

Hero and Antihero: An Ethic and Aesthetic Reflection of the Sports

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ABSTRACT

In Ancient Greece, the figure of the hero was identified as a demigod, possessed of altruistic and virtuous deeds. When Pierre de Coubertin reinstated the Olympic Games, the athlete was personified as a modern hero. Its antithesis, the anti-hero, has more virtue than defects, no evil but he does not care on the means to achieve his goals. In the eyes of everyone involved in sports competition, these characters captivate and at the same time, create conflicts of ethics and aesthetics. The purpose of this paper is to perform an ethical reflection linked to principles that contribute for the human growth and accomplishment, as well as the aesthetic on the perception of the sensitive, reverberated by sensations and feelings emerging from athletes. Connecting the ethic with the aesthetic spheres, we could have in the sports a phenomenon walking toward a common point between moral and aesthetic, between the good and the beauty.

KEYWORDS

ethic, aesthetic, athlete, hero, antihero

*“Equal is the gender of men to the gods,
as all of us extract life from the same mother; only,
a completely different strength
distinguishes the gods (immortality).”*

Pindaro - Olympics

Introduction

The year 2017 marked the farewell of the tracks a world record athlete, holder of eight Olympic gold medals and high charisma, able to captivate men, women, and children. His trademark is lightning pose after his victories. We are talking about the Jamaican sprinter Usain Bolt. The stage for Bolt's farewell was the athletic world championship held in London. We watched with frustration his difficulties in corresponding to the huge expectations created by the audience and the media to achieve the highest level of the podium.

His counterpoint is the American athlete Justin Gatlin, also an Olympic Gold medalist, and deemed his great opponent. Unlike Bolt, who is an athlete without any spots in his carrier, Gatlin was caught twice in the drug testing, and he was punished in principle with an eight-year suspension. However, he had his penalty reduced to four years as he cooperated to the doping investigations accomplished in the United States.

In London, at the end of the most traditional athletic championship, the 100-meters track race, Bolt finished in third place, behind Gatlin, who conquered the gold medal. The public present at the Olympic stadium in London, by one side, was clapping the strength of the hero and started booed the winner, considered the antihero due to his historic of doping since the same had already happened during the Rio de Janeiro Olympic Games in 2016.

By the model of Ancient Greece, the figure of the hero was personified as a demigod, that is, an outcome of the conception between a deity and a mortal being. Their actions had an altruistic and virtuous feature, their selfless dedication by the other made him to sacrifice himself, even when motivated by not honored causes, such as the feeling of vengeance. The desire of a warrior was to die young in a battle, in order to be mythicized as a hero (Vernant, 1991). The distinction between the hero and other human beings is his ability to solve problems. Through the courage and determination, he deals with adverse situations and walks forward. Nevertheless, his susceptibility to errors and the fear humanize the hero. For Gumbrecht (2006, p. 80): "Athletes would not be demigods, but instead, symbol-gods of the physical and emotional strength to cope with the human vulnerability."

On the other side, the antihero presents more defective than virtuous acts; in his essence, there is no evilness, but he does not care on the means to achieve his goals. Opposed to the heroes, antiheroes use their heroic virtues to accomplish selfish feats motivated by immoral feelings. He goes against socially accepted premises, and due to this, he usually is rejected by society. Such contestation implies in ethics-related questioning. The antihero arises to debate preset and rooted patterns as an unconditional truth by the heroes, whose criticism can be set in any social and historic period and context.

From this point, the purpose of this paper is to perform an ethical reflection linked to principles that contribute for the human growth and accomplishment, as well as the aesthetic on the perception of the sensitive, reverberated by sensations and feelings emerging from athletes. It is important to emphasize that the figure of the hero is integrated with the dominant values of society and, in this case, different perspectives. The athlete can be remembered and admired for the glorious past of a particular group, and the achievements of the sports hero can inspire devotion and nurture the self-esteem of the fans, putting the athlete in the condition of their representative. The anti-hero may be a rebel athlete who defies the established power and represents resistance groups and minorities, in other words, a rebel with cause, while others are merely convinced that human relations within society are useless and so can personal interests.

The hero

Providing meaning to the world is one of the first desires of human beings, as well as the desire that things happen in a certain way. Thus, a myth is born, a narrative that can clarify the phenomena of nature, casting way the fear and uncertainty that since the most primitive societies consume ourselves. The myth is still able to set exemplary models for every function and human activity, providing to the affection and imagination, prevalent roles in the legitimization process of the truths without needing to confirm them.

All the nations seem to feel the need to reflect on their most intimate desires in the figure of a being who can personify and overcome the major difficulties imposed in daily life. The hero has a duality in his project of life, while at the same time representing the human condition through his entire social and ethical complexity. On the other side, he complements such condition for bearing the virtues that the ordinary people are not able to show but try to achieve. In a classic narrative, the hero is the one who fights; his determination makes it possible to overcome visibly impossible obstacles as a way of life, and his aim is the honor of a people.

According to Campbell (1997), the society needs heroes because there is the intrinsic need of a powerful image seeking to gather individual trends in the same situation, in order to actuate as a unique power. The hero has the virtues required to overcome a problem or situation. With this, we identify ourselves with the heroes and looking to mirror our actions.

Which is the purpose of a hero? For Campbell (1997), it is to save a people, a person, or to protect an ideal. He sacrifices himself for something, and this constituted his morality. The good for the other is above everything, even his own needs, to take risks and make a difference in the world where he lives. Köthe (1987, p. 16) asserts that “No hero is epic by what he does; he only becomes epic by way of what he does is presented.” For the hero to assume a protagonist condition, it is required that there is a mythic situation, a feat to put him in evidence before the society. As Campbell (1997, p. 137) point out,

“Well, there are two types of deed. One is the physical deed, in which the hero performs a courageous act in battle or saves a life. The other kind is the spiritual deed, in which the hero learns to experience the supernormal range of human spiritual life and then comes back with a message.”

With this, his feats are immortalized and passed from generation to generation. People start to believe indeed that the heroes can accomplish, and there is an essential condition for the hero, a possibility of approaching to the gods, immortality in the sense of becoming a model for everyone, and a reason to turn the impossible into possible.

The antihero

In ancient narratives, the classic model represented the mythic figure holder of the strength, courage, and shrewdness (Rubio, 2001). Over time, such figure went through a process that reflected the transformation of the own man in the society, thus resulting in a twist, mainly from the Middle Ages. The imaginary in the Greek and Roman epics had collective features whose hero was inserted into the community, being representative of the ideals and beliefs of such collectivity modifying towards an individuality where his weakness is perceived, even when searching in a corrupted society. However, such modernity still represented the ruling aristocracy (Köthe, 1987).

The approaching to the daily life makes the hero depart from the mythic perfection, and this does not mean he is deprived, for instance, of courage, but the subjectivity and anguishes are present, living in a permanent conflict with the world, thus resulting in an increasing humanization of the hero (Brombert, 1999).

Unlike the meaning that the word antihero can have in a first moment as an antagonist to the hero, he is someone who does not fit into the classic stereotype, being antiheroic under the light of the feats permeating heroic acts. Mello (2003, p. 77) defines him as

“a loser-winner, who turns his weakness into strength, his fear into his weapon, from the shrewdness his shield; who, living in a hostile world, persecuted, expelled, grappling with the adversity, he ends up always circumventing his misfortune”.

He has unusual features, he is a disturber of the current order, and most of the times, an agitator. While the traditional model of the hero is praised and applauded, the antihero contests the prepositions socially accepted.

A broad definition of antihero according to Smith (1973) is one that avoids traditional heroic qualities. According to the author, the characteristics of the antiheroes are:

“disillusionment with and alienation or withdrawal from societal problems; opposition to or rebellion against those problems; or mockery and derision of heroes themselves” (Smith, 1976, 18).

In another sense, for Vande Berg (1998) some anti-heroes help to promote social change because the fame of sports gave them a leadership position to express disillusionment with the status quo – in society and sport, such as Muhammed Ali and anti-war protests.

Antihero is a character who most of the times attract us for his total lack of unselfishness, by the vanity and selfish which are ours and we identify ourselves in them, but the balance of the virtue is still possible.

It is necessary to understand the way of life of the antihero, in which the moment he is alienated from the features to construct the hero. Despite the pejorative connotation that the term carries, one can consider that such antagonist representation cannot have a negative function, and to understand which constitutive aspects of the antiheroic figure are essential to understand it.

Sports: ethics and aesthetic

Along the 20th century, sports have become an exemplary space of non-violent and non-military competition between the states, and it started occupying the school and college curriculum, becoming a profession and the motto of the most important multicultural and social meeting in the planet, the Olympic Games. Although it has begun in England, the appropriation of the sports as a path towards sublimation, purification, development, and improvement of the human condition has quickly democratized in such an extent that the athletic feats could no longer be detached from values such as determination, excellence or respect. With the increase in the sportive practice, he talks about the society and the paths of the civilization (Elias, 1994), could no longer be ignored.

In such sense, affection and rationality find in the body culture a favorable context, where the intensity and quality of the effective humor experienced by the actual practice affect both rational actions and decisions. With this, people can look for pleasant excitements within the possible rational demands of the daily life, thus enabling to experience sensations, emotions, and a feeling of happiness. In situations of an apparent, effective mobilization of the actions, they can lead to an awareness and deep reflection of our practices.

Opposed to the aggressiveness and violence constrained not only by the sportive rules, but by the cohabitation rules in the society, some values have been elected, and when manifested along a competition, they evidenced the human civility. Certainly, competitiveness and the new representations that victory and defeat started to receive with the streamlining and spectacularization of the sports demanded the maintenance and consequently sophistication of the rules and controls on the legitimacy of the athletic performance (Rubio, 2006). There was a time when professionalism was the target for criticism and punishing surveillance. It was believed that financial remuneration, besides of hurting the principles of equality that provides the most significant advantage to those exclusively dedicated to the task would replace the only driving force that should drive the athlete to the sports practice (what to do for love, origin of the expression amateurism) by the mere exchange of contract commitments.

The nature of the sports is similar to the own civilizing process, according to Elias and Dunning (1986), more related to the pleasant excitement and to the ability to enjoy life than to projects of bullying and punishment to the “bad behavior.”

In such sense, sports acquires a central and a paradoxical role, because at the same time it is responsible by enabling that the competitive instinct and aggressiveness are manifested, even though inside specific delimitations. It is also its role to allow that higher values emerge, which the history of the modern sports has highlighted: friendship, respect, excellence, determination, courage, equality, and inspiration (Müller, 2004; Perez and Rubio, 2012).

In the conception of Pierre de Coubertin, creator of the Olympic Games of the Modern Ages, the approaching of the sportive manifestations with a heroic imaginary would propel the insertion of the sports as a path to transform the human character. The Olympic athlete, as the leading actor of the biggest sportive and sociocultural event in the planet, endowed of talent and charisma, portrays the heroic myth of the redemption. He becomes a reference of resilience, dedication, and excellence that differentiates him from the

others, and through his path of life, he expresses and discloses the cultural and social face of the Olympic Movement.

Such mass phenomenon is, and it will be sustained for a long time by the presence of those heroes, the athletes who take to the people in the figure of spectators, practitioners, and fans to be identified with that event, represent the society in a general way as that who consistently overcomes visibly insurmountable obstacles. With this, all the eyes in the world turn to their actions, whether they be sportive or personal.

Such action consists of an intentional, conscious and voluntary act from the responsible by the action practiced and its consequences. Thus, the action has an intentionality and responsibility connotation (Tugendhat, 1996; MacIntyre, 1997).

It is intentionality related to the aims to be achieved. The movement is performed towards him, a condition providing to the action a concrete meaning, even if representing aspirations that cannot be quantified or materialized. The selection of a path over other lays on the intent for the action. Such behavior is controlled by reasons instead of biological factors, usually guided for a practical reason. When we do to make an action intentional, the reason must be internalized. When we to justify an action, it is necessary to assess its reason and the conflicts generated from it by rationality.

Concurrent, the responsibility shows that someone is deemed responsible by his acts and its consequences having as a parameter some specific rules. It assumes that persons have the ability to drive their actions by some reasons and by their own will. If the actions occur involuntarily or accidentally, there is no responsibility, once it is impossible to blame the way or intent of an action. Responsibility is directly related to the commitment to the purposes. To take the responsibility requires the ability and liberty to do it, bearing the risks arisen from such action.

The actions of the athletes are disclosed through and in the sports practice, the awareness that they are persons following ethic and aesthetic principles, transcending the athlete by a two-way path, body, and soul.

In Greek mythology, Apollo is the god representing the order, symmetry, sense, and beauty. It seems a contradiction a god incarnating contrasting positions such as rationality and the subjectivity of the aesthetic, but for Nietzsche (1979, p. 99) it is necessary that persons discern between the possible and the impossible and assess their potentialities and limitations: “the aesthetic necessity for beauty, there occur the demands ‘know thyself’ and ‘nothing in excess’”.

Reid (2012, p. 293) understands beauty as an aesthetic attribute, a means to provide joy and readiness to the soul and to withdraw from inside of a human being the happiness for the good living, and the body of the athlete, through his muscles, translated the expression of the beauty of the soul,

“What beauty the athletic body reflects through its muscularity, balance, harmony, and serenity are expressions of a soul, which has tamed and trained its animalistic nature to serve the more noble commands of reason. Such moderation may be at odds with the highest levels of athletic success, but there is no reason we cannot admire athletes for reasons other than victory – indeed many of the most admired athletes are praised precisely for their ability achieve excellence off the field as well as on. As in ancient Greece, we should interpret the ideal of athletic beauty as an expression of internal beauty, which is conceptually connected to the good and the true”.

The sensibility that guides the action of the athletes, and invariably of the public lays in the symmetry found in the expectation that surrounds a sportive event. The reality produced in advance can be different from the outcome at the end of the competition. The excitement resulted from the unexpectedness of a victory or defeat produces a sequence of experiments provided by several feelings arisen from the bodies of everyone involved. However, the beauty of the body movements of perfect performance of a gymnast or a virile throw of a soccer player produce an apparently uncontrolled euphoria, but that make show all the complexity of the human nature.

In the contemporary society, sports and its spectacularization produces an overexposure of the body of the athletes, as a way to praise the beauty and sexuality, as well as in the search for the pleasure resulting from the logic of the mercantilization. The media glimpsed in the sports a product of significant acceptance in their programming, and this makes a sportive spectacle unfeasible without a broad competitive structure between teams, athletes, and major sponsors. Due to this, the rules of some modalities changed by requirements from television networks. On the other side, the outcomes started being most valued, thus making the protagonist of such spectacle a mythic and media figure (Walsh & Giulianotti, 2001; Rubio, 2002; Horne, 2006).

However, athletic performance or the emotion of a highly disputed game cause feelings of aesthetic appreciation and pleasure of the beauty of that experience. All the experience of the athlete is applied to the characteristics of our lives as persons in which the understanding of the social interaction is irrelevant, but everything depends on how we understand the excellences of the aesthetic sensibility. The subjectivity of the understanding is equal to the appropriation of the world by a person, how pleasant is such experience, in such a way to stimulate that sensibility. For Welsch (1999, pp. 214-216),

“But what is perhaps more important is the following: aesthetic perfection is not incidental to sporting success, but intrinsic to it. What is decisive for the sporting success, is a perfect performance. And, it is this feature, above all, which is aesthetically appreciated in sport. We admire the elegance of a high-jumper clearing the bar or a runner’s power towards the finish - and this is why we enjoy looking at these bodies during as well as after the event, in order, say, to understand better their achievements or to be surprised that the runner shows so little sign of exertion after having crossed the finish line. In this sense we, as spectators, are right to focus on the body; and athletes are right in seeking perfection of their body and in demonstrating this both when performing and when exhibiting it. In sport the aesthetic and the functional go hand in hand.”

Both to the spectator and the own athletes, sports constitutes an extraordinary possibility of aesthetic experience, leading towards a fantastic and delirious experience of the senses.

The ethical action and the aesthetic experience – examples of the hero and antihero in sports

In the celebration of the Olympic Games, the sportsmanship is present in the joy for a victory or in the sadness for a defeat, in the anguish by a non-achieved target, or in the excitement of an effort accomplished.

The athlete searches for the victory, but he should wish the same to his opponent, as he made his best within the rules of the sports. In collective sports, the concern with the victory or with the excellence of the team replaces the desire for individual glory. The concern to the collective excellence minimizes the self-interest in his specific contribution for excellence. By its turn, the recognition of the contribution in participating with others transcends the own excellence. Thus, there is the same promotion between athletic excellence, moral excellence, beauty, and victory.

As in the Greek epics or medieval novels, the warrior knows or should know that the victory has a close relationship with sacrifice, even when fighting and falling in action for a fair cause or his king, it was beautiful dying with the weapon wielded. In the Ancient Olympic Games, athletes waited to be praised by songs and verses after showing their skills and to have their excellence acknowledged and recorded in the form of statues, poetry, and acclamation (Reid, 2012).

The sacrifices of the body to achieve a model of excellence expresses the quality of the beauty. Such sacrifice is rewarded by an aesthetic experience presented by the moment of the competition. The pleasure of the victory or an excellent outcome characterizing his best performance makes the act of the sacrifice a moment of true glorification to the athletic beauty.

In the athleticism, the triple jump competition is an example of the extreme demand of the body. It

requires exhaustive coordination, rhythm, and techniques training, but the resourcefulness of the athlete in the air in each of his three paces depicts a remarkable beauty. The viewers present at the Olympic Stadium watched the most spectacular sportive competition in the Mexico Olympic Games in 1968 and may be of the recent history of the sports at the end of the triple jump. Five world records were broken by three athletes on that day: Viktor Saneyev, Nelson Prudêncio, and Giuseppe Gentile. The result was unpredictable due to the perfection of each jump, and the uncertainty produced the beauty of the competition. Such aesthetical experience is connected to something unique to the people, objects, and events. Aristotle believed that the pleasure of the dramatic tragedies consisted of a catharsis of emotions, which could only occur if the play would have some storyline and characters.

The geniality of the artist, or in the case, the athlete, lays on the rupture of the homogeneity present in certain standards behaviors. Upon observing the conduct of the Olympic athlete, we know for sure the unpredictability that something impossible can happen. For Gumbrecht (2006), we are engaged to the Olympic athletes waiting for the epiphanies, and we are involved by their wonderful achievements.

Gold for Saneyev, silver for Prudêncio, and bronze for Gentile. In the voices of their opponents/friends, the beauty was in the smile of Prudêncio¹. Gentile, the first to break both the Olympic and the world record was surprised when Prudêncio came to greet him for his achievement, and on the podium, the tears of the second place was not for being defeated, but instead, due to the emotion of having the privilege to be among the best in the world. Hyland (1978) asserts that competition is a joint effort towards excellence, as far as it satisfies the best of our possibilities. In the ethic actuation, it prevails the Olympic saying that the opponent is not seen as an enemy to be destroyed, but rather, someone whose capacity and skills tests the own skills of the athlete, making the opponent the reason behind the own competition, that is, the excellence. Prudêncio is a model athlete, in that sense, Klapp (1962, pp. 27-28) explained that, "Heroes state major themes of an ethos, the kinds of things people approve." Feezell (1986) understands that the athlete must see the opponent not as an enemy, but rather, as a friendly competitor whose challenge is necessary to improve the pleasure to compete.

By their turn, there are also the anti-heroes and their actions that grant us the possibility to exercise an evaluating reading of oneself and of others, through which we can understand ourselves as human beings. Such condition enables us to perform a value judgment on the other from the inference that some qualities can be good or bad from the observation of the behaviors of a given person, thus implying in judgment of his character (La Taille, 2017)

Ryan Lochte² and a group of American swimmers is a backward example. During the Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro, it was an emblematic case as an exhibition of an antihero. Lies, defamation, vandalism, drunkenness, the distortion of what the Olympic opportunities and challenges propitiates, and do not match with what it is expected from an Olympic athlete. The consequences of those acts for Lochte, 12 times Olympic medalist were the loss of sponsorships and a 10-month suspension by the United States Olympic Committee and by the American Swimming Federation, added to ongoing legal processes. For Brombert (1999, p. 19), "those characters are not totally "weak" nor are deprived of courage; it simply call the attention as their features help to subvert, deflate, and contest the image of the ideal." After the suspension, Lochte³ said he became a 'better man'. In the journey of the hero, Campbell (1995, pp. 35-36) asserts that situations of removal even when involuntary become necessary, they make the heroes,

"to be represented as those deriving from some sort of dying to the world; and what happens in the interval of the hero's nonentity, so that he comes back as one reborn, made great and filled with creative power, mankind is also unanimous in declaring".

¹ Available at <https://globoplay.globo.com/v/5110028/>

² Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2016/aug/25/ryan-lochte-charged-rio-police-false-report>

³ Available at <http://abcnews.go.com/Entertainment/ryan-lochte-man-suspension/story?id=48401667>

Final considerations

For Lipovetsky (2005), the sport of the beginning until the mid-twentieth century was characterized by a school of morality, in which the athletes, in the sports dispute, assimilated the feelings of courage, loyalty, and self-surrender. The sport sharpened the pleasure of the struggle, the sense of effort, the solidarity and the disinterest, so to encourage the sport was the blossoming of the highest moral qualities. Notably, in the second half of the twentieth century until today, the sport has entered a cadence of post-moralistic logic, which from utopia gives way to the search for pleasure, energy dynamism, self-experience, a narcissistic individualist culture to bodily ecstasy. It is no longer the concept of virtue that guides the sport, but the body emotion, pleasure, and physical fitness, although we have examples of personal affirmation and social insertion that allows the overcoming of collective violence. In actuality, personal performance combines competition with others with competition against oneself, when compared to the other as an affirmation of one's ego. The sport ended a moralistic era, the sport of virtue metamorphosed into mercantilist logic and spectacularization, whose main objective is to catch the attention of an ever-increasing public, marketing actions, sports sponsorships and the professionalization of athletes.

The Olympic athlete, admired by people, shows an attitude of perseverance and excellence that we instantaneously acknowledge as being the best to track in our path to overcome adversities. The Olympic Games have been idealized with targets and additional attitudes that constitute the so-called "Olympic spirit", a concept that deals with not only the physical dimension but also the spirit and the mind. Records and optimal performances show the excellence of the body, in association to the excellences of the mind, which are moral virtues such as courage and friendship, making us able to overcome our limits in a persistent way in order to succeed.

The athlete is transfigured in a hero because he embodies, even if by some moment, a way and a symbol of resilience and triumph on himself and others. As a counterpoint, some of the anti-heroes, even when seen as corrupters of the ideal hero, helped to promote social transformations, as their popularity in the sports has given them a leadership position, from which we can express disillusionment with the operating *status quo* in the society and sports. The corruption of that pattern does not mean a mistaken view of the qualities, materialized by beauty and virtues that the sports lose space for the immoral action.

Connecting the ethic with the aesthetic spheres, we could have in the sports a phenomenon walking toward a common point between moral and aesthetic, between the good and the beauty, between the *areté* and *kalokagathia*.

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