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Greek Mythology and Education: From Theory to Practice

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Abstract

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

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1. Myths in Ancient Greek Culture

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

2. Sporting Myths and their Pedagogical Value

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

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

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