

## **An Anthropology of the Olympic Athlete Towards a Modernised Philosophy of the Olympic Games and Athletes**

Hans Lenk

---

Date of Submission: 09-09-2019

Date of Acceptance: 25-09-2019

---

### **I. INTRODUCTION**

#### *"telecratic" problems of the Olympics*

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

The active athlete is more troubled by "telecratic" necessities, which bother him, and other participants. At a time when TV-lenses are available, whizzing cameras sometimes irritate unduly the concentrated contestant. The sports show fascinates hundreds of millions of spectators since the mass media transmit direct colour coverage of Olympic events to all countries. Through gigantic "telecratic" inspection the athlete's rights, his optimal action and preparation strategies, even his human intimacy and the preservation of his private personality, seem to be possessions of (or at least commanded by) the camera-eye of Big Brother. Future Olympic Games will be increasingly faced with difficult "telecratic" problems - not only in financial terms. It will not be easy to find an overall strategy which simultaneously covers the public's need for information and the athlete's rights. We have to develop - and this aspect imply appropriate truly philosophical work - a kind of protection program for the athletes to secure their rights against the managers and constraints of the public media including their manipulative and alienating effects. "Telecracy" is and will remain, may even grow, a major problem of the Olympic Games and top level athletics in the future.

In addition, the athlete's rights' Programme has to pertain to his or her sovereignty and freedom of decision-making as against autocratic officials and coaches. The athletes — as persons with their own human rights — have to be protected. Only in this way can they really - in a humane sense of the word - fulfil the exemplary function as an instantiation of an ideal model.

However, coping with media problems and political and commercial questions will certainly not suffice. Nor are the Olympic Games just an affair of symbols, the protocol and ceremonies like the Opening, closing and Victory Ceremonies. The Olympic idea and the Olympic spirit are much more and further-reaching than just external symbols. They should remain alive and have to be adapted to modern requirements, e.g. to the open-minded critical intellectuality of today's younger generation. Some outdated components of the idea as, for instance, exaggerated nationalism, winning at any price, compulsive manipulation, the totally autocratic style of coaching, the dictatorship of officials, other-directedness in motivation etc. have to be eliminated or at least mitigated. Ceremonial change by itself cannot bring about this necessary reform. In addition, we can hardly expect the new positive concepts, these enthusing and exciting goals, novel guidelines and ideals from an empirical scientist who is usually restricted to his discipline and only descriptive methods. By contrast, this intellectual reform of the Olympic movement and sports is basically primarily a philosophical task.

Much intellectual and, particularly, philosophical work has still to be done. Philosophically speaking, the new version of the Olympic Idea still remains to be reborn or the extant conception has at least to be

reformed. The most important Olympic reorientation is indeed a philosophical one. It has yet to be waited for, it has to be worked for. It has to be a reform in the philosophical foundation. Sport philosophers have to take seriously the fashionable criticism of the last decades against sport and achievement orientation (cf. the author's 1972). They should develop a new or, at least a better, more adequate, philosophical anthropology of both the creative process of achieving and the achieving personality and add a social philosophy. We should also apply this philosophic anthropology to sport, science, art, play and any creative action as well as to education. This is particularly true for the Olympic calibre and for other achieving activities of top level.

A philosophy and a philosophic anthropology of achievement and of the creative achieving human being seems to be of an utmost importance - particularly for future interpretations of top-level sports of all kinds, most notably however, for the Olympic realm. I would like to sketch some basic ideas of a philosophical anthropology along these lines.

## **II. TRADITIONAL CONCEPTIONS OF THE HUMAN BEING IN THE OLYMPIC MOVEMENT**

Interestingly enough, it was in antiquity that our most influential anthropological ideas and concepts of "man" or, rather, the human being, were shaped. Greek philosophers, but also Greek mythology had exerted a decisive influence on the development of Western anthropology with respect to several conceptions of humans which in some sense are to be combined at present and in the future:

I mean the Promethean-Faustean concept of man, rather, correctly speaking nowadays, the human being, as the being searching for knowledge and the extension of insight, striving to improve or even get closer to perfection, in the arts and sciences. The ancient "Know thyself" supplemented by "Know the world" and its internal lawful connections, causes, and systems may – besides the biological basis - become also a slogan of the anthropological picture of humankind.

The second equally important one is the Homeric-Olympic ideal of humans governed by the quest for the best in achievement. The Homeric "Always to become better and to excel as compared with others", "Always to be the very best, distinguished from everyone else" (Ilias VI: 205; XI: 794) would be the slogan of this picture of man. Peleus gave that slogan as a piece of advice to his son Achilles. That so-called "Achilles Complex" (as the "Love Story" author and marathon man Segal therefore labelled it) is the most important and characteristic norm and standard of athletic competition at top level and of the Olympic contests, if not the most telling one of the Olympic Movement, although it is by no means the only characteristic feature. Like the first concept of humans it also is an ideal concept. Both may be combined in the activist aspiration to achieve best knowledge, best achievements in any field, e. g. by personally engaging in feats of arts and sciences including performing arts like music, drama, and athletics.

Even the individualistic, "Western" and Christian, conception of humans has been deeply impregnated by Greek philosophy via Saint Paul, the Book of John etc. It certainly is the sophists' and Socrates' discovery of the value of the individual which, in part at least, also led the Christian way of life. But humanistic individualism had its roots also in ethical Greek philosophy taking "man" himself (as a species as well as an individual) as a "measure of everything" (Protagoras). Moreover, the religious roots of the ancient Olympic Games which originally were celebrated in honour of Zeus are beyond any doubt.

It seems to be only the fourth conception of man, namely the practical-technological one of the experimenting human being manipulating world and nature which did not stem from the ancient philosophers and religious roots, which may instead be a modern offspring of the era of the Renaissance and/or Reformation. And it is particularly this conception of the human being which has most explicitly changed the world and our world-views. It might if unfettered even nowadays be considered a specific danger for mankind and nature, if not the other three world-views of Antiquity would counterbalance a potentially unlimited escalating hubris of technological man. (The ecological perspective came in only recently.)

Therefore, we have to consider all four conceptions of humankind as essential. Perhaps we may even add a fifth one: human creatures embedded in and being a part of nature adjusting to natural rhythms, systems, ecosystems etc.

We have to recur to the old ideas of wisdom and a counterbalance of harmony between the different anthropological conceptions. Self-idolization of man by means of his technological power must not run out of control, should be limited and checked as well as balanced by the other three, more humanistic ideals. There seems to be a system of check and balances also in anthropological conceptions. We have time and again to remind ourselves of this by reactivating, revitalising, improving and developing these humanistic ideas of the human. Each of these ideals seems to be equally important. Each has its own heroes, paragon personalities and ideal types as well as its own inherent dangers. This is true for the concept of Homeric-Olympic man, too.

More important for our present topic is it to pay attention to another rather characteristic trait or feature of humans not yet mentioned: They are not only acting beings (Gehlen) (i.e. the being consciously orienting themselves towards goals, plans, and some other overriding objectives), but (s)he is more specifically the being

who tries to materialize goals *better and better* by acting, conceiving, and deciding. (S)he is at the same time the personally acting, planning, thinking, judging, and performing being. Humans are the achieving beings par excellence. Authentic and autonomous action, creative personal performance and accomplishment are the necessary ideal traits of a real human being. "*Eigenhandlung*" (authentic actions and activity) and "*Eigenleistung*" (authentic and positively evaluated personal achievement) are among the most fitting characteristic traits of humans. Genuine life is personal, authentic or even consciously autonomous acting and achieving<sup>1</sup>.

Without pushing up this trait of "the achieving being" to the status of *the* would-be one and only characteristic of humans, I would like relate it - which is easy enough to do, after all - specifically to sports and athletics.

Let me first try to play with a bit of pseudo-etymology: with the notion of the *homo performans*, or, for that, *homo performer*. The achieving being is obliged indeed to use patterns, shapes, and structures in order to create and to orient her or himself or to act in meaningful ways. It has to pertain towards *form, to apply and conceive of forms*. (S)he can only achieve by utilizing and/or creating identifiable patterns or structures, i. e. *per formas, by forms*. Thus, (s)he depends on this and is even committed to exteriorize some form of forms, to project intentions, to achieve external products etc. Only creative product- and even "self"-exteriorization allows self-reflection. Self-perfection is only possible by performing, i.e. via personal achievement. This would include most activities of goal-oriented, even systematic, well-trained acting and performing - also in the sense of the word in "the performing arts". Everybody performs parts, takes roles in the theatre of everyday life. In some sense, we are all actors playing in the drama of our lives (Goffman (1959. By the very way of forms - by and in using forms and forming her or himself - *homo performer* comes to understand and yet to make her or himself.

The achieving being – that concept is more specific than the notion of the acting being, or any other one-trait characterisation of the human. However, this facet of characterisation clearly comprises the capacity of acting and action orientation, striving for goals, tasks and, in particular, improvement. It comprises the necessity of an external projection, i.e. self-exteriorization, into a work or an oeuvre, a result of an action or a record.

To be sure, in our age of media, TV, computer imagery and even "virtual reality" people need pictures and images as well as the arousal of their capacity for imagery; but they need even more than hitherto the active involvement of bodies and selves-as-yet-to-develop to really profit from the offered movie and colour pictures world and computer games which so easily seduce and don't really require a bodily demanding or actively engaging or even strenuous action, which youngsters so dearly need for their development and wellbeing! Instead, already then, in childish make-up, already all the manipulative practices and procedures of catching and capturing the young flexible minds by precarious vicarious templates in the form of effectively, yet passively arousing moving pictures, colours, fabricated events and stories would seduce the youngsters, who are by nature keen on running and moving, towards the life of a "couch potato" in front of the TV screen. Later, in their adolescent and adult lives, all the well-known mechanisms of alienation and manipulation within the "administrated world" tie in: institutionalisation, bureaucracy (red tape), functionalisation, segmentation, symbolization, vicarious representation, delegation, organisationism and even "Reality" shows or the mania of "outing oneself" in public or on the screen, in the papers etc. – without any underlying achievement, effort, or really active bodily and mental engagement. Showing off and boasting, just pretending to have accomplished something remarkable without having really done so, has unfortunately become a wide-spread strategy in our society honoring rather the public image of seeming successful than really achieved hard work or strenuous endeavours and efforts. "*Esse quam videri*"<sup>2</sup> read the Latin proverb of old: Real being (active) instead of mere appearances.

The trend towards a totally prefabricated and vicariously replayed pseudo world seems to have almost displaced towards remote ecological niches any proper personal and authentic initiative, not to speak of autonomous, psycho-physical action. Personal acting in the genuine sense tends to become a sort of leisure hobby for the proverbial common man or woman. In serious life, they would hardly *act* any more, being only condemned to functioning.

By contradistinction, to be human, to act and stay alive means indeed to be active and creative - to be and remain *homo actor, performer, and creator*. Humans are only really alive as humans when they act and

---

<sup>1</sup> Achievement and achieving here may also be understood in a wider sense. However, it can also be interpreted in an even narrower sense, in a more specific cultural way, i.e. in the connotation and meaning of an ever-improving quantifiable or measurable performance and accomplishment. Thus far, we have no really comprehensive and encompassing philosophic-anthropological work about "the achieving being" (for a shorter essay on that topic, cf. the author's 1983). The philosophy of achievement is so to speak still in its infancy, though we have some social psychological and sociological treatises on "the achieving society" (McClelland), "the achievement motive" and the dynamics of "achievement motivation" (Atkinson, Heckhausen and others) as well as plenty books about the so-called "achievement principle" in society, economics, and sociology.

<sup>2</sup> Interestingly enough, an American state (North Carolina) still has this telling slogan as its state motto.

move (physically as well as psychically as well as mentally). We can extend Schiller's famous statement "Man... is only completely a man when he plays"! into the slogan "Human beings ... are only completely human when they achieve freely", i.e., according to their own choice and determination without being dominated only by, e. g., the necessities of sustenance, orders, etc. Personal and authentic, autonomous or well-adapted free action is a criterion of real and truly personal life for the achieving being. Only (s)he who acts, achieves and moves (something and her or himself) is really alive in the deeper, humanistic, sense. Life in its emphatic understanding is goal-oriented action, personal achievement, authentic commitment and performance including at times strenuous bodily efforts like the ones in top level sports.

### III. APPLYING ANTHROPOLOGICAL INSIGHTS TO ATHLETICS

It is easy to apply these anthropological insights to sports and athletics. Both have been and remain to be realms of bodily activity in which genuine personal involvement and engagement are required. This is true in the original sense, even as a paradigm of bodily *and* psychic involvement. Sports actions and achievement cannot be easily, pretended or obtained surreptitiously, vicariously achieved, or even delegated. In this sense, sporting achievements are accomplished by personal endeavour and effort. They consist, ideally speaking, in genuine and honest actions resulting in an adequate assessment of performance and output. Sports actions and performance would require personal - at least usually nowadays in top level athletics - almost total devotion and commitment. "Concern for bodily excellence" - to use Paul Weiss's (1969) nice phrase - is nothing to play at or with loosely or to be ridiculed. Athletic action and achievement require spontaneity, serious commitment and at times extraordinary self-disciplining. Even leisure sports and games depend on such personal effort, bodily as well as psycho-physically active involvement. Personal freedom means here consciously and deliberately to agree with and abide by the extant rules. Some such freedom is to be found in the free variations of action and planning strategies within the framework and limits of the rules and standards. As chance, it is somehow expressed in the changing situations as also in the vicissitudes and unpredictability of a competition event. Finally, a feeling and experience of personal freedom may typically result and be gained, if you really have symbolically achieved a victory over yourself or over an opponent or against nature, say a mountain or storm or distance, e. g.: think of the experience of overcoming the notorious weakness after twenty miles of a marathon. In purely playful leisure sports the very establishing and changing of the rules as we go along provides an additional means of ex-pressing and constituting a freedom of action - you may think here even of a Wittgensteinian interpretation of "following a rule"! In the end, regarding that Adorno (1969) was certainly wrong in judging that sport would essentially be a "realm of non-freedom, wherever it is organized".

It is true though, in top level athletics there are indeed at times instances of manipulation, alienation or even compulsion and domination exerted on athletes by officials, authoritarian coaches, doping doctors, the notorious public pressures for and expectations of spectacular records, pressure of the media, journalists, etc. But these are external phenomena that do not necessarily touch the essentially voluntary action of a free athlete. Only an athlete who autonomously devotes her or himself to a strenuous regimen of training is at times capable of extraordinary accomplishments: you can command somebody to march, but not to establish a world record or, say, to climb Mount Everest without additional oxygen intake.

Achievement in its wider sense is more general than competition (although competition is one of the best means to improve achievement capability). The characteristic Homeric slogan mentioned above of athletic and Olympic contests ("Always to be the best, distinguished from everyone else", see above), is certainly not the only Olympic norm of the best possible achievement, although it is rather significant and characteristic for the very Olympic tradition and culture of achievement. The Olympic idea, thus, is mainly characterised by a specific principle of achievement, namely the agonistic or competitive one. However, even in the Olympic Movement, the harsh ideal norm of being the one and only victor is - or at least should be, ideally! - mitigated or put into a somewhat more restricted perspective, as shown by Coubertin's well-known phrase "The most important thing in the Olympic Games is not to win but to take part". Educationally speaking, it is indeed more important to perform at one's personal best, to achieve the best possible personal result, to be able to participate in the Games of the sports elite and to fight fairly. Indeed, most of the conducive effects and impacts of a rigorous athletic training and of a genuine top level achievement motivation can be gained without being the eventual, say Olympic, champion. Sometimes, it is rather an educational challenge to stand defeat, though nowadays even the very fact of having won an Olympic victory seems to be a special test for the athlete's personality to see whether (s)he can come out of the public and commercial aftermath uncorrupted<sup>3</sup>. In our publicity-afflicted society, the victorious athlete also has, so to speak, to pass a test of personal maturity.

The ideal models of the "sovereignty of the autonomous and enlightened athlete" and of the so-called "democratic" (i.e., actively participating) style of coaching were once established and elaborated in the practice

---

<sup>3</sup> Even in antiquity, again Pythagoras (according to Bowra) said, though it would be important to take part in the Panhellenic Games like the Olympic ones, it would as well be essential for the athlete not to win - because of the dangers of being seduced and corrupted by the aftermaths of, say, an Olympic or Isthmian victory!<sup>o</sup>

of coaching crews at Ratzeburg/Northern Germany during the fifties and sixties – n. b. with my cooperation as a member of one Olympic champion eight and, later, as an amateur coach of a World Champion eight oar shell (1966). Then, in a speech on the occasion of the German rowing championship (1965), I had already summed up conclusions from my practical experience in rowing and coaching. I talked about the ideal standard and model of an "autonomous" and "enlightened" or, rather, "sovereign" ("*mündiger*") athlete. The results regarding the so-called "democratic" style of coaching were also based on the late Karl Adam's experience, the most successful and (scientifically and philosophically) erudite coach ever who had revolutionized coaching methods in world rowing at the time.

#### IV. THE OLYMPIC CHARTER AND VALUE SYSTEM

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

In order to achieve these goals it should be worthwhile and conducive to elaborate a new "Olympic philosophy". Ideas about a necessarily pluralistic and multi-faceted anthropology and about the multi-compatibility and multi-identifiability of the Olympic Idea and Olympic Movement have to tie in (see the author's 1964). The values and goals of the Olympic movement are those of a truly international and inter-cultural movement. They are a fascinating symbol of the unity of mankind in its higher aspirations. In this, even ambiguity and vagueness of many components within the Olympic Idea can and did lead to a social gathering and uniting impact and toward a real social effect of multi-compatibility and multi-identifiability of the Olympic movement (cf. below and the author's 1964, 1979).

A somewhat more concise definition of the term "Olympic Idea" would necessarily comprise this pluralistic structure of values, norms and basic features of the Olympic movement. The values of tolerance, equal participation rights, equality of opportunities and qualifying as well as starting chances, respect of partners, competitors, and sport opponents, the idea of a symbolic unity of mankind, the achievement principle and the respective idea of an Olympic achieving elite are indeed values of such a formal character, functional norms so-to-speak which are compatible with many different cultural contents. All this is reflected already in the Olympic Charter, e.g. in § 6 and 3: regarding the autonomy of the Games, the Movement and the respective institutions, the National Olympic Committees and the IOC, rejection of any discrimination on political, racial, sexual or religious grounds etc. One should also look to Coubertin's explicitly "most important principle of today's Olympia": "*All games - all nations*" which, however, interestingly enough, does not appear at all within the Olympic Charter. The most famous Olympic slogan "*Citius, altius, fortius*" (§ 6) could and should be supplemented by "*pulchrius*" ("more beautiful") and "*humanius*" ("more human(e)") capturing the aesthetic and humanitarian aims of the Olympic Movement. Indeed, the Olympic philosophy has to be worked out according to an intellectual level of discussion up-to-date reflecting the far-reaching cultural and not only the sport components. The Olympics are in need of a more encompassing and concise description of the intellectual and philosophical content as well as of the Olympic conception of humans. The Olympic philosophy and the Olympic anthropology have to be developed in the future in order to be able to cope with external dangers cropping up from commercialism and nationalism and to successfully reflect the overriding impact of the Olympic idea and sports and actively achieving life in general.

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

The Olympic Games undoubtedly have political<sup>4</sup> influence beyond special partisanship: They may

---

<sup>4</sup> Generally speaking the IOC should more actively and more politically serve the supra-nationality and internationality of the movement by using political means in order to guarantee a relative political non-partisanship, the Olympic neutrality. This cannot be obtained by preaching ideals only, but by courageously using political means. This seems to be all the more promising since the Olympics are a really prestigious international enterprise on a planetary scale by now. Though the Olympic movement cannot bring about world peace as a direct consequence as would be alleged sometimes, it can certainly serve an indirect mission in getting the peoples to understand and respect each other in a benevolent way using the Olympics as a symbol of a more peaceful and better world and for an ideal unity of mankind. The Olympic movement has to remain aware of and consciously pursue the humanistic, educational and philosophic dimensions of its idea in order to live up to its honourable

have no *directly* effective peace mission as it is sometimes alleged but they constitute a symbol of a better and more human world, an understanding among the athletic youth crossing all national and cultural boundaries: All this furnishes the values and goals of the Olympic movement with the identity and union of a truly international and intercultural movement. They are a fascinated symbol of the unity of mankind in its higher aspiration. In this, as mentioned, even ambiguity and vagueness of many components within the Olympic Idea can and did lead toward a social effect of multi-compatibility and multi-identifiability (cf. my 1964). According to the goals of the founder of the modern Olympic Games, Pierre de Coubertin, as stated in the basic principles of the International Olympic Committee, the Games are intended to gather the world's youth at a great quadriennial sports festival to create international respect and goodwill and help build a better, more peaceful world.

As a consequence of the multi-identification and of the gathering impact also an *intercultural* collective and/or integrating effect is a function of the unspecific character, generalisability, formality, functionality, impartiality and cultural tolerance of the Olympic value system (Lenk 1964, 14 ff et passim). Thus, its famous contribution to an "understanding among peoples" occurs *indirectly* through being an effective symbol. Certainly, the Movement has and "only has the strength of a great ideal" (Brundage). Together with the fascination and the intercultural and international multi-compatibility that is quite an advantage.

It is inappropriate to overload the Olympic idea with the exorbitant demand of a substantial and significant peace mission and direct political functions. This allegation would perhaps even diminish its actual social effectiveness. Its contribution should be seen *indirectly* as an effective, exemplary symbol of political neutrality that develops an ubiquitously acceptable value system, which still would and could render notable influences on a "unity" of internationally understood goals and traditions, and offer public opportunities for developing understanding among representatives of various peoples and cultures.

The Olympics offer extant public opportunities for young athletic representatives of different nations enabling them at least to meet and learn to know and in part understand each other. In this sense, the Olympic Games and, moreover, the Olympic Movement fulfil an important symbolic role and function as regards an ideal unity of humankind. The Olympic Movement has to remain aware of and consciously pursue the humanistic, educational and philosophic dimensions of its idea in order to live up to its honourable tradition even if in danger today as ever since. The Olympic Movement is too important a humanistic idea to get sacrificed or to fall victim in the jungle of commercialism, telecracy and nationalism or to leave it to the short-sighted pragmatic orientations and operations of political and sport officials and administrators only. This is all the more important for the non-sportive components, elements and guide-lines of the Olympic Movement as, e.g., its value systems as well as its humanistic, anthropological and philosophical foundation. If there are any - Olympic philosophers should step to the front! They should not only start thinking and working, they also should enjoy some kind of resonance on the side of the public and by the Olympic officials - who thus far for the most part, unfortunately, are opportunistically and technocratically minded – they apparently don't very often even read nor think very much by way of , say, digging deeper.

## V. ATHLETIC AND OLYMPIC "MYTHS"

In this sense, do not Olympic Games - as a symbol of peaceful unity of mankind and youth - reflect a positive and special quasi "mythical" role - even today, besides the fact that in ancient history they were founded on a religious myth? (To be sure, "ideal type" symbols do have an important, quasi-"mythical" effect, even in a rather sober modern world which lacks in enthralling and particularly world-wide goals.) If 'myth' can be understood in an extended secularized sense, then this is certainly the case here. 'Myth' characterises a model that illustrates a meaning and valuation, and would reflect these connotations in a symbolical guise. These interpretations of meaning have developed historically in cultural traditions. Their illustration is evident in typical, exemplary situations described dramatically. When by a dramatic staging and the visualization of well-known concepts may create, circumscribe or define meaning for less well-known phenomena, "myths" develop and offer guidelines for meaning constituents and interpretations, both being typical and explanatory. (I called the theoretical description and modelling of these phenomena and the social philosophical interpretation a "mythological" approach which would figure in fact under the guideline of my methodology and philosophy of scheme-interpretationism (see my 2003).) In sport, these modern quasi myths create and transfer meaning in a visible way that is usually more dramatic and dynamic and often more festive than events meanings of everyday life.

In competition sports, "myth" is prevalent as a symbolic role of acting. The roles fit together, in the simplest confrontation, in visible dynamics and drama. The dramatic presence of the event and the historical immutability of each action and decision under the judgement of an excited and enthusiastic public are notably effective. In the simplified confrontation of competitive athletics, this can be a microcosmical illustration of

---

tradition.

almost archetypal dynamics.

The dramatic and quasi “mythical” event of the Olympics, its experience and outstanding character if not uniqueness would explain both the symbolic role and also the athletes’ and the spectators’ fascination for the respective Olympic sports activities. This is especially stressed in the historical uniqueness of Olympic Games. Sports action, and especially participation in the Olympic Games, is neither normal life in a nutshell nor the focus of daily life. In quasi myth(ological) symbolization and development, it results in a characteristically simple model of a vitally intensified, emphasized and contrasting mode of action in the form of role playing. The Olympic Games and the Olympic idea are distinguished from daily life by their tradition, the history of the ancient and modern Games, the intermingling with intellectual and artistic symbols and philosophical and pedagogical concepts (see my 1964, 1972, 1976, 1979). Top level sport — especially in the form of Olympic competition - symbolically and dramatically reflects the basic situation and the self-overwhelming and "active fighting accomplishment" of the athlete, who is - so to say - the “Herculean” man (or woman, if that

km) of Western culture. The sports “myth” and its fascination are characterised by self-expression and self-confirmation in aspiring to achievement, the dream of mastering nature and acting rationally and under control with a minimum of equipment, enhanced vitality, the desire to cross and remove limits (Ortega y Gasset), risk taking, pressing for the lead or advantageous position, surpassing existing achievements, the restriction to technically unnecessary goals and unnecessarily limited means for achieving these goals, as well as the dramatically dynamic role-confrontation during competition. Masterful strength, swiftness, ability, body-control and endurance symbolize human capabilities through a quasi-mythical interpretation of the human's fundamental situation. The fascination of sprint events, for example, cannot be completely explained rationally without referring to the symbolic "mythical" principle of the autonomous mobile human being, or to lost chances and experiences, or to the attractiveness of conquering spatial distance through personal strength, initiative and achievement motivation.

Ideally speaking, the athlete would dare to enter a new field of human achievement behaviour and endeavour, namely the field of a symbolic demonstration of strength, not only so much over others but equally also over her or himself. Athletic achievements also offer adventurous opportunities for gaining distinction in a basically uniform society, which nevertheless emphasizes individual values. The Olympic athlete thus illustrates the “Herculean myth” of a culturally exceptional achievement, i.e. of actions an activity being essentially unnecessary for life's sustenance that is nevertheless highly valued and arises from complete devotion to striving to attain a goal very difficult to reach. The memory of having proved oneself in athletic competition and systematically learning discipline in training and self-confidence does not only develop and gain from winning but also from honest participation in an Olympic or other outstanding athletic event. As a person, the athlete would/could build up personal self-esteem by knowing that (s)he has done her or his best (as Coubertin said: "The most important thing in life is not to have won, but to have fought well").

Looking back at these aspects, the athlete may establish personal stability and continuity of personal experience, confidence or even distinction within a tradition. He had devoted himself to an extraordinary task and stood the test in his own and others' eyes. Thus, Pythagoras (as quoted by Cicero<sup>5</sup>) was wrong in this matter: top level sport, especially Olympic athletics, does not only compactly reflect normal life, it is also a symbol of an emphasized and *exalted* vital life, of outstanding feats and devotion for extremely unusual achievements. Pythagoras forgot about the “mythical” interpretation that Olympic competition has for spectators and active athletes. His remark was undoubtedly aimed at the human habit of making “myths” too common an element of

---

<sup>5</sup> Cicero wrote (Tusc. Disp. V. III 9): "Pythagoras [...] replied that the life of man seemed to him to resemble the festival\* which was celebrated with most magnificent games before a concourse collected from the whole of Greece; for at this festival some men whose bodies had been trained sought to win the glorious distinction of a crown, others were attracted by the prospect of making gain by buying or selling, whilst there was on the other hand a certain class - the best type of free-born man - who looked neither for applause nor gain, but came for the sake of the spectacle and closely watched what was done and how it was done. So also we, as though we had come from some city to a kind of crowded festival, leaving in like fashion another life and nature of being, entered upon this life, and some were slaves of ambition, some of money; there were a special few who, counting all else as nothing, closely scanned the nature of things; these men gave themselves the name<sup>5</sup> of lovers of wisdom (for that is the meaning of the word philosopher); and just as at the games the men of truest breeding looked on without any self-seeking, so in life the contemplation and discovery of nature far surpassed all other pursuits." – Thus spoke Pythagoras - in my favourite quotation regarding the naming of that special “breed called” after that and still today “philosophers”; it is interesting for sport philosophers that their characterising label was once introduced in connection with the Olympic Games of antiquity!

everyday life.

When an athlete like the high jumper Fosbury in the sixties of last century discovered a new and victorious jumping style through intelligent variation; when the gymnast Fujimoto in Montreal attempted his decisive exercise with a fractured knee and completed his performance with a double summersault seconds before he collapsed (and won the gold medal for his team), one cannot claim that characterless, mechanical, systematized and manipulated muscle-machines accomplished pre-programmed and planned exploits. Today as in the past such cases have shown that athletic achievement cannot dispense with, ignore or shove aside extraordinary motivation, initiative, effort, personality and dedication, even devotion. This is particularly true today for areas in which almost all sports disciplines at Olympic level require total involvement in pursuing the attainment of unusual results. A top grade athletic achievement remains to be a real personal act requiring total involvement. Within a societal support system it may be facilitated and promoted, but it cannot be precisely or mechanically generated. The feat is and will always be individually accountable. The athlete is not a characterless producer of records; he is a personality - with heights and depths and abundant interesting variations, even and especially when he loses.

Thus, the outstanding personality as regards will-power, self-devotion, nearly total involvement in a goal-oriented activity is still found in sport today. The athlete is a symbol of "the achieving being".

Nowadays, the Olympic Games have lost the old religious values integrated in them within the Greek culture. However is that the only fact that has enabled them to gain world-wide attention? Religious and mythical secularization and independence were a pre-requisite for their accommodation in so many cultures, hence their world-wide effect. Even a certain ambiguity and multi-compatibility have been a cause of the world-wide Olympic "gathering effect". The "mythical" factors seem to appear in the Olympic Games only indirectly, formally and functionally. But they are important for the future of the Games. These factors especially require institutional regulation that is externally evident in forms, signs and Symbols expressed in ceremonies and protocol. But exteriorization of symbols and institutionalization, even innovative reforms of the protocol and ceremonies themselves, are not enough. The Olympic spirit should remain alive and be adapted to modern requirements, e.g. to the open-minded critical intellectuality of today's younger generation. Some outdated components of the idea as, for instance, exaggerated nationalism, victory at nearly any price, forced manipulation, the totally autocratic style of coaching, the dictatorship of officials, the other-directedness in motivation, have to be eliminated or at least mitigated. Ceremonial change alone cannot bring about this necessary reform. In addition, we can hardly expect the new positive concepts, these thrilling and exciting goals, novel guidelines and ideals from an *empirical* scientist who is usually restricted to the positions, methods and results of his discipline. This intellectual reform of the Olympic Movement and sports is also basically a philosophical task. This most important reorientation has yet to occur. It has to be a reform in the philosophical foundation, a renovation of the Olympic philosophy. Again: philosophers to the fore! We - as philosophers - have indeed to take seriously the fashionable and to a considerable degree justified criticism of the last half century launched against athletics and achievement orientation. We have to develop a new philosophy of unobstructed, freely chosen achievement actions and of the creative achieving being. In short, we have to delineate a new philosophical anthropology of both creative accomplishment and the achieving personality. We should also apply this philosophical anthropology to sports, science, art, play and any creative action, as well as to education.

## VI. A PRINCIPLE OF ACHIEVING CREATIVELY

There is still a *creative* principle of achievement or, rather, a principle of creative accomplishments and the respective processes, or, rather personal actions, of achieving. The traditional discussion thus far was too much related to the once fashionable social criticism in the philosophy and sociology of achievement, the performance principle and the "achieving society". One should not only interpret the comprehensive achieving principle in but a crude economical way. This would amount to a misunderstanding. I cannot go into details here of my counter-criticism of the social critics of the "achieving society" (see my 1972, 1979). Besides the economic and sociological achievement principles, we have at least a socio-psychological one - and a socio-philosophical one, too. The socio-philosophical aspect would mean that the human being is (amongst other necessary traits) indeed "the achieving being par excellence": one has to distinguish clearly between freely chosen, self-motivated achievements and secondarily motivated or even obtruded achievements. Philosophically and also social psychologically speaking, they are really very different. It is the first-mentioned kind of achieving activity and achievement motivation including the too often forgotten pleasure of achieving and being personally active and/or productive which I would really be creative, being characteristic for *homo performer* and *homo creator* at the same time. This kind of social philosophical - and personally experienced - achievement principle which has still to be further elaborated in philosophical terms is far from being outdated. (This is also true for the other variants of the achieving principle, even if we do not live in a strict "achieving society" as McClelland thinks: cf. again my 1972, 1979, 1983.)



Educationally speaking, it is necessary to provide plenty of opportunities for creative achieving actions (in the narrower competitive sense, and in the top level as well as in the wider sense). Every man and woman, in particular every youngster, has a human right to have access to creative activities. Creativity, primary motivation, personal commitment and devotion, a plurality of creative activities in a personal combination (multi-sidedness) - in short: any opportunity for creative achieving activity has to be provided and fostered by the very families, elementary and high schools, colleges, universities and most certainly and effectively by sport teams, clubs, boys' and girls' scout groups as well as by other rather official institutions and voluntary organizations. The liberal and democratic state has to emphasize and support these tendencies and should provide plenty of such opportunities to foster and further such activities, initiatives, and motivations. It seems necessary - at least in Europe - to develop and support as well as honour a new positive culture of creative achievements - of the creative achievement and performance principle (see my 1983).

Achievement being a cultural and social phenomenon - is not purely just a natural process or phenomenon. It is at the same time a psycho-physical, social psychological, cultural and also, in some sense, spiritual - and basically even an important anthropological and philosophical topic - even more so if and insofar as it is pertaining to symbolic results, processes, methods and mediating procedures. It is a fundamental anthropological model, if not a category, and an effective vehicle of self-understanding and self-development, as well as of social identification, judgement and appreciation.

Certainly, the human interest in personal authentic and autonomous acting, the respective concern for excellence by achieving and accomplishing something by one's personal efforts and endeavours, is, methodologically and philosophically speaking, an ideal with a normative hue and a convincing appeal, a demanding symbol, an expression of our eternal orientation towards the better. Achieving and "winning", though, by contrast to the notorious slogan by Tatum and Lombardi, is "not everything" nor "the only thing", but without achieving, the performing human being, *homo performer* and *creator*, could not make much sense of her or his life, and their higher life aspirations. Without creative human achievements and initiatives, higher civilization nor even our material culture would have been possible at all. *The cultural being* (dependent on culture) *is the achieving being*. To wit, *authentic and autonomic personal acting* ("*Eigenhandeln*", "*Eigenleistung*") is important for a creative life. Therefore, amongst other creative activities, sport can and should be a genuine means of human creativity, a function of which philosophers of an active life like Ortega y Gasset had certainly thought (see his 1930, my 1972, 1979).

Ideally, an Olympic athlete indeed would serve here as a notable example, a paragon model visibly illustrating this symbolic meaning of an actively achieving and "sporting" life. The Olympic idea, the mentioned mottos of Homer and Coubertin, which are conveyed best in sport and athletics, is certainly incorporated, even incarnated, in the personal histories, roles, and symbolic function of the Olympic athletes - be they winning or losing participants. We should not - although we still often do - exaggerate, like the ancient Greeks, the idea of victory as well as of the one and only winner and the all too widely spread orientation at the unique winner ("singular winner orientation", "*Singulärsiegerorientierung*" as I had called it elsewhere). Indeed, to "have fought well" (Coubertin) and to have been fair, to have done one's best - this also seems to be a very important lesson to be learned from the Olympic idea.

#### REFERENCES

- [1]. Adorno, Th. W.: Stichworte. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp 1969, 2nd.ed.
- [2]. Lenk, H.: Werte, Ziele, Wirklichkeit der modernen Olympischen Spiele. Schorndorf: Hofmann 1964.
- [3]. Lenk, H.: Leistungssport - Ideologie oder Mythos? Stuttgart: Kohlhammer 1972.
- [4]. Lenk, H.: Herculean "myth" aspects of athletics. In: Journal of the Philosophy of Sport 3 (1976), 11-21.
- [5]. Lenk, H.: Social Philosophy of Athletics, Champaign, IL: Stipes 1979.
- [6]. Lenk, H.: Eigenleistung. Osnabrück-Zurich: Interfrom 1983.
- [7]. Lenk, H.: Die achte Kunst: Leistungssport - Breitensport. Osnabrück-Zurich: Interfrom 1985.
- [8]. Lenk, H.: Erfolg oder Fairness? Münster: LIT 2002.
- [9]. Lenk, H.: Grasping Reality. Singapore (World Scientific) 2003.
- [10]. Ortega y Gasset, J.: El origen del estado (1930). In: id. Obras completas. Madrid 1950.
- [11]. Weiss, P.: Sport - A Philosophic Inquiry. Carbondale-Edwardsville: Southern Illinois UP 1969.

Hans Lenk. " An Anthropology of the Olympic Athlete Towards a Modernised Philosophy of the Olympic Games and Athletes." IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science (IOSR-JHSS). vol. 24 no. 09, 2019, pp. 13-21.