

from athletics to *arête*

a critique of the reification of sports

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Abstract

Contemporary athletics has been tied up with sponsorship and commercialization for its success. The visible endorsement of products during major sports events has become the norm, and sports has become a commercial tool. This paper critiques the commodification of sports, drawing from the Ancient Greek practice of play, where play is understood within the context of *arête*, and not simply instrumentally in terms of market concerns such as wealth, fame, and profit. To demonstrate the value of the ancient Greek practice of athletics, the paper will explore the works of Plato and Aristotle. The paper aims to show how the ancient Greek practices and the rumination of key thinkers may help us recover the lost value of athletics as a profound and a meaningful activity.

Keywords

Athletics, *arête*, reification, Ancient Greek philosophy, excellence



Introduction

Athletics has come to be increasingly colonized by market forces. A far cry from the Ancient Greek period, in which the famous Olympic Games emerged, nowadays, sporting events rely heavily on sponsorship and advertisements for their continued existence. Contemporary athletics has become a tool and strategic ally of corporate entities in pushing their financial interests.

At a cursory glance, this is not bad since the intrusion of market rationality also paves the way for sports to maintain global reach, allowing sports fans all over the world to watch a major sports events that physically they could not witness. However, the increasing control of the market over athletics has also diluted its essence to the extent that sports has become a mere commodity. This is evident from how the market has changed how games are played to serve primarily corporate interests. Economic remuneration and rewards encourage athletes to play the game because it pays, and is a good venue where one can establish a career. Consequently, athletics in the long run has degenerated, and has lost its value as a profound and meaningful activity.

Looking back to the Ancient Greek practice of sports can be edifying, and can shed light on the contemporary malady. The masters of the Ancient Greek period, Plato and Aristotle, conceived of sports not as a venue for income or profit maximization, or just an arena to display athletic competence, but as a higher endeavor that elevates the soul.

The paper argues that the Ancient Greeks can contribute to bringing back the essence and significance of athletics. Sports is not only a venue for competition, but more importantly is a locus of *arête*, or virtue and excellence, by which one can achieve the full flourishing of human existence. The paper is structured into five parts: The first section will dwell on empirical cases of reification of sports, or how the market colonizes athletics. The second part will discuss the Ancient Greeks conception of athletics. The third part will tackle Plato's views about sports and the soul. The fourth part is about Aristotle's view of *arête* in relation to sports and physical excellence. The last part will offer a brief conclusion.

The Reification of Sports: Its Pervasive Conquest

Athletic activity has entered the market space and become its financial surety. English (2016, 48) argues that professional sports is “thriving due to broadcast deals and sponsorship.” The funding from interested corporate entities makes it possible to stage a megasports event that reaches vast audiences, who—due to geographical distance and financial constraints—would not otherwise have been able to witness it. The involved corporate sponsor does this as a marketing strategy, a means of brand positioning in order to “enhance or leverage its sales by influencing the consumer behavior” (Farrelly et. al. 2005, 1017). The event becomes successful not only because of the participation and passion of athletes, but also because of the support of its sponsors through financial resources, logistics, and other infrastructures. Athletes who endorse products for corporate entities receive a hefty amount, while companies receive marketing endorsements that eventually translate into huge profits. The mutual advantage that both parties enjoy makes it a successful partnership, thus establishing a solid template for staging various sports events.

Notwithstanding these benefits, the practice of sponsorship and increasing commercialization also have adverse effects. Sports is increasingly made to conform to market demands that change its end, form, and content (Sewart 1987, 172-175). Market rationality and pressures change the rules of the game, devaluing the original intent and nature of athletic activity. For instance, the Los Angeles Olympic Committee (LAOC) deliberately held a marathon close to television’s primetime, when an earlier schedule would have been more conducive for athletes to run. This prompted Steve Scott to lash out against the move: “The Olympics are just a staging ground for someone’s commercial interests. The games are no longer an event to bring the best athletes together. They’re a TV extravaganza to sell McDonalds and Xerox” (Sewart 1987, 175). In tennis, players would “tank matches” so they could quit and join another tournament to make more money, or make internal arrangements and “split the money” (Sewart 1987, 176). Boxing is another sport tainted with the same problem. Its two boxing organizations, WBC and WBA, have undermined and bypassed the rule of objectively selecting challengers who belong only to the top 10, in a desperate effort to forge a lucrative contract with television networks (Sewart 1987, 176). The result is usually a watered-down, dry, and uneven match which undermines the integrity of boxing as a competitive sport. Finally, the

selection for the 1983 college football post-season was based on “box office and Nielsen Ratings rather than on performance” (Sewart 1987, 177).

The commodification of sports extends not just to individual and team sports, but to media journalism as well. In Australia and United Kingdom, interviewing athletes would only happen if there were a corporate sponsor (English 2016, 348). The journalist’s questions are not supposed to tarnish the image of the athlete, and are framed and shaped so as to gain a future audience with the athlete, which brings up the question of “whether media journalism is news or publicity” (English 2016, 348-349). Sports journalists can only ask questions that are not detrimental to the athlete’s image, especially if the athlete endorses a popular brand. Media journalists are pressured to conform to market criteria so as to continue their tenure in the industry. Journalism becomes a means of publicity for the athlete, with revenue returns from the corporate sponsor in mind.

The bidding process for hosting a sporting event organized by internationally sanctioned bodies is likewise pervaded and dictated by market logic. FIFA and IOC, for instance, take advantage of a country or city’s desire to host an event by charging high bidding fees, in order to pay for its expenses and the lucrative salaries of its executives (Zimbalist 2016, 154). The problem, however, is that the payment for the bid comes from taxpayers’ money, but the revenues are “not shared with the host city or country, but are retained by FIFA and the IOC (Zimbalist 2016, 154). FIFA gives puts a premium on the ability of a country or a city to meet its economic demands, placing little value on non-monetary considerations like the sentiments of the fan base and people’s passion for the sport.

The same market saturation can be found in basketball. The decision of FIBA to grant the hosting rights to China rather than to the Philippines is anchored heavily on economic criteria and infrastructure. The Philippines relied heavily on its fan base, and the fact that it is a basketball-crazy country, where basketball is the primary sport. Basketball should be hosted by a country which loves it, and whose passion for the game is beyond doubt. For example, during the aftermath of super typhoon Yolanda, people lost family members and property, but drew strength and resiliency from praying and playing the sport. Basketball is life for Filipinos, but China’s economic leverage is beyond the

Philippines' reach. Thus, the Philippines failed to meet the one deciding criterion employed by FIBA.

The reification of sports can support the advocacy against racial or gender discrimination, but only on a superficial level. Griffin (2012, 167) points out how the NBA, which is dominated by black male athletes such as LeBron James, but in which teams are coached and vastly owned by whites, is guilty of "commodifying blackness to gain money for the white[s]." According to this logic, blacks should not be discriminated against because they are a hot commodity, a huge source of revenue for sneaker companies. Companies such as Nike sometimes join the fight against discrimination, as when it terminated its endorsement contract with Manny Pacquiao after his offensive remarks against gay people. Arguably, however, the company only did this because any association with Pacquiao may be detrimental to its economic revenues from customers who belong to the LGBT community. Highlighting commercially driven political advocacies ignores sports companies' exploitative activities. After all, Nike was also charged with employing children in factories, and using sweatshop labor in manufacturing their shoes. When an institution accepts the endorsement of a company engaged in an unethical practice, is the institution also unwittingly supporting such practice?

The conquest of non-economic spheres of life such as sports and play by market rationality has only corroded the values these spheres uphold. Athletes are seeing sports as a career with monetary consideration being of paramount significance. The "play for pay" attitude can cascade into corrupt habits such as game fixing, unfair play, doping, and other unethical practices. The competitive spirit and the passion that fuels the game can easily be dismissed as pure sentimentality. Even if competition and athleticism are present, it can be simply to entertain a crowd, responsible for huge gate sales and endorsement, especially when a game, event, or fight is hyped. Floyd Mayweather, as a case in point, is notorious for trash talking in order to sell tickets to his fights, but is clever enough not to engage in heavy slug fights, and is known for running around the ring and for choosing opponents unlikely to tarnish his unblemished record. This makes him a dull and boring fighter to watch. As Stewart (1987, 182) forcefully concludes, "what we are witnessing is the reduction of athletic skill, competitive contest to a commodified spectacle sold in the market for mass entertainment."

Back to the Exemplar: Ancient Greek Athletics

The Ancient Greeks conceived of sports bereft of any instrumental, pecuniary aim. This is not to say that they did not offer rewards for victors of sports competitions. An important component of athletics is *athla* (prize), but this would often be a crown of olive branches. According to an anecdotal story, this made Xerxes of Persia wonder why the Greeks would not compete for money (Lunt and Dyreson 2013, 18-19). Indeed, competitions in the ancient Olympia were called the "competitions of the wreath (*stefanitis agon*) and not *chrematitis agon* (competitions for money)" (Fournaros 2005; Pisk 2006, 68). The debauchery that comes from money is far from the concerns of the Ancient Greek athletes.

Away from the modern market saturation, the conception of athletic competition by the Ancient Greeks is unique and profound. In terms of semantics, the Greek phrase for Olympic games is *Olympiakoi agones*, in which *agon* literally means "struggles or contests or even pains." Meanwhile, *paizein*, the Greek word for play, also means child, and is not used "for any event in Greek athletics" since athletics was played by grown men (Young 2004, 4-5)." The wealth of terminological meaning also goes beyond pure athletic competition. For example, Pisk (2006, 68) argues that the original *agon* means creativeness, especially in the aspiration for victory and honor, as well as the unveiling or unfolding of truth (*aletheia*), a term famously employed by Martin Heidegger. *Agon* is construed in this sense by the Ancient Greeks not as despair or loss of meaning, but as something interwoven with *arête*, translated as virtue or excellence. The victors are not simply the strongest and superior, but those who aspire for or embody virtue. The victory reflects the virtue that the athlete has cultivated in his training, which means *arête* is an integral part of winning, not simply a mere instrument for wealth and profit.

However, this is not to say that the Ancient Greeks were totally indifferent to money and rewards. Some scholars, F.P Jozsa for instance, would argue that the Ancient Greek athlete received monetary compensation from the state, but the practice reveals that *mammon* is not the primordial aim of the competition. Reid (2014, 9), comparing the modern and Ancient Greek athletes, writes that the latter is "more of a monk than an entrepreneur, and he would have expected to approach his training with complete discussion and focus." The Ancient Greek

athlete did not approach the game with fame and wealth in mind. He viewed it as an arena where he could train his body in order to develop his higher faculties, especially the soul. This motivation and the frame of mind made him more attuned to the virtues that athletics instills in the person, even if he loses the game.

Beyond money and profit, the Ancient Greeks valorized honor in victory and competition. This can be seen in how they paid homage to their great athletes. The renowned ones like Theagenes were considered and treated as heroes. Through their example and achievement, young people knew they could also leave "immortality in honorable memory," by becoming athletes who were "worthy of highest veneration" (Reid 2014, 9; Pisk 2006, 68). To be honored and venerated, even after death, was desirable and valuable in itself. The Ancient Greek athlete was focused on achieving "the ideal of *autotelicity*—the experience of an activity that is intrinsically rewarding and meaningful" (Reid 2014, 9). Honor and respect were sought by the Ancient Greeks for their own sake rather than as means for enriching their wealth.

The legacy of a great athlete who exemplified *arête* was worthy of emulation and utmost respect. He served as an inspiration not only because of his courage, discipline, and mastery of craft, but also because of his character and virtue, which the whole *polis* valued. The notion of self-actualization one achieved in athletics was performed also according to the virtues that the community upheld. This was essential, for the early Greek athletes were not seen as individualistic, with no regard for the *polis*.

Plato on Sports: The Harmony of the Soul

Plato, an Ancient Greek philosopher and athlete himself, did not write directly about sports and athletics. To conceptually extract his view on sports, one has to sift through his monumental work *The Republic* and his other dialogues. A discussion on sports would have to dwell on the various concepts he discussed extensively in his works, such as the tripartite soul, education, and justice.

In the *Phaedrus*, Plato (246ab) asserts that the soul is composed of three parts: reason, spirit, and appetite. He used the analogy of the charioteer and two horses to show how the three parts should function. The charioteer

represents reason, the highest faculty and the commanding principle. The good horse represents the spirit while the bad, unruly one represents the appetite. In *The Republic*, the three parts of the soul are revealed in the three classes of citizens in the ideal state, namely the philosopher-kings, the guardians, and the artisans. Their corresponding virtues are, respectively, wisdom, honor, and pleasure (435e-444e).

Plato argues that harmony in the soul, as well as harmony and justice in the city, require the proper functioning of their three parts. Reason should rule over spirit and appetite; spirit should help reason achieve its goal, while the appetite must heed the command of reason. In the *polis*, the rulers must be the philosopher-kings, who go through different stages of training such as study in mathematics and dialectics, in order to prepare them for the serious task of ruling and governance. The guardians, the class from which the rulers are chosen, must focus on training and discipline, for they are tasked to defend the city. Finally, the artisans must focus on their craft, and must not interfere with the tasks only given to the ruler and the guardians. Plato hopes for a perfect stratification where each class would function according to its expertise, thereby producing harmony, order, and stability in the polis.

Plato gives primacy to reason and seems to devalue the body. For instance, he recognizes the proclivity of the appetite to defy reason and try to rule over it, which is the cause of trouble and discord within the soul. The bad horse has the tendency to hijack reason. Although reason knows the right path and the good horse sees the vision that it wants to achieve, the bad horse is prone to wandering off, preventing reason from achieving its goals. The superiority of reason over the appetite is further strengthened by Plato's belief that the soul originates in the world of *eidōs*, where reality and the exemplars exist. He says that the soul originally existed in the world of forms in which its three parts enjoyed perfect harmony, with reason reigning over spirit and appetite. However, even in this perfect state, the lowest part of the soul pulled reason down to the point that it fell from the world of forms, and entered the visible world, where it found itself engaged within the body. The result was more trouble within the soul as it was now exposed to the needs of the body, and so the rebellious tendency of appetite was further strengthened (Stumpf 1994, 65). The body is not the home of the soul; it is its prison.

The difficulty lies now in fleshing out Plato's view on sports in light of his seeming denigration of the body, which athletics and physical training actively involve. Scholars such as Reid (2007), however, draw upon metaphors and fragments about athletics in *The Republic* and other dialogues in order to show the role of athletic training in the proper functioning of the soul. For instance, in *The Republic*, a telling dialogue between Socrates and Glaucon reveals the relevance of physical training:

Socrates: Have you noticed, I asked, how a lifelong devotion to physical exercise, to the exclusion of anything else, produces a certain kind of mind? Just as a neglect of it, produces another type?... one that type tends to be uncivilized and tough, the other soft and over-sensitive...

Glaucon: Yes... excessive emphasis on athletics produces an excessively uncivilized type, while a purely literary training leaves men indecently soft...

Socrates: What I should say therefore is that these two branches of education seem to have been given by some god to men to train these two parts of us—the one to train our philosophic part, the other our energy and initiative. They are not intended the one to train the body, the other mind, except incidentally, but to ensure harmony between energy and initiative on the one hand and reason on the other by tuning each to the right pitch. (Plato 1992, 410C-412a)

The training of the guardians, which is the subject matter of Socrates's and Glaucon's dialogue, indicates that balance between the mind and the body is essential. Physical training should not be ignored since it would leave the guardians soft. At the same time, there is the caveat that excessive training would also make them savage and indecent. A guardian with a sound mind but a soft body is an aberration that Plato does not condone, even if he emphasizes the primacy of reason over appetite.

Conversely, Plato sees the value of rational control over athletic activity. This is shown in his analogy for an unjust man as an impulsive, unthinking runner in the marathon who races too fast and ends up shamed: "They leap away sharply at first, but they become ridiculous by the end and go off uncrowned, with their ears dropping on their shoulders like those of exhausted dogs" (Plato 1961, 613b; Reid 2007, 164). The analogy is reminiscent of the role of reason in guiding spirit and appetite and setting the right course to take. An unthinking

athlete who operates solely on the promptings of emotion is not the ideal one for Plato.

The spirit also relies on physical engagement to develop itself. Carr (2010, 795-96), citing Plato's *Laws*, writes that "one could not be a spirited agent without some form of physical exercise or engagement." The spirited part of the soul relies on physical training and activity in order to fulfill its function of helping reason. The synergy among reason, spirit, and appetite, despite their differences in rank, is essential for the soul's health and proper functioning. As Carr (2010, 795-96) asserts, "Platonic moral psychology provides a key role for knowledge (*technē*) of physical training in the development of virtuous qualities of the soul."

The harmonization of the three parts of the soul requires proper education. "The whole psyche must be turned away from the preoccupation with the material world so that it may contemplate higher goods" (Plato 1992, 518d). Education trains the soul to contemplate the higher good, as opposed to indulging in lower-order pleasures which only debase it. As for athletics,

The building of character through sport in *The Republic* is achieved through the unification and harmonization of intellect, spirit and appetite in a way that orients them away from worldly pleasures (such as fame and fortune) and toward higher ideals such as justice and service. (Reid 2007, 164)

The education of the soul helps an athlete contemplate the highest good, which is beyond the material rewards that victory offers.

However, athletics and the development of *arête* in the soul is not just a personal endeavor that benefits the individual. In *The Republic*, Socrates accentuates the social, communal, and to some extent, political dimension of athletics:

Surely the Olympic victors are considered happy for a small part of what belongs to these men. Their victory is not only fairer but the public support is more complete. The victory they win is the preservation of the whole city, and they are crowned with support and everything else necessary to life—both they themselves and their children as well; and they get prizes from their city while they live and when they die receive a worthy burial. (Plato 1992, 465e)

While the contribution of athletes could not compare to the higher tasks entrusted to the guardians, Plato sees the value of athletes in the *polis*. Through their victories, they also contribute to the “preservation of the whole city,” even though they are not directly tasked to defend it. In turn, the high value that the city confers on them is revealed through public support and the provision of a “worthy burial” when they die. This shows that athletics is not just for the glorification or enrichment of the individual; rather, it makes a noble contribution to the whole community.

Aristotle on Athletics and *Arête*

Like Plato, Aristotle did not explicitly talk about sports and athletics in his works. His magnum opus the *Nicomachean Ethics* talks about virtue, the good life, and the *Summum Bonum*; his work *Politics* talks about ruling and governing the city and how to achieve the good life in the *polis*. Yet in these works, one can glean the fragments of his views on athletics and its deeper and wider meaning that goes beyond competition for fame and money. Aristotle’s focus is on *arête*, and sports and athletics are to be understood within this framework.

In *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle (1906, 30) writes, “every art and every inquiry, and likewise every act and purpose, seems to aim at some good.” He discusses the concept of *telos* or end, by which beings naturally seek to actualize themselves. For example, a seed naturally becomes a tree, which its *telos* ordains. Things go through the process of act and potency, whereby a being’s potency is actualized such that it becomes what it is intended to be. Aristotle also discusses the concept of *ergon* or function, whereby a thing is said to be good if it is able to fulfill its function. For example, a pen is good if it fulfills its function of writing, a ball its function of bouncing, and a chair its function of providing a sturdy and comfortable seat

Finally, Aristotle (1906, 30) discusses (human) excellence or virtue:

The virtue or excellence that we are to consider is, of course, the excellence of man... and by the excellence of man I mean excellence not of the body, but of the soul; for happiness we take to be an activity of the soul.

Excellence is an activity of the soul in accordance with reason; a good act follows the dictates of the highest faculty of man. *Eudaimonia*, translated as happiness or human flourishing, is an activity of reason, and is not the hedonic type of happiness that exalts the pleasures of the lowest faculty. In fact, by excellence, Aristotle means two senses: intellectual and moral. He thinks that the ultimate good is an intellectual virtue which is contemplation, an activity done for its sake, and not for anything else. Moral virtue lies in the mean between excess and deficiency. It is acquired through good habits, or constantly repeated actions. One learns to be good by doing the good. In the same way, the bad person acquires vice not by nature, but by habit.

For Aristotle, the intellectual life, which is the highest life, values morality, for a full flourishing of human existence would not be possible without the latter (MacAllister 2013, 915). The contemplative life is not possible without the moral virtues of temperance, courage, and magnanimity. The counterpart vices of stinginess or cowardice would distract an individual from achieving the highest life, making him or her focus on the self and the frivolous affairs of human existence. A person full of vices will most likely not aspire toward an intellectual life, as the pleasures of the senses would continually feed and dominate the appetitive and irrational part of the soul. Furthermore, an undisciplined and unhealthy body will tire easily, to the point that the person could not attain the level of transcendence required by contemplative activity.

It is in this context that Aristotle in the *Politics* asserts that physical excellence is essential for achieving the highest level of existence:

Since it is obvious that education by habit-forming must precede education by reasoned instruction.... it is clear that we must subject our children to gymnastics and physical training. (1138b)

Physical training prepares children in the long run for the contemplative life. It disciplines the body so that it becomes more attuned and predisposed to respond to the higher needs of the soul. Of course, physical excellence is auxiliary and does not supersede Aristotle's conception of the highest level of *arête*, which is intellectual. Nonetheless, the *arête* that one achieves in physical training and athletics, though not equal to contemplation, remains an excellence that Aristotle recognizes (MacAllister 2013, 917). Holowchak (2005) explains further that his conception of the good in relation to athletics is of three

sorts: “physical, bodily and external virtues such as courage and moderation... he favored training in gymnastics so long as it was prescribed at the right time in life and was undertaken ultimately for the sake of cultivating ethical character, not as an end in itself.” This means that athletics could not be the *summum bonum* since it is done for the sake of something else, and not for its own sake. However, it is still essential in cultivating character and developing moral virtue. As already asserted, it is also essential for the full flourishing of a person’s intellectual or contemplative life.

Furthermore, the coupling of athletics and *arête* and the human good is evident in Aristotle’s metaphors in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. For instance, in relation to Olympic athletes, he says, “As in the Olympic Games it is not the most beautiful and the strongest that are crowned but those who compete, so those who act rightly win the noble and good things in life” (1099a3-5).

For Aristotle, competition is not understood as the cutthroat desire to win and overpower opponents. It is not seen as a display of hubris and pride. The section on friendship and moral rivalry in the *Nicomachean Ethics* explicitly states the aim of every competition: “it is for the noble—the good of the soul—that friends do compete” (1169a8). Competition is an avenue whereby an individual strives to be his best while also making his opponent better. In the process, he attains excellence, and is “better off than he would have been had he not competed” (Kraut 1988, 27).

As for the prize of the competition, Aristotle does not depart from *arête*, from contemplation, which is a “blessed and godlike” life. He remarks, “that which is the prize and end of virtue seems to be the best thing and something godlike and blessed” (1099b 16-170). *Arête* is at the core of competition, and its prize for victors is still linked to virtuous activity of the highest kind.

Money as remuneration and as aim of competition is far from Aristotle’s concerns. In fact, he explicitly denounces money or *mammon* as the main motivation of any competition, and in fact of any human activity:

As for money-making life, it is something quite contrary to nature; and wealth evidently is not the good of which we are in search, for it is merely useful as a means to something else. So we might rather take pleasure and virtue or excellence to be ends than wealth; for they are chosen on their own account. But it seems that not even they are the

end, though much breath has been wasted in attempts to show that they are. (Aristotle 1906, 8)

The trajectory of Aristotle's view on athletics and physical training is centered on *arête*, not money. The ancient Greek athlete would have been puzzled at how their modern counterparts use athletics and sports to gain fame and wealth, and to advance their careers. Aristotle's view of moral virtue as the mean reminds athletes to avoid excess and deficiency as either one is bad. Too much preoccupation with fame and wealth makes one forego personal values and the ideals of sports.

Granting that athletes would not be great without the underlying moral virtues of discipline, temperance, and perseverance, actual motivating factors remain to be seen. Some may be motivated by legacy, fame, wealth, and career. It's doubtful whether one would be willing to play as intensely without the guarantee of a lucrative contract. The more a player performs well and draws huge fans, the more his or her market value increases. The desire to be a champion can undermine the virtue of perseverance and sacrifice, motivating an athlete to join a team that not only offers more money, but also guarantees wins. The formation of super teams reveals athletes' desire for easy wins. This is ironic because *agon*, from which the word athletics is derived, implies struggle, as well as the difficult but rewarding process of training to excel until one achieves one's goals. It seems that today, in light of the reification of sports, this has become an anachronistic ideal. Today, when a player says he wants to be great, he may really mean that he wants to be a premium commodity. Success is now measured not so much by rings and trophies as by endorsements and advertisements.

In the end, Aristotle offers us the perennially timely idea that sports and athletics can provide a useful platform for developing an ethical character. This pertains to a constellation of moral habits which are performed not for any pecuniary aim, but in recognition that a virtuous life is essential for our full flourishing. Athletics is an avenue where one can transcend mere play, and understand better what human good and human life are truly about.

Conclusion

The paper has attempted to show the significance of the Ancient Greek conception of athletics as *arête* in order to counter the increasing market colonization of sports and games. The corruption of contemporary athletics, which alters how games are played, stems from a lack of virtue, and is fuelled by the desire to gain fame and wealth. When athletes play for pay, they focus on the instrumental value of sports, ultimately diminishing its value. Sports loses its potential as a profound and meaningful activity that can make one virtuous. This is not to say that contemporary athletes could not be virtuous while benefitting from the market's support. However, one can doubt the pureness of their intent to cultivate virtue, for as long as they are trapped in the level of the instrumental, driven by the desire to become a premium commodity.

The Greek conception of *arête* as espoused by Plato and Aristotle is a virtue in accordance with the highest faculty of human beings, i.e. reason. A virtuous athlete is not moved by external motives or controlled by the desire to satiate the appetitive element. Athletics develops or cultivates physical excellence as a step up to the intellectual life, the life of contemplation which transcends the demands of the senses for gratification.

What the Ancient Greek practice of athletics can teach us has to do with the non-instrumental, metaphysical moorings and value of athletic activity. Plato teaches us to value what is essential to the soul, not just the temporary satiation of our appetite for wealth and fame. Meanwhile, Aristotle teaches us that athletes should cultivate an ethical character, which is required not only in playing sports, but more importantly in human flourishing. Following Aristotle, a good athlete is not necessarily a good person. Some great athletes may be involved in doping, and some may batter their spouse. Being a good person requires more than excellence in one's craft. In the end, the deeper grounding of athletics on *arête* helps us contemplate the profound value of this activity.

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