

WHAT IS GOOD SPORT: PLATO'S VIEW

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One of Plato's most common questions found in his dialogues is "What is something?" By asking this question Plato usually brought his co-speakers to the recognition that in fact they do not have a full comprehension of what something is, although they have a partial comprehension of it. The awareness of one's incomplete cognition is the first step to be made on the philosophic way to truth. As in ancient times also today Plato asks us – the modern philosophers of sport – "What is sport?" or more precisely "What is *good* sport?" Probably the best of Plato's answers to this question can be found in the basic concepts of his philosophy regarding his hierarchical division of the state and human soul into three parts. Since sport is derived from human being also the goodness of sport can be divided into three stages. The lowest stage of sport corresponds to the first part of the soul – the appetite soul. On this stage sport is based on the gaining of material goods through prizes won at competitions. In the philosophic view, this is the lowest possible stage of goodness of sport. The second stage of sport corresponds to the second part of the soul – the emotional soul. Sport at this stage is based on the elementary ancient *agon*, which seeks fulfilment in the winning of honour and glory. The greatest and the most superior is the third part of the soul – the reasonable soul. According to this, also the sport corresponding to the third part of the soul is the best. For this kind of sport it is no longer necessary to compete with other contestants, since it can achieve its fulfilment in perfect execution of movement or exercise, in which the perfect cooperation between reason (soul) and body is attained. At this stage of sport it is the most important to compete and win over one's self, and this can be achieved by everyone, without regard to his/her physical abilities in comparison with others. In Plato's view, good sport is the sport directed toward the fulfilment of self, all the way to the ideal – the idea itself. And only sport like that can bring true contentment to the human – the reasonable being. With this sport is essentially intervening in the sphere of philosophical cognition. The goodness of sport is no more determined by physical dimensions of space and time, but indeed, as Plato shows, the true good sport goes beyond these borders. In this manner sport goes beyond the physical world and touches the everlasting and unchangeable world of ideas. And the world of ideas is for Plato *tópos* where the very truth reveals itself. So, sport could be a useful means for the philosophical investigation of humans and the world.

Keywords: Philosophy of sport, ethics of sport, Plato, virtues.

THE ORIGINS OF SPORT IN ANCIENT GREECE

Philosophy and sport¹, both in fullness, were brought forth in ancient Greece. The situation of that period allowed people to stop scrambling just for how to survive physically but gave them extra time and energy which they directed toward things that do not bring any immediate benefit to survival. Therefore philosophy and sport represent human particularity (uniqueness) which distinguish them from other living beings (e. g. from animals).

From the Homer's poems it is clear that Greek people liked sport very much. This is proven by the fact that where the Greeks had come and built a city, they always built also a theater and sport facilities.² The Greek word *athletés* signifies the one who competes for a price. Sport competitions gave heroes a chance to show their *areté* and therefore strengthen their role in the society. The victory in a battle was not just a representation of one's superior physical force but also a presentation of better *arête* (Jaeger, 1973). And the inseparable companion of *areté* is honor. Heroes are trying all the time to get

¹ It must be said that neither ancient Greeks nor Plato himself used the term *sport*. As is well known, the term *sport*, in the meaning of special physical activity, did not appear until the 19th century in Great Britain. At the present time it is widespread and used for different physical activities which had different names in ancient times. Because of that we use *sport* in this paper for physical activities and to point out similarities with modern times.

² We can find proofs for that also in the Old Testament of the Bible: "Thereupon they built a gymnasium in Jerusalem according to the Gentile custom" (1 Mc 1, 14).

public honor and to avoid public shame. The victory was also the highest thing that ancient Greeks could desire because it gave them immortality in honorable memory. Victory or honorable death, both of them were worthy of highest veneration and both were worthy of sacrifice. All of these inspired Greek passion for competition (*agon*) and victory worthy of sacrifice. First sport competitions in Olympia had been called “competitions for a wreath” (*stefanitis agon*) and not “competitions for money” (*chrematitis agon*) (Fournaros, 2005). This shows us that from the first times on *agon* was the inspiration and source of sport competitions, although in later years also many other prizes were added. The meaning of original *agon* was in the creativeness; in uncovering the truth (*aletheia*); in earning victory and honor. But adding other material prizes represents, as we will see later, the first blow to original *agon*. The energy and motive for sport competitions from that time on start to come to a greater extent from the outside material prizes.

PLATO’S UNDERSTANDING OF SPORT

For the Greeks sport was a sign of their culture and something inherent. Therefore also Plato could not avoid sport. Gymnastics and music are for him two of the oldest parts of culture.³ Plato found the mission of his life in political activity – in education. So he touched sport many times in his dialogs and exposed its role in the education of young people. All education is directed to the development of virtue. The value of sport is above all in development of the virtue of fortitude. This is not surprising if we recall that Greeks before Plato had understood sport as *agon*, that is competition for glory and honor where at the same time also courage has to be demonstrated. Plato took over this understanding of sport, he deepened it and included it in his educational system.

Plato likewise uses examples from sport in his dialogs many times to illustrate different truths from everyday life. He compares true philosophy with gymnastics in opposition to sophistry which is like cosmetics.⁴ All education is designed to make a solid ground in young people based on which they can enter the world of philosophy.⁵ Education through gymnastics and music in childhood was directed to make some customs regarding justice

and beautifulness⁶ and to remove “leaden weights”⁷ – impulses – which pull them to the ground. Only when one gets clear of them can one turn towards the truth. “We can say that gymnastics and music *paideia* create effects of Good, but not the knowledge of Good” (Reale, 2002, 229). The latter is the aim of philosophical education. In the activity in accordance with reason – in philosophy – Plato saw the final point of Greek *paideia*, as the process of the realization of the highest fullness of human abilities.

PLATO’S PHILOSOPHY AND THE STUDY OF SPORT

Although in his dialogs Plato mentioned sport quite often and integrated it into his educational system he never asked the fundamental philosophical question; a question which he often asked his co-speakers in dialogs and with which he brought them to the cognition of their ignorance; the question “What is something?” So: What is sport? There is no doubt that he would also bring us to the cognition of our ignorance. This cognition allows us to start walking on the path of philosophy. For instance, it is necessary firstly to know a human individual to get to know how he or she can become better. “Can we ever know what art makes us better, if we do not know what we are ourselves?”⁸ Or: “Should we ever have known what art makes a shoe better, if we did not know a shoe? Impossible!”⁹ Only good knowledge of a thing allows us to be good in handling it. This is true for shoes and also – because of our complexity even more so – for human beings and, last, but not least, also for sport. So, when we have long discussions about sport, we should first answer Plato’s question of what something is, what is sport? Plato’s intention is not to destroy something, but to build on a solid ground of truth itself. If we interpret Plato’s philosophy in that way, as stimulation for philosophy, it still is of great value. In current times when wisdom is a “mass phenomenon” and when – to oppose true wisdom – one “wisdom” is contrary to another, this need for searching for real wisdom is even bigger.

So, what can Plato’s philosophy about what is sport tell us? More precisely: what is good¹⁰ and real, what is the best (most superior) sport? Because sport is in strong connection with human nature and because, as

³ E. g. Plato, *Republic* 376 e.

⁴ E. g. Plato, *Gorgias* 465 c.

⁵ E. g. Plato, *Republic* 498 b.

⁶ E. g. Plato, *Republic* 538 c.

⁷ E. g. Plato, *Republic* 519 b.

⁸ Plato, *Alcibiades I* 128 e.

⁹ Ibidem.

¹⁰ All Plato’s philosophy has a strong political-ethical direction.

we will see, different modes of sport correspond to different stages of the human soul, we should first take a look at that division.

THE HUMAN SOUL AND MODES OF SPORT

Beside the doctrine of forms Plato is also well known for teaching the doctrine of the state and the human soul. The ideal state and the human soul have a very similar construction. The soul is just like a small state. Plato divides the state into three different classes: the lowest is the economic class, second is the military class and the third, the highest and the most noble is the governing class of philosophers. Every one of these classes has its own virtue. And those virtues are presented also in different parts of the soul: in appetite, emotion and reason. So, to the lowest part of the soul and to the lowest class in the state belongs the virtue of temperance. To the second part of the soul and to the second class of the state belongs the virtue of fortitude. And to the highest part of the soul and the highest class of the state belongs the virtue of wisdom.

As we already have seen for Plato sport has value because it helps to develop the virtue of fortitude in the human soul and in the state. In both cases sport is a means of education in the second of the three stages, because it is connected with the second, emotional part of the soul and with the second military class in the state. So sport, as Plato had shown us, does not extend directly to the third or first part of the soul neither to the third or first class of the state.¹¹ However, some modes of sport which are common today correspond to Plato's division of the state and the human soul. This can, at the same time, show us that sport is tightly connected with human being. In Plato's teaching the human is his/her soul. Different values of different parts of the soul can then reveal to us also different values of sport, because every mode of sport is founded on a different part of the soul.

To three parts of the soul also three different pleasures are connected: "Because there are three parts of the soul – appetite, emotional and reasonable, there are also three different pleasures: pleasures connected with material things and riches (belonging to the appetite soul), pleasures connected with honor and victory (belonging to the emotional soul) and pleasures of cognition

(belonging to the reasonable soul)" (Reale, 2002, 182). Plato found the value of sport in the second part of the soul. This part of the soul owns fortitude and seeks fulfilment in pleasures of honor and victory. In this we can find the elementary ancient *agon* and the origins of sport in ancient Greece. As we know at first the only prize for victory was a wreath and honour. But later material prizes became more and more important.¹² From this it is clear that when sport lost its sources in *agon* (based in the second part of the soul) and got its motive and fulfilment from material prizes, it was degraded to the lower and worse pleasures of appetite soul. The fact that this became the main reason for sport¹³ represents – from the philosophical point of view – a step back. Sport in which money and material prizes are in the first place (sport in the service of money and not money in the service of sport) is in Plato's eyes degraded and the worst possible sport because in it there is no place for philosophy, for love for wisdom, cognition of the soul, etc. Sport like this is humiliated sport if we compare it with the sport for honour and glory, because it fulfils only the lowest (appetite) part of the soul while the emotional and reasonable part of the soul which are the special properties of humans remain unfulfilled.

If sport which is based on the appetite part of the soul and seeks its fulfillment in getting material prizes is the worst, then sport which extends to the third part of the soul is the best. This sport is superior because it corresponds to the reasonable human soul and is connected with pleasures of cognition. But, where we can find sport like this? If we can find the first kind of sport where material prizes are involved and the second where honor and glory can be reached, then we can search for the third kind of sport only outside "sport for money" or "sport for glory". Both, money and glory, do not originate in the human but come from the outside and do not depend on the particular human. As Aristotle found out glory is independent of him because only another human can give honor to the first one.¹⁴ Also only another person can give a prize to the winner. So we must search for the third kind of sport in tight connection with humans themselves. And this is in the first place competition with the self. The aim for this can be to attain perfect execution of a movement or exercise¹⁵ that can be only achieved with tight cooperation with reason. We can say that it is the highest union between body and soul, the full harmony of body with the instructions

¹¹ However, Plato indicates this: "The very exercises and tolls which he (an educated person) undergoes are intended to stimulate the spirited element of his nature, and not to increase his strength; he will not, like common athletes, use exercise and regimen to develop his muscles" (Plato, *Republic* 410 b). Athletes have only partial benefit of gymnastics because for them this is true: "There was gymnastics which presided over the growth and decay of the body, and may therefore be regarded as having to do with generation and corruption" (Plato, *Republic* 521 e).

¹² E. g. olive oil or food in a city house...

¹³ E. g. a modern professional sport for money.

¹⁴ E. g. Aristotle, *Nicomachean ethics* 1095 b.

¹⁵ Maybe we can say that we try to get close to the pure form of that movement or exercise.

of reason. In this way the best possible sport can be achieved. Sport like this presents human beings in the perfection of all of their potentials. In the activities and cognition that are in accordance with reason the highest fulfillment, the true contentment of the human – the reasonable being can be found. With this sport essentially intervenes in the sphere of philosophical cognition – the sphere of searching and cognition of wisdom and knowledge; cognition of self and self-borders.

At this point the question can rise if division of sport into three stages of goodness is not only a human construct which has no connection with reality? The answer based on Plato's philosophy is no. Because there is no sport in the physical world without humans; sport can become factual only through human beings and a human being is for Plato as much as a human soul, therefore it is evident that a human soul has direct influence on sport. So this division of goodness of sport is based on the fact of reality of the human being as Plato had understood. Besides this, this kind of division of sport is also adjusted to generally accepted values of different modes of sport, e. g. educational sport, recreational sport and professional sport.

INTERVENING OF SPORT INTO THE SPHERE OF PHILOSOPHY

As we have seen, sport extends to the sphere of philosophy. But why is the sport of the third part of the soul the best in doing this? Sport like this is similar to philosophy because they both use the same highest human capability – reason. Sport of this kind can lead humans to philosophical cognition of themselves. Through sport like this the human being is most revealed. Revelation of truth with reason leads to the highest human happiness, as Plato said. To show that philosophical cognition is of the highest value and the source of highest happiness Plato used an example from sport: "He (an athlete) only gives you the appearance of happiness, and I give you the reality."¹⁶ But now it is clear that also sport can be a means of philosophical cognition of truth and the source of true happiness. Just like the rulers in a state also sport of the third stage intervenes into the sphere of philosophy, because it has its origin in the reasonable part of the soul. By using the mind (intellect), sport extends over the physical world and touches the everlasting and unchangeable world of forms. And the world of forms is for Plato *tópos* where the very truth is being revealed.¹⁷

Of course it is hard to find a sport which we could classify into just one of the categories of the goodness of sport. In real life it is necessary that different sports get mixed. E. g. we have a top-level basketball-player, who plays to earn a huge salary (the first and lowest stage of sport). But he also gets motivated to play in desire for victory and glory (the second stage of sport) and, besides that, he has a lot of fun when he completely controls his body and the ball (the third, highest stage of sport). As in Plato's state also in the human soul the prerequisite for happiness is the harmonization of all parts. Good is not in negation of the lower parts of the soul, classes of the state or modes of sport but in the harmonization of them and in bringing them to the right place. Since in the state the highest class has to direct the lower two and in the soul the highest stage has to wisely harmonize the lowest so it must be also in sport. If athletes want to fulfill their potential, then their activity (sport) must be done in accordance with this. In this harmonization of all three stages of sport where the highest reason leads the lower two, we can find also the virtue of justice. Justice is one of the four cardinal virtues. The other three (wisdom, fortitude and temperance), as we have seen, can be found in different stages of sport. So different modes of sport intervene with the very essence of human ethical nature. If professional sport wants to be worthy of human beings and the aspiration for victory and glory legitimate, both of them must be under the control of sport by the reasonable part of the soul, from sport which is directed to the improvement of self.

To the sphere of philosophy do not extend only the third reasonable sport, but as Plato showed, also sport from the second stage which originates from fortitude. Namely, Plato recognized fortitude as a virtue, and all virtues are good. So also fortitude is good. "Everyone is good in that in which he/she is wise, and bad in that in which he/she is unwise. And therefore if a brave man is good, he is also wise."¹⁸ So the development of true fortitude can lead us to wisdom. And this is the sense of true philosophy: "The wisdom which knows what are and are not dangers."¹⁹ Sport is also one of the best means for the development of courage especially among youth. So sport, according to Plato, can lead us to the highest wisdom – the ability to distinguish between too much and too little, between good and bad. Courage is therefore a virtuous product of sport engagement that plays a very important role in the educational process of the young. And sport is a means by which and through which humans can express their courage. In sport humans can find, develop and strengthen the virtue of fortitude and

¹⁶ Plato, *Apology* 36 d, e.

¹⁷ E. g. Plato, *Phaedrus* 247 c.

¹⁸ Plato, *Laches* 194 d.

¹⁹ Plato, *Protagoras* 360 d.

at the same time become aware of themselves because we get to know our soul from where courage is coming. The process of cognition of fortitude which is one of the major attributes of the human soul can therefore lead also to getting to know humans themselves. In this sport can be a means of philosophical researching and even similar to philosophy.

CONCLUSION

Many contemporary thinkers are returning to Plato and his thought. Their understanding of Plato often becomes the central and most influential point of their thought. Actually studies of Greek philosophy do not have meaning only in themselves, but also as much as they touch us in our present time and situation. Therefore also our investigation of Plato's philosophy concerns us as much as it touches our situation and contemporary sport. We can repeat after Jaeger: "We started out with Plato to find a state. Instead, we have found a man" (Jaeger, 1973, 354). Or paraphrased: We start to closely examine a man and we found out which kind of sport is good. At this point Plato warns us that the true value and goodness of sport is not determined by the physical dimensions of space and time. The seconds and meters are no more important because true good sport goes beyond these borders since for true good sport the cognition and improvement of self are the most important and even essential. And these are not reserved for just a few top-level individuals but everyone is capable of attaining them. Therefore this has a much bigger, even universal value. Also professional sport – sport for money and for glory gets its value only when it is harmonized with the reasonable part. To nominate reasonable sport as the leader (manager) of other sports is like nominating the absolute and divinity for the first measure. So, Plato's final suggestion could be to try to build a state within us which only can lead to happiness of people as athletes.

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CO JE TO DOBRÝ SPORT: PLATÓNŮV POHLED (Souhrn anglického textu)

Jednou z nejobvyklejších Platónových otázek, které nacházíme v jeho dialozích, je „Co je něco?“ Touto otázkou většinou Platón přiměl své protějšky k uznání, že ve skutečnosti úplně nerozumí tomu, co je čím, přestože částečně tomu rozumí. Uvědomění si svého neúplného chápání je prvním krokem na filosofické cestě k pravdě. Stejně jako ve starověku se dnes Platón táže i nás – moderní filosofové sportu – „Co je to sport?“ nebo lépe „Co je to dobrý sport?“ Pravděpodobně nejlepší Platónovu odpověď na tuto otázku lze nalézt v základních konceptech jeho filosofie týkající se hierarchického rozdělení státu a lidské duše do tří úrovní. Vzhledem k tomu, že sport je odvozen od člověka, může být také prospěšnost sportu rozdělena do tří úrovní. Nejnižší úroveň sportu odpovídá první části duše – žádostivé duši. Na této úrovni je sport založen na získávání materiálních statků v podobě cen na soutěžích. Z filosofického hlediska je to nejnižší možnou úrovní prospěšnosti sportu. Druhá úroveň sportu odpovídá druhé části duše – emocionální duši. Sport je na této úrovni založen na elementárním starověkém *agónu*, který se snaží dojít k naplnění ziskem cti a slávy. Nejdůležitější a nejvyšší je třetí část duše – rozumná duše. V souladu s tím je také sport odpovídající této třetí části duše tím nejlepším. U tohoto druhu sportu už není nezbytné zápasit s jinými soupeři, protože může dojít k naplnění v dokonalém provádění pohybu nebo cvičení, při nichž se dosahuje dokonalé spolupráce mezi rozumem (duší) a tělem. Na této úrovni sportu je nejdůležitější soupeřit a přemáhat sama sebe a toho může docílit každý, bez ohledu na jeho fyzické schopnosti ve srovnání s ostatními. Z Platónova hlediska je dobrým sportem sport zaměřený na naplnění sebe sama, a to až k ideálu – samotné ideji. A pouze takový sport může přinášet člověku – myslící bytosti – uspokojení. Tímto sport zásadně zasahuje do oblasti filosofického poznání. Prospěšnost sportu už není určována

fyzikálními rozměry prostoru a času, nýbrž, jak ukazuje Platón, skutečně dobrý sport tyto hranice překračuje. Tímto způsobem sport přesahuje fyzický svět a dotýká se věčného a neměnného světa idejí. A svět idejí je pro Platóna *tópos*, ve kterém se zjevuje skutečná pravda. Sport by tedy mohl být užitečným prostředkem filosofického zkoumání člověka a světa.

Klíčová slova: filosofie sportu, etika sportu, Platón, ctnost.

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