

Introduction to Nietzsche and Sports

Introduction

According to a letter to his mother and sister, which Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) sent from Schulpforta in March 1863, there was a 'ball', on which occasion the older schoolboys played quite well, but his class didn't.¹ Nietzsche is referring to a school festival here, and the play his class performed was Schiller's *Wallensteins Lager*.² Despite his veneration of the intoxicating and overly dramatic God Dionysus, Nietzsche was quite the opposite type, as a school boy; 'Fritz', as his mother and sister called him, was the typical introvert bookworm, who liked to read and play the piano, but couldn't stand noise and rough play, let alone sports. And whilst modern sports were upcoming in the second half of the nineteenth century in Europe, Nietzsche indeed only mentions the word 'sport' once, in a reference to erotic chase.³ 'Sportsmen' are referred to only once in his works, again in 1887, i.e., in *On the Genealogy of Morals* III 17, in a metaphorical sense.⁴

1 KSB 1: 232.

2 Benders/ Oettermann, *Friedrich Nietzsche Chronik in Bildern und Texten*, Munich and Vienna: Carl Hanser Verlag, 2000, 95.

3 NL 1887 – 10[53] (KSA 12: 482).

4 GM III 17 (KSA 5: 379).

So, Nietzsche's own lived experiences with sports seem to be confined to horseback-riding, which he learned together with his best friend Erwin Rohde in early 1868, and hiking, which he did daily and with fervent ardor after his early retirement in 1879 from university life.⁵ Legend has it that Nietzsche was a rather talented horse rider and to his own surprise he was chosen for the horse artillery in fall of that same year, in spite of his severe myopia. His riding career ended prematurely in March 1868, though, when, during a too-quickly performed jump, he fell with his breast on the knob at the front of the saddle and ripped several muscles and ligaments and bruised some ribs.⁶

The 'and' in the title 'Nietzsche and Sports' of this issue therefore strikes us as odd: we cannot learn anything from the historical development of sports by looking at Nietzsche's life; Nietzsche doesn't seem to have had any substantial interest in sports, nor did he ever reflect on sports as activity of personal, social or cultural value. He never developed a 'philosophy of sports' e.g., a phenomenological account of movement or an ethics of fair play and a sport[wo]manship. So why this issue on the topic of Nietzsche and sports?

The justification for this issue resides in the application of Nietzsche's thoughts on play and *agon* to contemporary sports culture. Nietzsche's philosophy is marked by two elements that are key for sport studies: his aesthetics and ontology revolve around the concepts of 'play' and 'competition' or '*agon*.' What is more, his ethics rests on the stylization of the self and his anthropology and philosophy of culture are built on the idea of the moral and spiritual transformation of persons from 'camel' figure into 'lion' and

5 Benders/ Oettermann, 162.

6 Bennders, R., and Oettermann, S., 174.

finally 'child' figure. One of the hallmarks of this transformation is the 'naturalization' and 'aestheticization' of personal belief systems and perception of self and world, turning the hierarchy between body and mind upside down. In so doing, he is the first philosopher of modern philosophy to attach more value to the body than to the mind in epistemological matters.

*Nietzsche's philosophy of play and **agon***

In Nietzsche's ontology – following Heraclitus – conflict is the source of all things and his primary aesthetic interest lies in the transformation of life's pain and tragic events into beauty.⁷ This is clear from his earliest works onwards. Nietzsche's inaugural lecture "Homer and Classical Philology" (1868) and his essay "Homer on Competition" – part of the "Five Prefaces to Five Unwritten Books" (1872) – attest to his idea that strife is at the core of all things – an idea that later returns in his famous and unfortunately often misunderstood concept 'will to power'. Artistic and sportive competitions made up a great part of the religious festivals in Greece, and Nietzsche refers to those quite a bit, especially in his early works. He claims that aesthetic competition in an international setting is of fundamental importance for the development of high art and that the Germans first need to master the Greek art of competition if they are to become of any importance at all in Europe's artistic culture.⁸

Nietzsche's philosophy is permeated by the awareness of the dark side of everything that appears as light and the existential necessity for lightness, serenity, playfulness, and beauty to endure the deep, dark, and highly painful abysses of life. Developing an intense relation with his body, probably under the influence of his ever deeper and longer depressions, his mis-

sion becomes to introduce the body into philosophy. He does so by literally 'transfiguring' his personality, which he considers the product of his physiological-psychological well-being, into philosophical theories and methods of radical critique of Humanism, Christian and Kantian morality, rationalism and Cartesian philosophy of mind.

Had Nietzsche lived in the twentieth century, he might as well have been the first body-phenomenologist and/or philosopher of sports. Or we can honor him still with those titles. His idea of freedom as something that can only be attained by overcoming resistance, and his conviction that humanity can only thrive when approaching life like a child in play with destiny, further strengthen the idea that Nietzsche actually has much to offer to the philosophy of sports. In fact, if we are to develop a philosophy of play and sports, it would be quite an omission not to involve Nietzsche's thoughts on play, *agon* and their value for life.

Overview of the articles in this volume

This is confirmed by underlying articles. These range from Nietzsche's *agonism* applied to the case of pro-wrestling to Nietzsche and sailing, and Phil Jackson's coaching style explained in Nietzschean terms. The originality of these papers shows the breadth of the philosophy of sports, and of the potential of Nietzsche's thought for its expansion and deepening. The philosophy of sports is a relatively new discipline within philosophy and therefore still very much in development. Unfortunately, the ethics of doping is so prominent in this discipline that other topics are often overshadowed by the question of fair play.

7 Deleuze, 17.

8 See Prange, Martine, *Nietzsche, Wagner, Europe*, Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013.

The articles in this volume show that the value of Nietzsche's thought resides foremost in strengthening other important topics in the philosophy of sports, such as the phenomenological, individual experience of sports and the athletic body; the value of competition for human flourishing; and the aesthetic experience of pleasure and pain as fundamental athletic experiences.

The first article in this volume, "Beyond Face and Heel: Nietzsche's Agonism and the Pro-Wrestling Spectacle" by Abelson, showcases this. Abelson argues that professional wrestling blends athletic and theatrical elements and that the story of a wrestling match is the story of values in conflict, reminiscent of Nietzsche's ideas about *agon*. In this way, wrestling models both the healthy contest (*Wettkampf*) itself and the threat of its disruption (*Vernichtungslust*).

A key point in Abelson's argument concerns the idea that the producers, performers, and consumers of pro-wrestling form a larger community because the spectators are a constitutive part of the spectacle. As such, he claims, the role of the crowd in pro-wrestling bears interesting similarities to that of the chorus in Attic tragedy as Nietzsche conceives it in *The Birth of Tragedy*. Like tragedy, pro-wrestling is an idealization of reality, whose very artificiality allows for its aesthetic effect.

Abelson concludes that the character of the wrestlers and their stories as a reflection of the crowd's valuations may lead to new possibilities for the *agon*, and therefore meaning and value creation due to the recent transformation in the makeup of the crowd conducive to flamboyant characters such as Dalton Castle, and openly LGBTQ performers such as Sonny Kiss, Effy and Ashley Vox and women wrestlers entering the sports.

The second article, "Nietzsche, Zarathustra, and the Three Metamorphosis of the Spirit: Possible Contributions to the Concept of Game" by Odilon José Roble, Marcus Vinicius Simões de Campos, and Fidel Machado de Castro Silva discusses how the concept of 'game' is used at the end of the parable "On the Three Metamorphosis of the Spirit" in Nietzsche's *Thus spoke Zarathustra*. They acknowledge that Nietzsche did not have in mind discussing the phenomenon of game but nevertheless they claim that his thought may open for us fields of reflection that have been little explored in the philosophy of sports. In the philosophy of sports, (analytic) philosophers follow the definition of Bernard Suits that "playing a game is the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles" (Suits, Bernard. *The Grasshopper: Games, Life, And Utopia*. Orchard Park, NY: Broadview Press Ltd., 2014, 43). With their article, the authors hope to broaden the perspective on our understanding of why human beings are inclined to play games with more of a continental philosophical approach. This is a very important undertaking for the philosophy of sports as a whole, given that Suits' account happens to be the dominant account in the philosophy of sports.

The authors ask, "What possible interpretations about game at the end of the parable could we realize?" "Would this excerpt have some contribution to the reigning notion of game?" They set the specific objective to present a vitalist, affirmative conception of the player spirit. The player spirit is represented by the figure of the child, who creates worlds rather than responding to the world in which it lives. While the camel and the lion still respond to a situation, the child is proactive. It is not interested in the past, only in creating out of the flow of abundance. She doesn't experience life and reality as something to be fled, rejected or changed, but as something she can play with and enjoy. Not the spirit of gravity but a lighthearted spirit rules her. As such, the child at play symbolizes the unity with rather than the fight against life, and affirms its continuous creation and destruction beyond any morality.

In “Sport, Instrument of Nihilism or Praxis of Lightness,” the author Luc Viet Anh Ha asks whether sports can be seen as a Nietzschean praxis. In order to qualify for it as ‘Nietzschean’, sports must be either life-enhancing or life-depreciating, and this depends on how whether they incorporate or expel instincts. The author derives from Nietzsche’s account of the triangular relationship between instinct, morals and soul in the *Genealogy* that “sport is an activity which enables a relief from a world of spiritual valuation and from its weight.” This is so, when sport is driven by ‘active forces’ and not ‘reactive forces’, as activity refers to vitality, health, and abundance and reactivity to sickness. Sports as driven by active forces “allow for a certain alleviation from our human-all-too-human condition,” it is argued, as sports, considered a creative process, “takes place in a reactive world and transmutes the reactive forces into active ones.” This doesn’t mean that ‘health’ or building character should be the justificatory reason for doing sports. On the contrary: that would be a ‘reactive interpretation’. The real justification of sports is an existential and vitalist one: to give way to ‘a surplus of strength’ and not to enhance vitality or health. Does the child not play out of this abundance of life, and not because it wants to be healthy?

However, sports are way more than a life-affirming activity, also in Nietzschean terms. The article “Nietzsche’s Collective ‘Will to Power’ and the Coaching Style of Phil Jackson,” written by Bradley Kaye argues that is also an activity aiming for gaining knowledge of the self. Socrates, it is remembered, was not only a philosopher, but also a wrestler. Any philosophical meditation, it is argued, “must be understood as immanently produced within the body and its impulses, instinctual drives, and primitive forms of affect which can be “trained” and directed through gymnastic athletic competition.” The agonistic, competitive spirit is part of the philosophical spirit, leading to a ‘deepening’ of the spirit. Understood as such, the job of a coach is ‘to inspire the agonistic, playful, and competitive “flattening” of the opponent, not by being caught up in the opponent’s game, but through the spiritual deepening of his players’. Phil Jackson is put forward as the example of such a coach par excellence, because he creates a ‘we-Über-

mensch’ team that “allows for the exertion of energy” in the most effective way, i.e., by ‘benching the ego’ and letting every player discover their own role. The ‘we- Übermensch’ team does not spill energy by working too hard, but it passes the ball so effectively that it doesn’t seem to cost any energy. Hence, while the opponent is exhausted and low, ‘flattened’ on energy, the ‘we- Übermensch’ team plays with energy without spilling anything.

In “The Waves Rise Around Your Mountain,” Daniel Brennan explains surfing in Nietzschean terms, referring to the dramatic interlocution between art and nature. Hiking and mountaineering seem obvious, but this paper focusses on surfing in reference to Nietzsche’s prosaic writings on the sea, inspired especially from this beautiful passage in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*: “Am I sitting high and dry then?” — asked Zarathustra, laughing. — “The waves around your mountain,” answered the soothsayer, “are rising and rising, the waves of great distress and tribulation: and soon they will raise your boat and carry you away.” — Zarathustra was silent at this and marveled.

The most sought-after experience of surfing is riding a wave so that one becomes enclosed in the cavern created by the breaking wave. This is known in surf-culture as ‘barrel riding’ or ‘tube riding.’ Brennan argues that “the barrel is much like the description of caves in Nietzsche’s writing, especially in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.” Surfers describe the barrel as a place where time stops or where one meets god. It is a place of wisdom getting, where one emerges utterly changed by the experience. That Zarathustra could sit in a cave with the waves crashing below him, does seem to suggest an experience quite similar to surfing, he claims.

A whole different claim is made by Yunus Tuncel in his essay “Shooting with Arrows: Archery Symbolism in Nietzsche’s Agonism.” Nietzsche frequently uses archery symbolism throughout his writings. In fact, this symbolism may be “the most used sport metaphor in Nietzsche’s texts,” Tuncel writes, probably also because Nietzsche was exposed to archery in school. The arch or archery is also a symbol that turns up very often in mythical and

philosophical texts throughout world literature, of which Nietzsche may have been well aware. Tuncel indicates that archery in Nietzsche's work seems to represent a symbol of struggle and a symbol in Zarathustra's cosmology, but what interests Tuncel the most is the transformation of archery as a means of war into a means of 'contest':

"What is striking about contest in archery is how it best exemplifies Nietzsche's idea of transfiguration of war into contest; a weapon of annihilation turns into a weapon of competition. We may also list sports like shooting and fencing in this respect."

Tuncel discusses three uses of archery in the context of Nietzsche's agnostic philosophy: 1) truth-telling and shooting with an arrow; 2) tension and release of tension (or *Gelassenheit*); and 3) the rational and the non-rational, thoughts and maxims. Let me confine myself to the first use, which is most remarkable. In several texts, Nietzsche associates truth-telling with arrow-shooting. What does this association reveal about Nietzsche's concept of the truth? As Tuncel explains: An arrow "pierces, penetrates into depths, and shatters" and "Nietzsche often reserves this metaphor from archery for poetic or aphoristic truths:"

Rhymes are deadly little arrows.
See the tremor, see the quiver
When they pierce the vital marrows
Of the lizard, or his liver! (*The Gay Science*, "The Poet's Call," 353)

As we know, according to Nietzsche truth at bottom is a metaphor, of which we have forgotten that it is a metaphor. Metaphors are "fluid and fleeting like an arrow, which can reach depths and heights." Tuncel points out six 'overhumanly' qualities of archery, from directness to target. Let's not

forget that Europe needs free spirits 'who know their goal' and aim at the target: "But ...we *good Europeans* are free, *very* free spirits—we still feel it, the whole need of the spirit and the whole tension of its bow. And perhaps also the arrow, the task, and—who knows? — the goal." (*Beyond Good and Evil*, Preface, 3-4).

After reading the contributions in this volume, it is clear, to me, that Nietzsche has much to offer to the philosophy of sports. The philosophy of sports would do well to turn their attention more to Nietzsche's philosophy, especially if this discipline wants to expand its scope beyond the obvious (ethics of doping, fair play) and develop into the rich, exciting and promising discipline it can be by, for example, focusing more on its ontological and aesthetic qualities to affirm life, its *agonism* as part of it, and its creativity as life-giving power.

I hope you enjoy reading the articles in this issue as much as I did!

Martine Prange, Amsterdam, August 2020.