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Greek Mythology and Education: From Theory to Practice

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Abstract

This paper analyses the role that mythical Greek narratives should play in contemporary Olympic education. We will show how Olympism and its ideals are rooted in myths. Greek sports were structured according to ancient Greece religious values and rituals. For example, athletes competed to “become immortal” (being awarded by the gods) through achieving victory and fame in the sporting arena. In modern times, Olympism aimed at becoming a mythology, that is, a “secular religion”. We find this idea, for instance, in De Coubertin’s conception of modern sport as a *religio athletae*. To show if contemporary (post-modern) sports can be turned into such a thing, we will provide an existential and phenomenological analysis of the myth phenomenon. In so doing, *mythos* and *logos* will be unified in a “new agonistic *paideia*.” By embracing a universalist (or continuist) conception of both sport ideals and human nature, we will argue that contemporary sports have the potential to use mythical narratives to convey their values, that is to say, to teach Olympic sports values. We do not even need to create new myths. Rather, we can use those that we already have to teach important values. To prove this claim, we will use Heracles’ myth to present a normative account of the athlete and show how we can use myths to teach Olympic values.

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1. Myths in Ancient Greek Culture

The word “myth” largely refers to any traditional story. In a narrower sense, it regards sacred narratives aimed at explaining how the world or humankind came to be in their present form and how they ought to be. It has, at least, four functions: cosmological, historical, sociological, and psychological (Melich, 1996: 71-86). Thus, myths can be

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approached from two different perspectives: a descriptive one and a normative one. Regarding the former, myths arise as either over-elaborated accounts of historical events or allegories for unexplained natural phenomena. However, they cannot be reduced to this. They are not mere tales to make people feel safer by helping them understand the world in which they live. We should not downplay myths' normative potential, which explains why they typically involve supernatural and model characters and why rulers and priests always endorse them.

In ancient Greece, a myth was not simply a story, or a tale, rich in religious and poetic meanings, but rather a body of scientific knowledge about the world and a normative conception of human beings. Although the history of Greek thought is that of a progressive emancipation from mythical knowledge (*mythos*) to science (*logos*), the former played a seminal role in ancient Greek culture (*paideia*). As showed in Werner Jaeger's *Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture*, which is the most comprehensive study about classical Greek culture, there was neither a written code of laws, nor a system of ethics in ancient Greece. Guidance was provided by the life of model heroes as well as by proverbial wisdom handed down from one generation to another. Myths embodied both of them. This is the reason Homer and Hesiod became the main educators of ancient Greek society, and why the *Iliad* was its "Bible".

In Greek mythology, for being a perfect man in ancient Greece, it was necessary to cultivate both body and spirit. Heroes were always physically attractive as well as morally exemplar. Homer, for instance, says that Achilles' master, Phoenix, claimed that his pupil was more excellent than the other warriors were because he combined physical and intellectual skills. This connection between the concepts of physical beauty and goodness is also found in later works in the history of ancient Greece. For instance, Plato regards beauty as the highest idea of his system in some works, whereas, in others, he situates the idea of goodness at the top of his world of ideas, or forms. This is the reason Greek myths, in particular, and Greek education, in general, thought that both physical and spiritual perfection were necessary for educating men into their truer form.

The values and principles at the ground of the ancient Olympic Games are rooted in myths as well. Pindar, for example, traces the founding of the Olympics to Heracles, who instituted them, and introduced the olive crown as a prize, in honour of Zeus to thank him for his help in completing his fifth labour, cleaning Augeas' horse stalls in one day. Olympic myths play the four above mentioned basic functions of the myth as well. However, in line with Magnane's ideas, sporting myths have something special compared to the others (cit. by Lenk, 1976). They serve us to identify with the values of an unofficial culture, which are easier to grasp and understand than the ones of the official culture within which we live.

Sport, therefore, provides an easier way for ordinary people to have access to an ontology of the world as well as to role models for their behaviour. In line with this idea, and with the humanistic principle in which Greek sport was rooted, many authors, such as de Coubertin, mostly from the field of pedagogy, have argued for a humanistic account of sports (Isidori & Reid, 2011). They claim that we should recover the mythical elements hidden in contemporary sports. For de Coubertin, for instance, "[h]ealthy democracy, wise and peaceful internationalism, will penetrate the new stadium and preserve within it the cult of honour and disinterestedness which will enable athletics to help in the task of moral education and social peace" (Pierre de Coubertin, 1986, cit. by Loland, 2003).

Among the great ideas developed by Western thought, the Olympic ideal represents one of the best expression of our identity, not only as European but also as human beings and citizens of the world. Thanks to the Olympic Games, this Olympic ideal belongs to the world, to all the people of the world, especially because the Olympics are the world's biggest mass spectacle.

2. Sporting Myths and their Pedagogical Value

Along with Jaeger and some representatives of the critical theory school (Jaeger, 1969; Adorno & Horkheimer, 1991), we argue that our modern tradition contains certain mythological and foundational values of the Greeks. As our history begins with them, we have a common fund of social an intellectual forms and ideals. In Jaeger's words, "Greece still fulfils some need of our own life" (Jaeger, 1969: xv). Such a common *existential need* is "the creation of a higher type of man" (Jaeger, 1969: xvii). Following Hans Lenk, sport perfectly engages with this purpose because its guiding normative principle is the "achievement principle", which states that "sports present a particular attractive medium of demonstrative individuation, self-development, and self-confirmation for younger men with reference to goals and value patterns which are emotionally [and officially] approved in [his] culture" (Lenk, 1976: 15).

As Pierre de Coubertin, the founder of modern Olympics, knew about the pedagogical and humanistic potential

of the ancient Olympic Games, he wanted to bring them back to life with educative purposes. He believed that the revived Olympics would contribute to the “spiritual” development of Europe. The Olympics were the ritual of the *religio athletae*, which will give Europe the spiritual and moral guidance to face the challenges posed by their highly industrialized modern world.

Firstly, he thought that, in line with the pedagogical purpose of both Greek myths and modern pedagogy, sport could help European societies educate their citizens into *their truer form*. The expression “true form” needs to be understood by attending to the Greeks’ differentiation between “training” and “education”. Whereas the former referred to the teaching of skills specific to arts and handicrafts, that is to say, to those activities that Aristotle called as “*techne*”, the latter referred to a normative task aimed at fulfilling the ideal of men as they ought to be. Men are brought into their true form when they realize their potential, the idea of what they ought to be. Regarding this, citizens of modern societies should understand that they inhabit a globalized world and have to become cosmopolitan citizens. This is their truer form as “children” of a global era.

Secondly, Coubertin thought of sports as tools to protect and foster Europe’s cosmopolitan identity (Carrington, 2004: 81-99). Olympic ideals and values illustrated the humanistic values at the basis of the European culture of his time. The Olympic Games serve as a framework and perfect illustration of them. For instance, at the Olympics, people from very different cultures could gather in the same place and be treated equally like athletes who have the same opportunity to win, and excel. Athletes in ancient Greece competed naked to delete the social differences existing between them. Both events embodied the ideal of equality. Moreover, Greek people from all over the world were accepted to participate in the Games as well as we today accept athletes from every country in the world to participate in the Olympics. It could be argued, then, that both equality and (Greek-)cosmopolitanism are at the basis of the ancient and modern ideal of Olympism. This would make our case for the continuity between ancient and modern sports.

To make this claim stronger, we will show that we could use Greek myths to teach Olympic values in many ways. For instance, when teaching Olympic education, we could use Greek myths as starting point for our lessons with the aim of introducing the controversial issues to be analysed. As we claimed before, the very nature of mythical tales helps people understand and engage with the values transmitted by such stories. Therefore, students would more easily understand what is at stake when they discuss a particular topic in sports. The following sections will show how to do this by analysing Heracles’ myth and linking it to the academic debate on the ideal of the perfect athlete.

3. Heracles: Olympic Symbols and the Ideal Athlete

Heracles was the son of Alcmena and Zeus, who made love to her while Amphitryon, Alcmenes’ husband, was at war (Morford & Lenardon, 2002: 518-547). Heracles was born half god, half human. Zeus’ wife, Hera, was so jealous at Alcmena and Heracles that she persecuted the latter as a revenge on Zeus for his infidelity. Hera tried to kill Heracles many times, but as he always survived, she decided that she will make Heracles’ life as miserable as she could. To achieve her goal, Hera took control of Heracles’ mind and put him into a great rage, which led him to murder his family. She induced Heracles to kill his two sons and his wife, Megara.

Once Heracles recovered his senses, he regretted what he had done so profoundly that he travelled to Delphi in search of expiation. The Oracle imposed him to serve King Eurystheus, who gave Heracles twelve labours or heroic tasks, the Twelve Labours of Heracles. Insofar as he succeeded, his soul would be purified of his sin. Amongst these labours were slay the Nemean Lion, capture the Golden Hind of Artemis, capture the Cretan Bull, slay the nine-headed Lernaean Hydra, and clean the Augean stables in one day. Heracles completed these tasks and was purged of his sins, becoming the most famous Greek hero. However, Heracles was still a mortal human being. For him to be immortal, he had to get rid of his human mortal body. To do so, he had a funeral pyre built for himself and asked a friend to light it. Once Heracles was set on fire, he “dead” by fire (Morford & Lenardon, 2002: 537), his mortal body disappeared and his immortal nature remained. He joined Zeus on Mount Olympus in this way and became a full god as a reward for his achievements.

Heracles’ life has been used to illustrate the symbols and principles at the ground of Olympism (Balius Juli, 1992). David J. Lunt, for instance, argues that “[t]he most attractive heroic model for a powerful athlete was Herakles.” (Lunt, 2009: 378) He gathered many of the virtues that are essential in athletes such as unselfish fortitude, laboring for the good of the others, and struggling for achieving virtue (Morford & Lenardon, 2002: 538).

His life illustrates the key normative elements of the ancient Olympics. This is the reason he is regarded as one of its (spiritual) fathers.

The symbol of the sacrificial pyre is probably the clearest case where Heracles' life inspires the ancient Olympics. According to Heather L. Reid (2011), ancient Greek sports were conceived as sacrificial rites. It was the victor of the most important athletic contest, the foot-race in Olympia, who was in charge of lighting the Olympic flame, "the sacrificial pyre", as a sign of self-sacrifice. By performing this ritual, the most excellent person, the victor, was offered to the gods, he was given in symbolic sacrifice. This is the reason the Greeks thought that the victors deserved no material prizes, but the honour of being offered in sacrifice to the gods. Heracles' self-sacrifice is the very image of this will to immortality. In fact, Heracles became the most famous hero in ancient Greece because of his victories in many fields like hunting, war, and sports.

Heracles' myth embodies many other principles and normative elements of the ancient Olympics, which are still present in our modern Games. For example, the myth says that there were two labors that Eurystheus did not accept: the cleaning of the horse stalls and the killing of the Hydra. Heracles completed them in a wrong way by violating some principles that regulated the nature of his expiatory task. We can draw a parallel between these principles and those that regulate the athletic contest, such as the one of fairness. Heracles' was supposed to complete his tasks by himself to purge his sin. However, the legend tells that his nephew, Iolaus, helped him in the Hydra task and Zeus in the stalls labor. Their aid is considered as illegitimate. Regarding this idea, the debate on fairness concerning the use of illegitimate shortcuts – aids – is central in contemporary sports, especially, in the case of the application of technology to sports performance. Critics of doping argue that performance-enhancing artificial substances are an illegitimate aid to athletes.

There is a second reason Eurystheus did not accept Heracles' labour of cleaning the Augean stables, the immaterial nature of his prize. The main purpose of Heracles' performance was to achieve expiation of his sins, which is an immaterial prize. However, the legend says that Heracles was willing to accept pay for his labour. As this is a material prize, the very motivation for completing such task would have not being an intrinsic reason, expiation, but an extrinsic one, a monetary compensation. This episode of the cleaning of the Augean stables embodies the - mistaken - idea that Greek athletes received no monetary prizes for their victories. Therefore, the roots of amateurism can be traced to Heracles' myth.

The most important lesson contained in Heracles' myth is the hero's superhuman will to overcome all the obstacles in his path to success. Heracles' life inspires young people, in general, and athletes, in particular, to strive to achieve their goals, to become victors. In fact, Isocrates described Heracles' as "full of *agones*" in reference to the twelve labours that he had to complete. "*Agon*" was the term employed in ancient Greek to refer to competitive contests. Moreover, the word "labour" is "*athloi*" in ancient Greek (Morford & Lenardon, 2002: 523), which is the root of the English word "athle-te." "*Athla*" denotes struggle, but literally refers to prizes or contests for prizes (Lunt, 2009).

Greek athletes competed for *arete* and *kydos*. The former means "excellence" and the latter "praise" or "renown". *Arete* was such an important matter because it helped athletes win the athletic contests. Winners were commemorate publicly and became role models for their contemporaries (*kydos*). But the real goal of athletes was far beyond this. They wanted to perpetuate their influence over people to be commemorated after their death, in this way, they continued to exert influence on earth. For athletes to be immortal and reach the glory, they had to excel in what they did. Their fate was to strive to achieve physical excellence: "Like Herakles, who successfully overcame all obstacles and completed his labors or *athla*, victorious athletes sought their own heroic adventures in their quests for immortal status and heroic honors after death. Charged with *kydos* and hungry for *kleos*, these powerful champions claimed a heroic superhuman status that enabled them to lead their cities to victory in battle or to continue to exert influence over earthly affairs after their deaths [...] The power, might, and *arete* of their athletic victories provided the justification for their heroization." (Morford & Lenardon, 2002: 388).

This is an ideal that is vigorously alive in our society, in general, and in the theoretical reflection on sports. For instance, those philosopher of sports called as "internalists" defend that the main goal of sportspeople should be the struggle for excellence. In so doing, they become role models for the new generations. This Herculean aspect of Greek sports is not at odds with the reality of our contemporary sports. As the former football player and coach, Jorge Valdano, said in a recent interview, "Athletes are the only heroes in our society" (González, 2012). Moreover, athletes are aware of this fact. As Dave Zirin argues (2013), athletes are speaking out about social and political issues more than ever because they know that they have political and social responsibility. We will not discuss the issue of whether or not athletes should be role models, but this is one of the hot topics within philosophy of sports

today. To conclude, in line with Lenk's thesis, we contend that the Herculean spirit is the perfect ideal model for our athletes.

4. Conclusion: Theory and Practice in the Pedagogy of Sport Using Myths

The Olympic myth analysed in this paper provides Olympic philosophy students with an opportunity to reflect on an issue often forgotten in Olympic education, the relationship between religion and Olympic values. Although the disenchantment of reality process generated by Enlightenment eroded the role played by mythological narratives in education, we have shown that there are many benefits in teaching Olympic education in our schools and universities by using ancient Olympic myths as didactical tools. We hope that, in the future, there will be educationists willing to accept the challenge of teaching and studying Olympic education in such a way that connects the past, present, and future of Olympism.

*Authors' contributions. This study is the result of a collaboration between the three authors. Their contribution can be summed up as follows. Francisco Javier Lopez Frias: conception and design of the study, analysis of literature and manuscript writing. Emanuele Isidori: acquisition of scientific literature, manuscript revision, obtaining funding. Clea Hadjistephanou Papaellina: interpretation of data and of scientific literature.

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