

Cardinal Virtues in Sport: Prudentia

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ABSTRACT

Cardinal virtues present one of the oldest anthropological theories and ethical systems in the western philosophical tradition. Among other great ancient philosophers, Plato talked about four main virtues: prudence (practical wisdom), justice, fortitude (courage), and temperance (moderation). As these virtues are not arbitrary, but instead correspond to some fundamental characteristics of human beings, they are not only useful for moral decision-making, but they also present an original anthropological theory. This paper focuses on the role of prudence in sports.

Prudence has two aspects: it is a) cognitive, and b) decision-making. Perceptively it is turned toward reality, "imperatively" toward volition and action. As such, it is a fundamental virtue in sports practices. First of all, its role is in the cognition of the specific situations an athlete is in. In addition, it gives instructions as to how to respond to them. Prudence directed into the cognition of reality involves two main elements, namely *memoria* and *docilitas*. The role of *memoria* consists in developing and enriching special motor memory from past experiences, and so it is one of the goals of any practice of technical elements. *Docilitas* is the kind of open-mindedness which recognizes the true variety of things and situations to be experienced and does not cage itself in any presumption of deceptive knowledge. As such, it can be recognized in the concept of sports as "knowledge-gaining activity".

The other aspect of prudence is directed towards deciding what actions to take. With *solertia*, the athlete can swiftly, but with open eyes and clear-sighted vision, decide to do something good in a concrete situation. The second element is *providentia* (foresight), meaning the capacity to estimate with a sure instinct for the future whether or not a particular action will lead to the realization of a goal. This is demanded of all sports, especially competitive sports, where the deciding factor between top and average athletes is often not physical or technical abilities but the intellectual capacity (or tactics) to foresee what is going to happen on the field in the next few moments.

KEYWORDS

cardinal virtues, prudence, sports anthropology, sports ethics

Introduction

In the past few decades, virtues in sports have gained much attention. This is not surprising because it seems that some characteristics of virtues successfully respond to very complex practical situations in sports. Experiences show that the mere rules of particular sport do not assure good actions in sports. Plato

(360 B.C., 427a) has already pointed out that two things guide good actions: laws (or rules), which direct us from the outside, and virtues, which direct us from the inside. He was convinced that virtues are better than laws since it does not make any sense to promulgate laws among non-virtuous persons because they will disregard them. On the other hand, virtuous people are able to determine what is good and what is not, regardless of laws. Therefore, it is important to become a good person, since only then do laws or rules make sense. Plato¹ reveals four main virtues: justice, prudence (practical wisdom), courage (fortitude), and temperance (moderation, self-control)². But the question arises as to why there are only four virtues and not more. Plato responds that these four virtues represent the whole of virtues³. These virtues are evidently tightly connected with Plato's structure of the human soul, that thing which makes human beings what they are. But these four cardinal⁴ virtues are not the only virtues, whether in Plato's philosophy or in the philosophies of others. They are the "hinges" on which all the other virtues turn. They are the necessary foundation and precondition for all other virtues.

On prudence⁵ in general

Plato (360 B.C., 433b) and Aristotle (350 B.C., V, 3, 1129b27) thought that the first and most important virtue is the virtue of justice because, as they said, in justice all other virtues are included. Justice is an essential virtue for a good community, the ancient "polis". It seems that it is also preferential in sports, especially when we think about sports competitions. But, as later philosophy emphasized, the source of justice and other virtues is reason. Reason is one of the essential characteristics of the human being and of the majority of human acts. Therefore, to act in accordance with reason, the first demand is to have the virtue of prudence. Although Plato and Aristotle explicitly put reason only in second place among the cardinal virtues, they implicitly recognized its pivotal role in guidance. Plato said:

"Is there not one true coin for which all things ought to be exchanged? And that is wisdom⁶; and only in exchange for this, and in company with this, is anything truly bought or sold, whether courage or temperance or justice" (Plato, 360 B.C., Phaedo, 69a-b).

After Plato, St. Thomas Aquinas asserts that good actions are only those whose source is rooted in reason:

"It must be observed that the nature of a thing is chiefly the form from which that thing derives its species. Now man derives his species from his rational soul: and consequently whatever is contrary to the order of reason is, properly speaking, contrary to the nature of man, as man; while whatever is in accord with reason, is in accord with the nature of man, as man. Now

¹Cf.: Plato (360 B.C.). Republic, 427e. However, these four virtues were not Plato's invention. "As early as Aeschylus (Sept. 610), we find this canon of the four so-called Platonic virtues mentioned as the sum of the citizen's virtue. Plato took it over 'en block' from the ethical system of the early Greek city-state" (Jaeger, 1973, p. 106). The same four virtues can also be found in Pindar's Odes (458 B.C., pp. 24-28) and in the Old Testament of the Bible: "If one loves justice, the fruits of her works are virtues; For she teaches moderation and prudence, justice and fortitude, and nothing in life is more useful for men than these" (Book of Wisdom 8,7. Retrieved from <http://www.biblija.net/biblija.cgi?l=en>).

²From the history of western philosophy we can recognize four main philosophers whose ethics is based on virtues: Plato, Aristotle, St. Augustine, and St. Thomas Aquinas. Therefore, our research is more or less based on their theories.

³However, these four virtues are not rigid. Plato also mentioned other virtues in other writings (e.g., 360 B.C., Republic, 402c, 536a; Meno 74a; Protagoras, 330b, 349b).

⁴Cf.: Plato (360 B.C.). Republic, 428a; Phaedo, 69b. In the patristic time, St. Ambrosius (De sacr. 3, 2, 9; Expos. In Lucam 5, pp. 62-68) named them cardinal virtues - "virtutes cardinales" or "virtutes principales" (from Latin "cardo", "hinge") - because of their pivotal role in human flourishing. After that, the name "cardinal" became accepted for these four virtues.

⁵About the problem of the English translation, or rather the transliteration, of the latin word "prudencia" into "prudence", see: McCabe (2008), pp. 103-104.

⁶There is no agreement on the translation of Plato's words for cardinal virtue connected with reason. As P. Kreeft stresses (1990, p. 450), we can distinguish between wisdom, prudence, and art: "'Wisdom' is speculative knowledge (the knowledge of first causes); 'prudence' is practical knowledge (the knowledge of what to do); 'art' is productive knowledge (the knowledge of what to make)".

man's good is to be in accord with reason, and his evil is to be against reason"(Aquinas, Summa Theologica I, II, 71, 2).

After Aquinas, the modern German philosopher Josef Pieper wrote:

"The virtue of prudence is the mold and 'mother' of all the other cardinal virtues, of justice, fortitude, and temperance. In other words, none but the prudent man can be just, brave, and temperate, and the good man is good in so far as he is prudent" (Pieper, 1965, p. 3).

Because prudence is a central virtue in human actions, it is also one of the decision-making factors for being a good human being and doing good things. Therefore, it is not possible to exclude prudence from any sports activity.

As early as in Plato's theory, the four cardinal virtues weren't something arbitrary, but rather they corresponded to some fundamental characteristics of human beings. This was also true for Aquinas⁷. For this reason, they present a classical anthropological view on human beings. Cardinal virtues can be used as moral virtues in solving moral dilemmas, but first of all they are the original theory of human nature. As with any cardinal virtue, prudence is founded on the basic characteristics of human beings and is directed at perfecting them. Prudence corresponds to two fundamental characteristics of human beings: cognition and decision-making. Therefore, prudence has two aspects: it is 1) cognitive and 2) decision-making. Firstly it is turned toward reality, and secondly toward volition and action. Pieper wrote:

"So the prudent person, on the one hand, looks at the objective reality of things, and on the other hand, concerns himself with the willing and doing. But it is the reality at which he looks in the first place. And then, in virtue of the knowledge of reality he decides what is to be done and what not, and how it should be done and how not. So, really, all virtue depends upon prudence"(Pieper, 1949, p. 7).

As such, prudence is a fundamental virtue in human life as well as in sports practices: first, its role is in cognition of the specific and unique situations that an athlete is in; second, it gives instructions for how to appropriately respond to them.

Prudence in sports

We will present the role of prudence in sports in general, without focusing on any one sport in particular. However this application can be made to any specific sports activity. Prudence is more important in some sports and less in others. But there is no sport that does not practice the virtue of prudence. Virtue as such means enhancing the state of being human. Virtue is, as Aquinas said, the "ultimum potentiale"⁸, the ultimate of what man is able to be. "The virtuous man 'is' the man who develops goodness through his deeds out of his innermost inclination and substance" (Pieper, 1949, p. 6)⁹. Therefore, the role of the virtue of prudence is in developing human beings in general and athletes in particular to their utmost capacities.

Prudence as we present it is more or less identical to practical wisdom. The basic role of prudence in sports is in the cognition of the reality of the specific situations an athlete is in and the provision of instructions for how to appropriately respond to them. The first thing that is demanded of an active man is that he should be knowing¹⁰. The realization of good actions in sports presupposes the knowledge of reality. An athlete should know precisely the reality of his actual situation; this implies knowledge of himself and his body, his opponents, knowledge of the environment or spatial awareness, and knowledge of the sports activity or task which has to be done. All of these factors change rapidly during sports activities. Thus, cognition of oneself and of others and the environment is a crucial factor in any sports activity,

⁷See: Aquinas. Summa Theologica, I, II, 61, 2 and Summa Theologica, I, II, 63, 1.

⁸See: Aquinas. Quaestio disputata de virtutibus in communi, p. 17.

⁹See also: Strauss (1999), p. 136; Atkins & Williams (2005), p. xxviii.

¹⁰See: Aquinas. Quaestio disputata de virtutibus cardinalibus, p. 17.

especially during competition. Knowing the truth about the situation where one is therefore the foundation for any good action. Whoever does not know the true condition of real things cannot do good, for good is that which complies with reality. As we will see later, the ability to comprehend a concrete situation in sports as quickly and as correctly as possible can be the deciding factor between the average and the best athletes and the average and the best referees. Prudence, however, is not only the cognition of a situation. The main thing is that this knowledge of reality must be transformed into a prudent decision which takes effect directly in its execution. The prudent athlete or referee must therefore immediately direct his cognitions toward concrete realization in action.

For example, the essential characteristic of a good referee is to be just-to act and make decisions according to the real situation. As Pieper said (1949, p. 8),

“The fundamental attitude of justness (in the sense of agreement with reality), of objectivity, as expressed in the classical doctrine of prudence, was summarized in the Middle Ages in the following sentence, a sentence both grand and simple: Wise is man if all things taste to him as they really are”.

In this sense, a good referee is the one who, first, correctly recognizes and comprehends concrete situations in games and, second, makes decisions that are in accordance with the situation. The correct cognition of reality is paramount. To be up-to-date with what is going on in the game is necessary. Only based on the knowledge of truth can a good referee make decisions such as when to stop the game or when to give an advantage.

We can see that the prerequisite of justice is truth-the truth of cognition. Therefore, we can see that knowledge of truth also has a moral implication. Prudence and justice are more closely connected than they might appear at first sight. There is no justice without prudence. Prudence can protect a referee against the lack of objectivity because only an objective man can be just.

“The emphasis upon moral rules led to a neglect of the virtues, especially prudence”, wrote Hibbs (1997, p. 107). In the act of prudence, what we ought to do is defined by what we are and where we are and takes the circumstances into consideration. Therefore, prudence offers the chance to overcome “moralism” and/or “formalism” in sports. According to formalism, good is what should be because it should be; usually this is because it is written in the rules. But without some basic capacity for discerning what rules are relevant in a particular situation, the referee could easily ruin the game. Moreover, the problem of an infinite regression of rules seems unavoidable in formalism. On the other hand, the doctrine of prudence says that good is what agrees with reality; it should be because it corresponds with a concrete situation (Pieper, 1949, p. 7). Because of this, prudence is not important just for referees, but also for any fair play action in sports, where mere rules are surpassed. Namely, fair play actions do not correspond primarily to formal rules or laws of a particular sport; instead, they take into account unique and complex situations in sports, including all of the participants and moral goodness. The existence of acts of fair play in sports is the proof of a special kind of freedom in sports. If sports were preoccupied with rules, if sports were too legalistic and formalistic, there would be no place for fair play anymore. The feeling of freedom, which is one of the essential intrinsic values of sports, would disappear; with this loss of freedom, creativity and moral duty would also go away. Prudence is, therefore, an essential characteristic of fair play in sports.

Aquinas wrote about eight quasi-integral parts of prudence¹¹. We will emphasize only four of them that seem especially relevant to sports. We have already seen that prudence has two aspects: it is cognitive and decision-making. Prudence directed into the cognition of reality involves two elements: “memoria” and “docilitas”.

“Memoria”, or “memory”, means more than the capacity for recollection which we have by nature.

¹¹These are memory, understanding or intelligence, docility, shrewdness, reason, foresight, circumspection, and caution (Aquinas. Summa Theologica, II, II 49, a.8).

“The good memory which enters into the perfection of prudence means nothing less than ‘true-to-being’ memory. For the virtue of prudence resides in this: that the objective cognition of reality shall determine action; that the truth of real things shall become determinative” (Pieper, 1965, p. 15).

“Memoria” is therefore the first prerequisite for the perfection of prudence. In sports, athletes and referees must pay attention to what is going on. Only the correct cognition of a situation can ensure proper actions. But memory does not stop here: past experiences have an important role in recognizing and comprehending what is going on. Thus the role of “memoria” also consists of developing and enriching special memories (motor learning) from past experiences, and thus it is an important goal of any technical sports training, as well as physical education in schools. Sports games and disciplines which are based more on technical movement (e.g., gymnastics) are especially dependant on the memory of past body movement experiences. When an athlete again and again repeats similar movements in similar and different situations, he gains a special capacity to act quickly and almost automatically in very complex sports situations. Without “memoria”, athletes would have to learn body movements and body control from the beginning every day. But memory allows athletes to progress further, beginning with the easiest movements and progressing to more complex ones in different situations. The cultivation of “memoria” will therefore give an advantage to any athlete. On the other hand, nowhere else is the danger for prudence so great as here, where the “truth of real things” can be falsified, either by forgetfulness or by the assent of the will. This occurs, for example, when an athlete loses his proper motor memory, his body feeling for the execution of a movement, or when a referee does not properly see a foul, etc. The cultivation of “memoria” therefore demands a lot of training and repetitions to maintain peak performance.

The second characteristic of prudence is “docilitas”. It is the kind of open-mindedness which recognizes the true variety of things and situations to be experienced and does not cage itself in any presumption of deceptive knowledge. Pieper (1965, p. 16) wrote that docilitas means “the ability to take advice, sprung not from any vague ‘modesty’, but simply from the desire for real understanding (which, however, necessarily includes genuine humility)”. Like Socrates, an athlete must acknowledge that he does not know everything, and therefore it is worth trying to acquire the desired knowledge: knowledge about the correct execution of movement, knowledge about the challenge and task at hand, knowledge about his condition, knowledge about the other competitors, knowledge about the results of the contest, and the knowledge about the environment. As such, docilitas can be recognized as an essential characteristic in the concept of sports known as “knowledge-gaining activity”. Without the willingness to learn, the majority of sports activities would become too complicated to perform. Athletes need and use docilitas, open-mindedness, to learn new complicated movements and progress in their performances. Aquinas wrote that “in matters of prudence man stands in very great need of being taught by others, especially by old folk who have acquired a sane understanding of the ends in practical matters”¹². Similarly, all athletes know that advice of coaches and more experienced colleagues can help a lot in successfully overcoming challenges and making progress in sports.

“Solertia” is the “capacity for instantly grasping an unexpected situation, and deciding with extreme quick-wittedness” (Pieper, 1965, p. 13)¹³. With the aid of “solertia”, the athlete can swiftly, but with open eyes and clear-sighted vision, decide for the good in a concrete situation. It is worth noting that in sports activities, athletes rarely have enough time to reflect on what is going on in the game and what to do in the next moment, so decisions have to be made quickly. Important decisions in sports are usually made in the spur of the moment, without deep consideration. Paul Weiss (1969, p. 34) wrote decades ago that “Everyone of them [sports] offers a test of a man’s capacity to judge and to control himself”. Therefore, “solertia” is essential for a good athlete. In team sports games or individual disciplines, the capacity for fast cognition of complex and changing situations, as well as the ability to make sound decisions quickly, is essential. “Solertia” enables athletes to “stay in the game” during the ongoing activity, with speedy

¹²See: Aquinas. Summa Theologica, II, II 49, 8, 3.

¹³See also: Aquinas. Summa Theologica, II, II 49, 4.

evaluation of a situation and its requirements (Vendemiati, 2005, p. 83). When athletes gain “solertia”, they have the ability to almost unconsciously do the right thing at the right time. But “solertia” is not self-sufficient. “Solertia” can operate only on the foundation of “memoria” (acquired experiences) and “docilitas” (openness to new things and progress).

The last element in our analysis of prudence is also directed towards deciding what actions to take. This is “providentia” (foresight), meaning the capacity to estimate, with a sure instinct for the future, whether or not a particular action will lead to the realization of a goal¹⁴. This is demanded of all sports, especially games, where the deciding factor between top and average athletes is often not physical or technical abilities but the intellectual capacity to foresee what is going to happen on the field in the next few moments. Good athletes or players must somehow foresee what the situation in the game will be in the next few moments in order to prepare for it. Providentia is very demanding because it concerns concrete but contingent future objects about which we can never have absolute certainty; this is, on the other hand, possible in theoretical thinking. “Intuitions” of providentia can never ensure that what was planned will be realized, so in providentia it is not possible to avoid worry¹⁵. At the same time, providentia is one of the most attractive capacities. It is one of the most important characteristics which makes sports attractive. As spectators, we are often enraptured with the perfectly organized and executed actions which occur during the seemingly chaotic movements of players on the field. No human being can ever rationally calculate all of the possibilities that can happen during a game. Even before a game, a great deal of energy is directed into the consideration of which team has the best chances of winning, which individual competitor is better in some elements of the sport, and how the environment will change during the competition. Therefore, a lot of variables have to be taken into consideration, and the one who is the best in considering them will make the best decisions. Thus it is clear that an athlete with highly developed providentia will always have an advantage over other athletes. Once again, we can emphasize that “providentia” without other elements of prudence (“memoria”, “docilitas”, and “solertia”) cannot work successfully. Aquinas considers providentia to be the most important component of perfect prudence. In fact, the name prudentia stems from providentia¹⁶.

We focused our research on the question of why the virtue of prudence is necessary for sports activities. We saw that the development of prudence can significantly help to improve sports performances. But we can also look from the other side and recognize that the development of prudence through sports can benefit everyday life. Therefore, it is necessary to approach sports with reason; it is necessary to devote enough time for reflection on what happens before, at, and after sports practices.

Conclusion

The essential qualities of a good athlete include the ability to maintain attention and focus on changes in the environment. This is prerequisite for making and acting upon good decisions. Only one who knows the objective reality can do good. “Good intentions” do not suffice for justice, nor for success in sports. The actions of an athlete must be appropriate for the situation that the athlete is in. It cannot be emphasized enough how important the cognition of concrete reality is in sports. In all sports activities, concrete situations can change drastically in less than a second. Thus, any virtue that allows an athlete to cope with these demands can drastically improve the athlete’s performance.

The basic role of the virtue of prudence in sports is therefore to recognize the true goal of different situations and to choose the proper means and actions for its realization. Because prudence is the foundation and source for all other virtues, it is not possible to educate people about justice, fortitude, or temperance, if they are not prudent. Athletes are obviously not an exception here. Prudence does not tell us what good sports are, but it shows us the direction that is worth taking if we want to go towards that goal.

¹⁴E.g., Aquinas. *Summa Theologica*, II, II 49, 6.

¹⁵E.g., Aquinas. *Summa Theologica*, I, 22, 1, c and II, II 49, 6, ad 1m. See also: Vendemiati (2005), p. 85-86.

¹⁶E.g., Aquinas. *Summa Theologica*, II, II 49, 6 ad 1.

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