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GAMES AS WINDOWS AND REMEDIES TO MODERN SOCIETY: A QUALIFIED DEFENSE OF AGONISTIC ENCOUNTERS

Los juegos como ventanas y remedios a la sociedad moderna: Una defensa limitada de los encuentros agonísticos

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Abstract

In this article, I explore connections among sport, competition, and capitalist society by drawing from works in the philosophy of sport and critical theory. Initially, I identify games, especially sports, as fundamental activities in contemporary life. In particular, I claim that the glorification of victory in sporting contests permeates the attitude toward competition of individuals in capitalist societies. Thus, sports can be understood as windows to observe the "achievement ethos" inherent in capitalism. Subsequently, I explore both philosophical victory-centric and mutualistic views of sporting competition. What follows from this examination is that competition itself is not inherently negative. It becomes detrimental when pursued at any cost. In alignment with Robert L. Simon's sport mutualism, I advocate that competition may yield positive moral and social outcomes when approached as a "mutual quest for excellence." To conclude, I trace this positive, mutualistic conception of competition back to ancient Greek and post-Hellenic reflections on agōn *and excellence.*

Keywords: *Sport; Excellence; Achievement; Competition; Capitalism.*

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Resumen

En este artículo se explora la conexión entre el deporte, la competición y la sociedad capitalista a partir de trabajos de filosofía del deporte y teoría crítica. Inicialmente, se identifican los juegos, especialmente los deportes, como actividades fundamentales en la actualidad. En concreto, se afirma que la glorificación de la victoria en las competiciones deportivas impregna la actitud hacia la competición de quienes habitan las sociedades capitalistas. Así, los deportes pueden entenderse como ventanas para observar el "ethos del logro" inherente al capitalismo. Posteriormente, se exploran las nociones filosóficas de la competición deportiva centradas tanto en la victoria como en el mutualismo. Lo que se desprende de este análisis es que la competición en sí no es intrínsecamente negativa. Se vuelve perjudicial cuando se persigue a toda costa. En consonancia con el mutualismo deportivo de Robert L. Simon, se defiende que la competición puede producir resultados morales y sociales positivos cuando se enfoca como una "búsqueda mutua de la excelencia". Para concluir, rastreo esta concepción positiva y mutualista de la competición hasta las reflexiones sobre el agōn *y la excelencia en la antigua Grecia y Roma.*

Palabras clave: *deporte; excelencia; logro; competición; capitalismo.*

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GAMES AS WINDOWS AND REMEDIES TO MODERN SOCIETY: A QUALIFIED DEFENSE OF AGONISTIC ENCOUNTERS

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I. Introduction

In his masterpiece, *The Grasshopper: Games, Life and Utopia,* Bernard Suits (1978), the most influential figure in the philosophy of sport, regards games as "clues to the future" (p. 159). While today's reality falls short of the futuristic utopia depicted in the book, where technological development has liberated humans from the toil of work to devote their lives to autotelic gameplay, Suits' contention regarding games' capacity to reveal aspects of society remains relevant. Games, particularly those that capture widespread attention, such as sport, expose essential traits of contemporary life. Dutch historian Johan Huizinga (2014[1938]), whose reflections on play in *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* greatly inspired Suits, critiques modern sport's over-seriousness, noting its impact on transforming everyday activities like politics and business into sport-like games. Notably, before the publication of Huizinga's foundational work, sociologist and economist Thorstein Veblen (1899) had already thematized the "gamification" of business activities in his analyses of conspicuous consumption. In *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions*, published in 1899, he writes:

> ... with the cultural advance, [property] becomes more and more a trophy of successes scored in the game of ownership carried on between the members of the group ... the end sought by accumulation is to rank high in

comparison with the rest of the community in point of pecuniary strength. (Veblen, 1899, pp. 22-26)

Contemporary luminaries and cultural critics who have examined the "gamification" or "sportification" of life explain that the competitive character of modern existence has been exacerbated over the last half a century, penetrating even deeper into the fabric of society (Giulianotti & Thiel, 2023). Philosophers Christian Laval and Pierre Dardot (2013) attribute this development to the minimization or elimination of national governments' role in allocating goods and opportunities traditionally within their purview to delegate this task to competitive market processes. The growing liberalization across various aspects of life has diminished the cohesive solidarity that once defined welfare societies, favoring the dominance of market logic[2] as the primary normative framework for social existence. In what follows, I explain that the emphasis on victory in sport competitions mirrors and influences the prevailing attitude toward competition within capitalist society. Then, I examine contrasting philosophical perspectives on sporting competition, ranging from those centered on victory to more mutualistic views. I contend that competitions built upon mutualist attitudes, instead of a winning-at-all-costs mentality, can foster positive moral and social outcomes. To conclude, I trace the roots of the mutualistic understanding of competition to luminaries in ancient Greece and Rome.

II. Competition, capitalism, and the achievement society

To illustrate how the emphasis on competition has infiltrated public policy, including that of the European left, which has a long-standing and robust tradition of developing and defending welfare policies, Dardot and Laval (2013, pp. 204-206) refer to *Europe: The Third Way*. This manifesto, co-signed in 1999 by the then heads of state in England and Germany, Tony Blair and Gerhard Schröder, outlines the aspirations to reshape the economic and social policies of the European Union. A distinctive feature of their proposed framework is that the promotion of competition takes precedence over the

[2] For instance, economist and political philosopher Friedrich A. Hayek (2007), one of the intellectual founders of neoliberalism, justified the deployment of competition for social purposes as follows: "The basic contention of theory is rather that competition will make it necessary for people to act rationally in order to maintain themselves. It is based not on the assumption that most or all the participants in the market process are rational, but, on the contrary, on the assumption that it will in general be through competition that a few relatively more rational individuals will make it necessary for the rest to emulate them in order to prevail" (p. 75).

pursuit of solidaristic goals traditionally sought by Leftist governments. The document identifies the following main objective of economic policies:

> ... [the creation] of a robust and competitive market framework. Product market competition and open trade is essential to stimulate productivity and growth. For that reason a framework that allows market forces to work properly is essential to economic success and a precondition of a more successful employment policy. (Dardot & Laval, 2013, p. 204)

To this end, the emphasis on solidaristic mechanisms must be significantly reconsidered:

> The promotion of social justice was sometimes confused with the imposition of equality of outcome. The result was a neglect of the importance of rewarding effort and responsibility, and the association of social democracy with conformity, rather than the celebration of creativity, diversity and excellence. (Dardot & Laval, 2013, pp. 204-205)

While proponents present liberalization as the most efficient method of administering a polity, relying on competition for governance yields negative consequences. First, it submerges individuals in a situation of "global competition," wherein they must constantly "prove themselves to merit the conditions of their existence" (Dardot & Laval, 2013, p. 186). This competition has individualizing effects, as it highlights performance differences among individuals. Comparing people in this way produces social stratification and status differentiation based on economic success, a phenomenon that critical theorist Herbert Marcuse (1998[1955]) calls "the achievement principle." Second, global competition mandates the relentless pursuit of efficiency by intensifying effort, improving results, and reducing unnecessary expenses. Under the spell of competition, individuals channel their energies into constantly seeking to enhance their performance to succeed, that is, "to win" (Dardot & Laval, 2013, p. 312)[3]. Using a sport-related analogy, critical theorist and cultural critic Byung-Chul Han (2015) notes that today's achievement society is "slowly developing into a *doping* society [where] the human body and the human being as a whole [become] a performance-machine … that is supposed to function without disturbance and maximize achievement" (p. 30, emphasis added).

[3] For Dardot and Laval (2013), the following Margaret Thatcher's dictum about neoliberal policies perfectly captures the implications of neoliberal economic theory: "Economics are the method. The object is to change the soul" (p. 292).

In the 1970s, philosopher and former Olympian rower Hans Lenk, when examining sport and society in light of critical theory concepts like the achievement principle, likened self-affirmation with performance, arguing that the latter nourishes and stabilizes the feeling of one's value. As per Lenk (1972), individuals often identify so strongly with their successes that they become their achievements. The epitome of the contemporary obsession for competitive success is the elite-level athlete: "[t]he imperative of continuously increasing achievements in sport – of 'achievement at all costs' – has ... grown to be an ideology of achievement; for it serves to justify and legitimate high achievement sport, which in turn would likely induce the achievement motivation necessary for professional work" (Lenk, 1972, p. 183). In the same vein, sport law expert Martin Hardie (2020) posits that "[t]he moral atmosphere of sport ... is the moral atmosphere of the society of competition [or achievement]" (p. 159). Referencing sport psychological studies on sport and morality, he elucidates that the type of self-centered reasoning demanded in sport, when extrapolated to daily matters, induces a moral transformation that validates "egocentric interest [as] a legitimate means of pursuing the goal of competition" (Hardie, 2020, p. 158)[4]. Thus, he closes his book *Governing the Society of Competition: Cycling, Doping and the Law* by asserting:

> The time of sport in modernity, and its precursors before that, was the time of the feast in many respects, the exceptional time away from work ... However, with the coming of the ... society of competition, the logic of sport spills over and serves as a model for the rest of society. No longer does sport mirror society, but rather in the society of competition, society itself must mirror the logic of sport. (Hardie, 2020, p. 206)

Earlier in the tome, Hardie (2020, p. 169) approves of Dardot and Laval's (2013) contention that "competitive sport is the great social theatre that displays the modern gods, demi-gods and heroes" (p. 312). Athletes, as the central figures in today's most popular competitions, exemplify and manifest the characteristics of the *homo certaminis,* modeling exemplary behavior for individuals in contemporary society. *Pace* moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre's (2007) examination of moral cultures, the athlete has become a "moral character" of modern society[5], "because of the way in

[4] Numerous highly successful and influential contemporary political and economic frameworks rely on game theoretical models to conceptualize and predict people's social behavior, regarding them as efficiency maximizers, as *homo oeconomicus* (Ross, 2023*).*

[5] See López Frías, 2015.

which moral and metaphysical ideas and theories assume through them an embodied existence in the social world" (p. 44). No other social character demonstrates a greater emphasis on enhancing their performance to outdo fellow competitors and exhibits a stronger commitment to the achievement (or win-at-all-cost) mentality. Sport specialization (i.e., the practice of focusing training and participation in one specific sport to increase the probability of later success) begins at increasingly younger ages, raising concerns about the physical and psychological well-being of young people (Smith, 2015). Arguably, this pattern is unparalleled compared to other social activities in modern life (Gregory, 2017).

As a token, cyclists have long spoken about the impossibility of competing at the highest level without resorting to prohibited performance-enhancing substances and methods, colloquially known as doping. In his now-infamous interview with journalist Oprah Winfrey, US cycling legend Lance Armstrong publicly confessed to his use of banned substances and methods, partly justifying this practice based on the widely shared perception among cyclists that winning the Tour de France without doping is impossible. This competition is undoubtedly one of the most broadly followed and prestigious sport events, and it has earned the reputation of being one of the most physically demanding athletic contests. For instance, a 2003 German movie centered on the Telekom cycling team during that year's Tour de France refers to the event as "Hell on wheels." Recently, two-time winner of the competition Tadej Pogacar expressed feeling "like riding in hell" after completing the Bourg-en-Bresse stage of the Tour (Snowball, 2023).

III. Sport, excellence, and competition

It is worthwhile to identify distinctive traits shared between contemporary athletes (and those who emulate their approach to success) and other historically achievement-oriented figures, such as the Hellenistic athlete and the modern entrepreneur. The Greeks' participation in contests was mediated by religious beliefs that tied athletes to their communities. In this sense, the athletes' quest for superiority was restrained, controlled, or counteracted by other values within the Greek worldview. Similarly, according to Laval and Dardot, market competition, in the early stages of the modern economy, was subordinated to the pursuit of the common good (see also Conill Sancho, 2017). For instance, the state could legitimately interfere with competitive processes in the market to ensure their positive impact on the public. Also, in their interpretation of early modern capitalism, Laval and Dardot explain that competitors better appreciated the limits of competitive behavior and

its ultimate goal. In contemporary society, not only is competition granted unrestricted freedom, but it is also perceived as an end in itself. This attitude toward competition leads to the absence of normative principles that limit competitive pursuits and, more significantly, people's competitive drive. The unbound character of competition partly originates from capitalist systems' imperative to create endless needs to self-sustain itself. In other words, inciting perpetual competition is capitalism's method of survival.

In deploying a game-like form of competition to govern social life, contemporary society not only falls short of Suits' utopian world, wherein individuals devote their lives to playing intrinsically valuable games, but rather it becomes increasingly dominated by an instrumental mentality, with individuals engaged in continuous confrontation, each seeking to enhance their performance to attain goals as efficiently as possible. Interestingly, in his 1974 analysis of sport and the achievement society, Lenk (1974) warns against the extrapolation of sport's achievement emphasis to the larger society: "the total achieving society would be terrible: the competition of all against all in all activities … would make Hobbes' primordial vision come true" (p. 61). A world of efficiency maximizers constantly competing with one another for social positions and status is the future situation that has resulted from unleashing the competitive character of sport.

To Suits' credit, on multiple occasions, he warns against using games for instrumental purposes, especially to advance social goals. For instance, he strongly opposes Eric Berne's psychoanalytical and "radical instrumentalist" views of social life as comprising a series of elaborate games that people play simply to earn recognition (Suits, 1978, Chapter 13). Also, in his short paper "Sticky Wickedness: Games and Morality," Suits (1982) maintains that gameplay is a wicked guide for moral conduct because games trivialize (life) goals to direct players' attention to the means employed to achieve the goals. For example, in a footrace, merely getting from point A to point B holds little significance. The crux lies in accomplishing that goal by following the game's specified rules and thereby using the means they prescribe: finishing a *designated circuit* from point A to point B *on foot* faster than the other competitors. Track-and-field athletes regard the goal as important mainly for the purpose of playing the game, that is, because it enables them to exercise and develop the skills necessary for participating in the race. Converting valuable life goals into game goals to exercise specific skills would transform worthwhile goals into mere means for eliciting a specific

type of action (e.g., a firefighter intentionally starting a fire to exercise the skills required to extinguish it)[6].

Suits' views of gameplay must be understood as an effort to curb the predominance of instrumental mentality in modern society (López Frías, 2021). When framed correctly, namely in perfectionist terms (i.e., as pertaining to the development of typically human capacities), games and, in turn, competition can bear positive outcomes[7]. Following his footsteps, contemporary sport philosophers have formulated positive views of competition. In this regard, philosopher Robert L. Simon's (2014) examinations of sport are the *locus classicus.* Building upon philosophy scholar Edwin J. Delattre[8], Simon differentiates two views of competition. One is exemplified in the statement usually (mis)attributed to former Green Bay Packers coach Vince Lombardi: "Winning is not the most important thing; it's the only thing" (see O'Connor, 2014). From this perspective, sport competition is primarily, if not exclusively, concerned with winning. Differently put, the major goal of a sport contestant is to defeat an opponent. Sport, thus perceived, raises ethical problems, including the minimization of the process of playing the game, the promotion of "Me first" egocentric attitudes, the reduction of sport to a zero-sum activity, and the consideration of opponents as obstacles or enemies to be overcome or eliminated. Cases that illustrate the prevalence of this mentality among elite-level athletes abound. For instance, in the aforementioned conversation between Armstrong and Oprah, the cyclist confessed that his "fighter" or "win-at-all-costs" attitude was an essential factor in his decision to take doping substances.

The other view of sport, which Simon (2014) champions and labels "mutualism," incorporates a more ethically defensible understanding of competition. From a mutualist standpoint, sport contests are cooperative enterprises that present worth-meeting challenges to push contestants to excel. In the most recent edition of his groundbreaking *Fair Play: The Ethics*

[6] For a recent formulation and examination of this thesis, see Nguyen, 2021.

[7] Similarly, Lenk (1972; 1974) points out the "emancipatory" potential of sport. For more on emancipation through sport, see Morgan, 1994.

[8] In one of the earliest issues of the *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport,* Delattre (1975) examines US journalist and fiction writer Richard Harding Davis' chronicle of the 1895 Yale-Princeton football game to identify valuable moments in sport contests, those moments that, in Delattre's words, "make the game worth the candle" (p. 134). In his view, these moments highlight the importance of a qualified form of victory, namely the one achieved against a worthy opponent. For Delattre, facing opponents of similar skill and dedication initiates a self-discovery process for athletes, allowing them to unveil their true athletic capacities and develop them further: "Exclusive emphasis on winning has particularly tended to obscure the importance of the quality of the opposition and of the thrill of the competition itself" (Delattre, 1975, p. 134).

of Sport, coauthored with sport philosophers César R. Torres and Peter H. Hager, Simon writes:

> We propose, then, that competitive athletics is best conceived as a *mutual quest for excellence*, an activity that is significantly cooperative in that all the participants consent to be tested in the crucible of competition for both the intrinsic value of meeting interesting challenges and for what we can learn about ourselves and others through the attempt to meet the competitive test. (Simon et al., 2014, p. 70, emphasis added)

Simon and his collaborators understand sport competition as a mutual quest for excellence. To illustrate this view of sport, he relies on the following words by the former president of Yale and commissioner of Major League Baseball:

> When . . . a person on the field or fairway, rink, floor, or track performs an act that surpasses—despite his or her evident mortality, his or her humanness—whatever we have seen or heard of or could conceive of doing ourselves, then we have witnessed . . . an instant of complete coherence. In that instant, pulled to our feet, we are pulled out of ourselves. We feel what we saw, became what we perceived. The memory of that moment is deep enough to send us all out again and again, to reenact the ceremony, made of all the minor ceremonies to which spectator and player devote themselves, in the hopes that the moment will be summoned again and made again palpable. (Simon, 2014, p. 69)

Unlike victory-centric views of sport, mutualism accentuates the process of playing the game, cultivates a collaborative ethos, portrays sport as a non-zero-sum enterprise, and views opponents as facilitators or collaborators working toward excellence. Of course, competitors care about and strive toward winning. However, their pursuit of victory is subordinated to their engagement in a mutual quest for excellence. They seek to win to the extent that contending to win allows them to develop their capacities in the crucible of competition.

The history of sport offers myriad examples of mutualistic confrontation. In an insightful essay on healthy rivalry, writer and retired English cricketer Michael Brearley (2011) holds a mutualist-like view of competition, bringing readers' attention to the etymological roots of the terms "rival" and "compete": "*rivalis* meant 'sharing the same stream,' *competens* meant 'striving together with,' 'agreeing together.'" Among the traits of this understanding of rivalry, Brearley emphasizes the feeling of generosity.

Athletes are generous toward their opponents in recognition of their role as co-creators of excellence. Thus, he posits:

> We not only want to defeat our opponents, we also depend on them and their skill, courage and hostility in order to prove and hone our own skills, to justify proper pride. There is a unity of shared striving, as well as a duality of opposition. (Brearley, 2011)

For further illustration, consider the relationships between NBA legends Larry Bird and Earvin "Magic" Johnson and tennis superstars Chris Evert and Martina Navratilova, to name just a few (Hersh, 2013). Bird explained that playing against Magic Johnson influenced him as follows:

> There's no question that Magic is the toughest competitor and probably the toughest player I've ever seen. There's no question about that ... I'll never forget that college game where I knew from the beginning we was [sic] outmatched because of the talent and Magic was leading them up and down the court. We got into the first year in the NBA, he wins the championship right off the bat. A lot of pressure, a lot of pressure. A lot of pressure on me to start winning championships, and I don't think I could ever achieve that if I didn't have a player I always looked at—I knew he was watching me because I was watching him, I was making sure I knew what he was doing every night. He took my game to a level... (Silva, 2023)

The development of the respectful, competitive relationship and friendship bonds created between the two players is masterfully depicted in the documentary *Magic & Bird: A Courtship of Rivals*.

Lastly, track-and-field phenoms Luz Long from Germany and Jesse Owens from the U.S. produced a politically- and socially-charged illustration of mutualism. During the qualifying round of the long jump event in the 1936 Olympic games held in Berlin, with Adolf Hitler watching from the presidential box, Owens faced the risk of elimination due to penalties for stepping on the designated jumping area. Witnessing Owens' challenges, Long reportedly approached him and suggested that Owens marked his jumping position farther from the board, using his training diver, to ensure compliance with the rules. Following Long's suggestion, Owens advanced to the final round, ultimately securing the gold medal and breaking the Olympic record. The German athlete was the first competitor to congratulate Owens, and he even raised Owens' arm in a symbolic gesture of triumph. In a movie centered on Owens' experience in the Berlin games, titled *Jesse Owens*

Returns to Berlin, the Black athlete from Ann Arbor, Michigan, conveys his gratitude toward Long to the German athlete's son, Kai.

Whereas competitors obsessed with winning seek to become superior to their counterparts, those focused on becoming better accept their limitations and seek to experience the joy of their own beings[9]. Most importantly, Simon's conceptual framework aligns with earlier reflections on the Janus-faced character of sport competition, some of which trace back to discourses around *agōn* in the Hellenistic and post-Hellenic eras.

VI. The origins of mutualism's positive understanding of competition

Victory was crucial to Greek athletes. In athletic contests, only one participant was awarded a prize: a wreath of olive leaves from the judges and bunches of foliage and wool ribbons from spectators. There was no dignity in losing, no silver or bronze medals, no statues honoring those who "fought well," and no tributes from the *polis* for simply participating in the games. Ancient historian Pausanias mentions defeated, ashamed contestants discreetly returning home using back streets to avoid being seen (Kyle, 2014, p. 26)[10]. In Homer's *Iliad,* Achilles' father, Peleus, in a Lombardiesque fashion, instructs his son to "Always be the bravest and excel over others" (*Iliad*, 11.780), a maxim that seemed to shape the conduct of participants in agonistic contests. In this respect, the inscriptions in Corinthian, Isthmian, and Athenian curse tablets where athletes invoke divine intervention to diminish their opponents' performance are famous. One from the *agora* in Athens, directed against a wrestler named Eutychian, includes sentences like "Let Eutychian be deaf, dumb, mindless, harmless, and not fighting against anyone," and "Bind Eutychian in the unilluminated eternity of oblivion and chill and destroy also the wrestling that he is going to do this coming Friday" (Murray, 2014, p. 315).

Nonetheless, as in contemporary times, the ancient Greeks also valued and stressed the developmental, educational, and ethical aspects of competition (for a detailed analysis of these linkages, see Ornelas, 2022). In Syrian satirist Lucian of Samosa's *Anarchasis,* Solon, one of the greatest Athenian statespersons, justifies the Greeks' high regard for sport to the Scythian Anarchasis as follows:

[9] The ancient Greek poet Hesiod speaks of two types of strife connected to two different goddesses: bad Eris and good Eris, identifying the former as the one that embodies the effort to beat one's opponents by destroying them (Acampora, 2013).

[10] See Jenifer Neils' (2014) examination of a pictorial representation on a vase commemorating a victory in the torch race at the Panathenaic Games in Athens.

> But, my dear fellow, it is not the bare gifts that we have in view! They are merely tokens of the victory and marks to identify the winners. But the reputation that goes with them is worth everything to the victors, and to attain it, even to be kicked is nothing to men who seek to capture fame through hardships. Without hardships it cannot be acquired; the man who covets it must put up with many unpleasantnesses in the beginning before at last he can expect the profitable and delightful outcome of his exertions. (Lucian, 2006, p. 11)

As sport historian Thomas F. Scanlon (1983) explains, the Greeks had two terms for "contest": *áethlos* and *agōn.* The former, which means "toil, strenuous work" or "difficult task for a goal," closely connects to the term *áethlon*, meaning "prize," and emphasizes the physical struggle for a prize. Ancient lyric poet Pindar writes about how distinctively athletes fix their thoughts on the prize:

> Time. Time moved forward and declared the plain truth: how Herakles divided up the gift of war and offered the choice part, and how he established the four years' festival with the first Olympic games and its victories. Who then won the new crown with hands or feet or chariot, after fixing in his thoughts the boast of the contest and achieving it in deed? (cit. in Hawhee, 2002, p. 192)

Agōn, as per Scanlon, refers to places associated with confrontation (peaceful, as in sport, or bellicose). Moreover, the term connects to *agós* ("leader" or "chief"), indicating that contestants were leaders or, at least, performed and were celebrated as such for their skillful displays. As rhetoric scholar Debra Hawhee (2002) expounds, the term *agōn* is also tied with *agein*, meaning "to bring up, train, educate," which suggests development through striving.

At the heart of the *agōn,* thus, "is not the victory *per se* but rather the hunt for the victory" (Hawhee, 2002, p. 192). The key to the *agōn* is the public display of excellence, *aretê*. In his *Rhetoric*, philosopher Aristotle identifies the Olympic victor as an exemplar of excellence:

> Since that which is more difficult or more rare is the better, seasons and ages and places and times and powers produce great things; that is, if one does something beyond his power or his age or his equals, and if he does them in such a way and place and time, he will have greatness and beauty and goodness and justice and oppositions. (Miller, 2012, p. 138)

In this regard, Lucian's Solon asserts, "watching the *aretê* of men and physical beauty, amazing condition and great skill and irresistible force" (in Miller, 2012, p. 78). Sport philosopher Heather Reid (2012) elaborates on the connection between excellence and beauty by remarking that "[a]thletic beauty [for the Greeks] symbolizes the triumph of our divine, spiritual nature over our animalistic, physical nature" (p. 287). In alignment with this interpretation, by examining inscriptions from the Hellenistic period, Olympic studies expert H.W. Pleket highlights the following description of a wrestler, in particular a pankratiast, from Ephesos: "[he] has undertaken the training of his body, and is also most noble in competition and most dignified in his way of life and his conduct, so that in him *all virtue of body and soul is blended*" (Pleket, 2014, p. 108, original emphasis).

Pindar, known for his odes celebrating athletic excellence, opens his *Eighth Olympian* by stating that victory brings "great and eternal glory indeed" (Nielsen, 2014, p. 142). Scholars have identified the pursuit of glory as the primary goal of ancient Greek athletes, who thought that glory would give them a form of immortality: being remembered and celebrated forever. Glory was believed to result from two types of honors: *kleos*, conferred by fellow humans, and *kudos,* bestowed by the gods. In accumulating these accolades, athletes displayed gratitude. Philosopher Christa Davis Acampora (2013) suggests that athletes perceived the contest as a shared venture involving opponents, who helped them achieve competitive glory, and, more broadly, the conditions that facilitated their participation in the contest, especially the city that supported and later celebrated their efforts, bringing more *kleos*: "the victor returns to his polis to extend and redistribute this power to the city through the rituals of the crowning ceremony, the ceremonial reentry of the victor in the city, and the statuary and poetic memorials" (Acampora, 2013, pp. 32–33). Demonstrations of gratitude played a crucial role in athletes' behavior in another sense. They believed that gods often directly intervened in athletic competitions. For instance, Homer describes how Athena interferes in favor of Odysseus in the footrace during funeral games to honor Patroclus (*Iliad,* 23.740–97). Because victors were thought to enjoy the gods' favor, they displayed humility and expressed gratitude to the deities for giving them *kudos*. Greek athletes admired specific mythological characters, especially Herakles, and their achievements. Hence, their engagement in competition was arguably greatly motivated by the effort to assimilate their mythological idols—consider sport historian David J. Lunt's (2009) analyses of how ancient Greek athletes admired mythological heroes. Contestants also sought to approximate the ideal of physical excellence their anthropomorphic gods embodied. Interestingly,

athletes who attempted to better their role models were regarded as hubristic and deemed deserving of divine punishment[11].

With the demise of the Greek civilization, post-Hellenic societies kept organizing athletic contests. As classical studies luminary Michael B. Poliakoff's (1984) examination of Judeo-Christian views of sport demonstrates, sport-related concepts and metaphors were important in Jewish and early Christian sages' thoughts. Roman orator and philosopher Dio Chrysostomo muses:

> The man who is noble is the one who considers hardship as his greatest competitor and struggles with it day and night, and not, like some goat, for a bit of celery or olive or pine, but for the sake of happiness and arete throughout his whole life (in Miller, 2012, pp. 100–101).

Multiple accounts of Job's story, such as those in the *Suda* and the *Testament of Job*, depict him as a wrestler, a holy man who fights for God. In this vein, John Chrysostom, bishop of Constantinople between 398 and 404 CE, features hundreds of athletic metaphors linking holiness to a contest and regarding Abraham, Joseph, Jesus, Paul, and Job as athletic heroes[12]. Similarly, within the Jewish tradition, the philosopher Philo Judaeus asserts:

> Do not regard as holy the Games which the cities put on every other year, having built theaters to receive many thousands of people. For in these festivals, the man who outwrestles an opponent and stretches him on his back or prone on the ground, or the one powerful in boxing or pankration who doesn't stop short of violence and wrongdoing wins the first prize . . . Now the only contest which can rightly be called Olympic the inhabitants of Elis do not hold, but it is the contest for the gaining of divine, truly Olympian virtues. (in Poliakoff, 1984, p. 64)

Therefore, post-Hellenic intellectuals placed a significant value on athletic contests when these activities were considered sites for spiritual and ethical development. *Pace* Huizinga's lamentation concerning today's widespread over-serious attitude toward sport, one can well critique sport for embodying and spreading the win-at-all-cost mentality directed at demonstrating superiority. However, with the sport mutualists, one could instead present resistance to the emphasis on victory and favor aspects of sport connected to athletes' quest for excellence, seeking to capitalize on

[11] See the story of Marsyas' competition with Apollo.

[12] For a in-depth analysis of these ideas, with special emphasis on Apostol Paul uses of agonistic metaphors and terms, see Pfitzner, 1967.

them to help humans flourish, perhaps toward Suits' envisioned utopia of fulfilled autotelic gameplayers.

V. Conclusion: Mutualist competitions as remedies to the corruptive effects of the "achievement ethos"

Sporting contests, competition, society, and capitalism intertwine in contemporary life. When constructed as a pursuit of excellence, competition holds the potential for moral and social transformation, focusing individuals' attention on cooperative enterprises that promote flourishing. However, competitive encounters, which prevail in all social spheres nowadays, are typically understood and promoted quite differently in capitalist societies, specifically as activities centered on achievement and outperforming individuals perceived as competitors. By reconceptualizing competitive environments as sites conducive to the mutual quest for excellence, as already anticipated in ancient examinations of agonistic activities, contemporary mutualist sport philosophers provide a remedy to mitigate the adverse effects of the "achievement ethos" in capitalist society and, in turn, shed light on how to develop cultures that de-emphasize the pursuit of victory to prioritize social encounters that elicit human flourishing. These musings on sporting competition and its connections to larger society demonstrate the importance of reflecting upon sport through philosophical lenses. Although sporting activities are often regarded as trivial or unimportant, they serve as windows and help identify remedies to problems affecting today's society.

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