthusing and exciting goals, novel guidelines and ideals from a ‘hard’ *empirical* scientist who is usually restricted to his very discipline only. The intellectual reform of the Olympic Movement and sports is basically primarily a philosophical task which, by the way, the XIth Olympic Congress at Baden-Baden as of 1981 did not approach even from the distance. Philosophically speaking, this otherwise (organizationally speaking) rather ‘revolutionary’ Olympic Congress brought nothing new – nothing even of a qualified intellectual level at all. Prime Minister Mzali of Tunis (a member of the IOC), e.g., submitted the only paper of the so called Olympic philosophy, but he only gave some old-fashioned hortatory advice regarding the educational value of Olympism

(including the usual wrong quotation of the “*mens sana in corpore sano*” instead of “*Optandum (e)st ut sit mens sana in corpore sano*” (Juvenal)). Olympism would be “a quest for the best” and the Olympic philosophy “a cry for joy, a homage to the enthusiasm of youth” – indeed a real disappointment regarding serious or new philosophical content. – Therefore, the new Olympic Idea still remains to be reborn or at least reformed. The most important reorientation is, it seems, a philosophical one. It has yet to be waited for, it has to be worked for. It has to be a reform in the philosophical foundation, a renovation of the Olympic philosophy and spirit. Really Olympic philosophers to the front! Sport philosophers have to take the fashionable academic criticisms of the last five decades against sport and achievement orientation seriously. They should develop a new philosophical anthropology of both creative achieving and the achieving personality. We should also apply this partially new philosophic anthropology to sport, science, art, play, and any creative action as well as to education. This is particularly true for the Olympic level.

A philosophy and a philosophic anthropology of achievement and creativity of man seem to be of an utmost importance – particularly for future interpretations of top-level sports of all kinds most notably for the Olympic realm. I would like to sketch some basic ideas along these lines. Certainly, man is characterized by many essential traits: He is at the same time *homo faber*, *homo cogitans*, *homo agens*, *homo loquens*, *homo ludens*, *homo laborans*, *homo creator*, *homo compensator*, or even *homo competens* (the competitive being). All these characteristic features seem to encompass more or less necessary conditions, but no single one offers a sufficient condition – and thus a clean-cut criterion of what man really is.

Any monolithic definition and theory of the human being seems to be doomed to oneness and, thus, failure. A definition, moreover, cannot replace a whole theory referring to a very complex field and object. A philosophic anthropology thus has to go beyond a single-factor-approach, it has to develop a multifactorial theory or interpretational model. It cannot also just summarize results of empirical sciences and humanities. But it has necessarily also to include ideal-type characterizations such as the mentioned features and even normative functions, regarding ideal traits of what man should be under the auspices of his permanent orientation toward the good, or better, toward goals and tasks, hopes and life plans.

Nevertheless, even if this is to be taken into consideration, it may be worthwhile to pay attention to another rather specific trait of man:

Humans are not only the acting beings (Schütz, Gehlen) (i.e. the being consciously orienting himself towards goals), but they are more specifically the beings who try to materialize goals *better* and *better* by acting themselves, as individual agents. Man or woman is at the same time the personally acting and performing being. (S)he is the achieving being, so to speak. *Proper action, creative personal performance and accomplishment* are necessary ideal traits of a real human being. *Eigenhandlung* und *Eigenleistung* – proper/personal action and authentic achievement are among the most specific designating traits. *Real life is personal, proper acting and achieving* (at least, in what we call western culture). Individual authentic achievement might be interpreted here in the wider sense – later on it has also to

be understood in an even more specific cultural sense, i.e. in the narrower sense of ever-improving quantifiable or measurable performance and accomplishments.

Without exaggerating this trait of the *homo performans* as the one and only trait characteristic of man, let us deal a bit more with this feature and relate it – which is easy enough, after all – to sports.

First of all, I should like to do a little bit of pseudoetymology: *homo performans*, *homo performer*. The achieving being has to use, to create and to orient her or himself at forms. (S)he can only achieve via using and/or creating identifiable forms, structures: *per formas*. Thus, (s)he is depending on and even obliged to externalize, to project one's own intentions, to achieve external products. Creative self-externalization only allows for reflecting, reflection (reflexion). Self-perfection is only possible by *performing*, i.e. personal achievement. This includes goal-oriented, even systematic, well-trained acting and performing – also in the sense the word is used in performing arts. Erving Goffman's social psychology of "The Self in Everyday Life" (1959) comes to mind. Everybody performs parts, roles in the theatre of daily life. In some sense we are all actors playing in a great drama – be it a tragedy (hopefully not) or a comedy (a satyr play as in antiquity). By the way of forms – in the double sense of using forms and forming oneself – *homo performer* comes to understand oneself and to make her or himself 'who he is' or is to be: "How one becomes what one is (to be)" (Nietzsche, VI, p. 255).

The achieving being – this is much more than solely the acting being, the compensating being etc. Nevertheless, this facet of human characterization clearly comprises the capacity of acting and action orientation, striving for goals, tasks and improvement.

To be human, to stay alive as a human being is to be active and creative – *homo actor*, *performator* and *creator*. Plato even defined life as – active – movement (i.e. movement of the soul). (Phaedrus 245 c: "When or where movement finishes, life finishes itself.") We can assimilate this with Schiller's "Man (or woman) ... is only completely a human [i.e. in the ideal, fully developed sense], when he (or she) plays"! Man is only really alive as man when he acts and moves (physically as well as psychically). We can extend this to the slogan "Man ... is only completely man, when he achieves – freely", i.e. according to one's own choice and determination as well as one's endeavour and not merely governed by necessities of sustenance, orders etc.

Personal and proper free authentic action is a criterion of real life for the achieving being. Only (s)he who acts, achieves and moves (something and himself) is really alive. Life in its deepest sense is goal-oriented action, is personal achievement, engagement and performance in the mentioned sense. If human life is ideally creative action, achieving, performance, *homo creator*, *homo movens* and *homo performer* are necessarily connected with one another. Creative or senseful human life (in its ideal sense)¹ is in the last analysis personal achieving activity (at least in the wider sense of

¹ Certainly, this is ideal-type speak: Human suffering, incapacities of elder people or not yet developed competences or capabilities of youngster would not deprive them of their humanity, ethically speaking!

the term “achievement”). If creative life in its deepest roots is proper and personal activity and achievement – active sporting activity, then, remains to be a distinct (or even distinguished) element, vehicle and medium of engaged active life in the original sense of *Eigenhandlung* (“proper and authentic action”). Thus sport is active life, genuine life, creative life, higher life! To state this is by no means trivial in the overwhelming grip of the administrated and codified world we talked about above – particularly in the year 1984! Indeed, active sport has remained to be genuine action (Murphy) in a world of prevailing institutions and codifications.

It is easy therefore to apply the mentioned insights to athletics. Our main thesis is that a sport in general is a realm of activity in which genuine personal action in the original psychophysical sense is still not only possible but rather the paradigmatic case. (That would merely also pertain to handicapped persons!) Sporting action and achievement cannot be delegated, vicariously achieved, pretended or obtained surreptitiously: In this sense the normal sport achievement is gained by personal endeavour and effort – it is, ideally speaking, a genuine and honest action resulting in an adequate assessment.

Sporting action and performance requires personal and – at least in top-level athletics – almost total devotion and engagement. “Concern for bodily excellence” – to use Paul Weiss’ nice phrase – is nothing to play at or with loosely. Athletic action and achievement requires spontaneity, serious engagement and self-victory.

Even leisure sports and play require personal effort, psychophysically and active involvement. Personal freedom in sports is to be found in the deliberate agreement with the rules as well as in the spontaneous and/or planned variations of action strategies within the framework and allowances of norms. It is also expressed in the vicissitudes and unpredictabilities of a competitive event. Finally, a personal sense of freedom might be gained and materialized if you successfully carry a victory over yourself or symbolically over an opponent or a natural obstacle: examples (which I had experienced time and again) are a glacier wall of six thousand feet or the unavoidable weakness period in a marathon after twenty miles. In leisure sport, the making up of rules as we go along provides an additional means of expressing and constituting a freedom of action. Therefore, Adorno and the Frankfurt School of social philosophy were wrong when they stated that sport would be essentially a realm of unfreedom wherever it is organized. To be sure, in top level athletics there are at times dangers and instances of manipulation, alienation or even compulsion exerted on athletes by officials, authoritarian coaches, public expectations of spectacular records, pressure of public opinion, journalists etc. But these are deviant phenomena not meeting the paradigmatic (ideal) case of a free, voluntary athlete. Only an athlete who is freely devoting her or himself to a strenuous regimen of training is capable of extraordinary accomplishments: You can command somebody to march but not to establish a world record.

By the way, what was said about being victorious over oneself certainly applies well to handicapped persons as well as athletes.

The norm of athletic competition and the Olympic agon – after the piece of advice Peleus gave to his son Achilles “Always to be the very best, distinguished

from everyone else” (Homer *Iliad* VI, 205; XI, 794) – this so-called “Achilles Complex” (Segal) is not the only norm of the best possible achievement, but it is rather significant and characteristic for achievements of Olympic calibre. The Olympic Idea, thus, is characterized by a *specific* principle of achievement, namely the agonetic (agonistic) or competitive one at top level. However, even in the Olympic Movement, the harsh ideal norm of being the unique victor is mitigated or brought into relation, so to speak, as it shows Coubertin’s well-known quote from the Bishop of Pennsylvania “The most important thing in the Olympic Games is not to win but to take part.” Educationally, it is indeed more important to perform at one’s best level in order to achieve the best possible personal result, to be able to participate in the Games of the sporting elite and to fight fairly and well. Indeed, most of the conducive effects and educational impacts of a rigorous athletic training and of a genuine top-level achievement motivation can be gained without being the eventual champion. Sometimes, it is rather an important educational challenge to stand defeat, though nowadays also an Olympic victory seems to provoke a special test for the athlete’s personality whether he can come out of the public and commercial aftermath uncorrupted. The victorious athlete, so to speak, has also to qualify a test of personal maturity in our publicity-prone society.

The Olympic athlete, indeed, serves as an outstanding paragon example documenting this symbolic sense of an active achieving life. The Olympic Idea – the agonetic idea at top-level, expressed in the Achilles and the Coubertin slogan alike – is certainly incorporated, even incarnated in the ideal type of an Olympic athlete – may (s)he (have) be(en) a winning or a losing contestant. To have fought well, to have achieved one’s best – that seems to be the very core of the Olympic Idea. We should try to keep this educational idea relatively free from exaggeration to an inhumane extreme as well as from political and/or commercial distortion.

In order to achieve these goals it should be worthwhile and conducive to elaborate indeed a new “Olympic Philosophy” as was already asked for by IOC President Brundage before the Munich Olympics (1972) as well as by President Samaranch prior to the Baden-Baden Olympic Congress in 1981.

The mentioned idea about the multicompatibility and multiidentifiability of the Olympic Idea, Olympic value system and Olympic Movement have to tie in; a somewhat more concise definition of the term “Olympic Idea” would have to comprise this pluralistic structure of values, norms and basic features of the Olympic Movement. The values of tolerance, equal participation rights, respect of partners and sport opponents, the idea of a symbolic unity of mankind, the achievement principle and the respective idea of an Olympic achieving elite are indeed values of such a formal character, functional norms so-to-speak which are compatible with many different cultural contents. All this is reflected already in the Olympic Charter, e.g. in § 6 and § 3: regarding the autonomy of the Games, the Movement and NOCs and the IOC, rejection of any discrimination on political, racial or religious grounds etc. One should also look to Coubertin’s “most important principle of today’s Olympic”: “All games – all nations” which, interestingly enough, does not appear at all within the Olympic Charter – even not in the last edition! The most famous Olympic slogan “Citius –

Altius – Fortius” (§ 6) – also not mentioned any more in the last version of the Olympic Charter – could and should be supplemented by “*pulchrius*” and “*humanius*” capturing the aesthetic and humanitarian aims of the Olympic Movement. Indeed, the Olympic philosophy has to be worked out according to an intellectual level of discussion up-to-date reflecting the far-reaching cultural and not only sportive components. The Olympics are in need of a more encompassing and concise description of the intellectual and philosophical content as well as of the Olympic conception of humans. Olympic philosophy and Olympic anthropology have to be developed in the future in order to be able to cope with external dangers cropping up from commercialism and nationalism and to successfully reflect the overriding impact of the Olympic Idea on sports and an active achieving life in general. (We may and would have to add also the now so-called Paralympic values.)

Already Coubertin interpreted the Olympic tradition as being much more than the mere organization of sport games or just a world-championship of all kinds of sport. Coubertin’s main idea of an “Alliance of the arts, the sciences and sports” in the Olympic Games might also influence some organizational parts of the Olympics. However and again, just the mere reform of the Olympic protocol will not suffice.

Some suggestions might reflect Coubertin’s ideas: why not involve the winning artists in the respective youth competitions in music (“Jugend musiziert”) and research or arts? The young elite musicians could give a concert at the occasion of the Olympic Games, expositions could cover the other creative competitions mentioned. An Olympic arts award could honour the best work of art relating to sports of the respective last Olympiad, i.e. the last four years. One could also think of an Olympic award in science regarding sport themes – maybe in two classes, in natural science and the humanities. Also, one could think of a special award for a really outstanding accomplishment in a non-Olympic sport, of a fair play and Olympic humanity award as well as of an Olympic all-round award for combining sportive and other accomplishments in an outstanding combination. Why not invite some of the previous victors of the Para-Olympics, now ‘Paralympics’, of the handicapped athletes to attend the Opening Ceremony or the respective prize awarding occasions?

Within the Olympics itself it seems to be overdue by now to honour all the finalists in the victory ceremonies – not only the three medallists since the level of achievement, preparation and effort seems to be often almost the same for any finalist. This had been suggested time and again but has as yet not succeeded. Years ago, some international sport federations do already successfully play down nationalistic emphasis in the protocol of their respective championships by barring national flags, anthems, military uniforms at the occasion of opening and victory ceremonies. (Unfortunately, that telling symbolic act has meanwhile mostly been given up again.). At least, one could and did leave the national flags circling the main Olympic stadium under the Olympic flag and combine the respective teams’ flag bearers in a great block at the opening and closing ceremonies. This would reflect the international participation but not unduly emphasize the chauvinistic accent. The respective Olympic team could march in behind the National Olympic

Committee's flag – as in part, for other reasons, already practised in the Moscow Games in 1980. One could also dispense with national flags and anthems at the victory ceremonies since the nationality is mentioned on the scoreboard anyhow. (At this time, that seems rather utopian though.) Since the Games are considered to be individual events not taking place between countries or nations (§ 9, Olympic Charter) but only citizens of a country which have been entered by their respective NOC are allowed to “represent this country” (§§ 8, 30, 67), a certain kind of analysis and improvement of the respective ambivalence or even contradictions within the Olympic Charter are required.

Generally speaking, the IOC should more actively and more politically serve the supernationality and internationality of the Movement by using political means in order to guarantee a *relative* political non-partisanship, the *Olympic neutrality*. That however cannot be obtained by preaching ideals, but only by courageously using political means. All this seems to be more promising since the Olympics are a really prestigious international enterprise on a worldwide scale by now. Though the Olympic Movement cannot bring about world peace as a direct consequence as was alleged sometimes, it can certainly serve an *indirect* mission in getting the peoples to understand and respect each other in a benevolent way using the Olympics as a symbol of a more peaceful and better world and of an ideal unity of mankind. The Olympic Movement has to remain aware of and consciously pursue the humanistic, educational and philosophic dimensions of its idea in order to live up to its honourable tradition. The Olympic Movement is too important a humanistic idea to get sacrificed or to fall victim in the jungle of commercialism, telecracy and nationalism.

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