THE BODY AS A FORM OF ID AND SOCIAL DIFFERENTIATION (IN ANCIENT GREECE)

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ABSTRACT
The aim of the article is the presentation of the philosophical approach towards the human body against a background of broader culture and social context. In ancient Greece, the corporeal nature of man was a category strongly linked with a precisely understood form physical culture, including both philosophy and medicine and what we would call today ‘physiotherapy’. In antiquity, rank and a person’s social status was assessed not only by the quantity of material goods owned, but also by the superiority of one’s body and their fitness level; the physical form. Those who were disabled were disposed of or outcast. The human body was treated as a kind of identification card, which contributed to the development of numerous social divisions. This paradigm was supported both in practice and theory by such outstanding thinkers as: Aristotle, Plato, Socrates, Hippocrates, Pythagoras and Diogenes of Sinope.

Key words: human body, man, philosophy, ancient times

Starting from the first ancient Olympic Games, when immersed in the social reality of that time, the physical body of a citizen, and especially the body of an athlete, was strongly marked (and branded in some cases) by ethical opinion. Expressing this idea more precisely, the body was a kind of transparent, legible and clear social form of identification for the majority of one’s fellow citizens. And it remains the same today: the body isn’t merely a tool, the material substratum, which – like clothing – is something a person wears. The body is the basis for creating a person’s image and the way they are perceived, categorization and assessed. In many cases (often hastily) this kind of categorizing gives rise to diversified social differentiation. Some people want to emphasize their affiliation to certain social groups and even subcultures with their particular physical appearance (e.g. by appearing “fit” or with a muscular build). The best example of this is those who are physically active and those who actively practise sport. Both amateurs and professionals, for instance models and managers (for whom their body is their job as well as a business card) as well as bodybuilders and combat sport fighters. Among them there are also stadium hooligans and football pseudo-fans, who wish to emphasize their strength and efficiency through their physical appearance. It serves as a way of dominating over other weaker opponents. Therefore it is not only athletes who are judged on the basis of their physical appearance.

All over ancient Greece – the “homeland” of the Olympic Games and of European philosophy (being such different domains of human activity, they are curiously adjacent) – there prevailed a similar attitude towards the body and almost identical way of taking care and exercising it. The Hellenic peoples (inhabitants of Athens, Macedonians, Spartans etc.) had similar attitudes towards corporeality and physical activity, similar methods of treating physical disability and mental impairments. Youth, strength, efficiency and health were treated as a gift of fate and luck, which could be increased through physical exercise. Old age, limited psychomotor abilities and possible disability was evidence of losing the favour of the gods, a curse that gave grounds to committing suicide for many people. In the Greek Pantheon, almost all of the Olympic gods were perfectly built and remarkably physically fit: both women (e.g. Athena, the patron of the capital of Greece) and men, with Poseidon and Zeus (presented in iconography as a mighty thrower of fiery javelins) were at the head. These gods, immortalised in ancient sculptures, can still arouse astonishment mixed up with a sense of jealousy. It happens even today that when seeing a well-built person we use expressions such as “divine body” or “sculpted” whether by nature or physical exercise.

Greeks regarded those who didn’t exercise, couldn’t swim or didn’t speak Greek (with its hundreds of dialects) as barbarians. Physical activity, built around a sports mentality, was organized by parents and the state and was practised from early childhood until old age. In addition, it was also always naked (irrespective of age): both during “training” and during the most important sport competitions; whether local or general-Greek (Olympic, Isthmian, Nemean, Pythian). A classicist of sport sociology – Zbigniew Krawczyk – observes, “The competitors’ bodies of the Olympic Games entered the reality of the sacred world with a double meaning: instrumental – as a tool of success offered to
the gods, and intrinsic – as an object of worship and adoration by the society of the polis” [1, p. 104]. It might also have been the reason why, before exercising, each contestant completed a series of careful ablutions (similar to religious ceremonies). A former Olympian, and today an ethnologist of sport – Wojciech Lipoński – found that, “The most common form of baths in ancient Greece were the balneum or balineum (Greek for balaneion, Latin for bathwaters – baths). Balneum were a set of sanitary devices, and at the same time considered having a sporting nature, functioning close to gymnasia, private houses and also as separate complexes of public buildings; it also stood for the style of sanitary and recreational activities that took place there, consisting of baths, massages as well as associated cultural activities. Separate balaneum were built for women and for men” [2, p. 284]. Women were excluded from this definitely male world of physical culture and sport and they participated in their own, although rarely held, competitions – e.g., the Heraean Games.

A good way to illustrate this argument is through the Homeric story of Odysseus who washed up completely naked on a shore as a castaway – without any insignia or other signs of affiliation to any social group. His only social discriminant was his body, the look of which has already suggested something to the observers. It was also a valuable clue and basis for his ethical evaluation. “Ill fashioned, at least, he is not in his thighs and sinewy legs and hands withal, and his stalwart neck and mighty strength: and he lacks not youth, but is crushed by many troubles” we can read in Homer’s Odyssey [3, p. 114]. Appearances can be misleading though. Therefore, the interlocutor, in trying to verify Odysseus, persuades him to take part in a sports contest, which would be the best way to test one’s nobility, and therefore provokes him, challenging him to a duel. He insults Odysseus, pointing out the probable ignorance of such noble entertainment as sport rivalry. He compares him to a sea worker who earns their living through hard physical work (which could explain the above average body build and powerful musculature of Odysseus). Only after being provoked does Odysseus hurl with impressive momentum a bronze discus far beyond the finishing line is he identified as being “of noble birth”. His physical build does not arouse the slightest doubt anymore and he is complemented on his physical competence. The skills he possesses are an adequate and sufficient proof of his social affiliation. Therefore, they require no further verification: the anonymous and suspicious figure of Odysseus is included into the exclusive circle of aristocrats. Thanks to sport does an act of social incorporation allow Odysseus to become unconditionally accepted as being “one of them”.

Having leisure time and the chance of utilising it for practising sport was for Hellenes a defining characteristic of social elite. Spartans (largely men, women to a lesser extent) – devoted almost all of their time to body building, trying to reach a state of complete perfection. Fitness was useful both in the pankration (a kind of “catch wrestling”) during the Olympic Games, as well as in war which Spartans most willingly occupied themselves with, treating sport as relevant preparation for this bloody craft. The Spartans, however, didn’t possess an advanced form of spiritual culture, which was considered inseparable with physical culture, that other Greeks could boast about. It was not by accident that one of the most outstanding ancient philosophers – Aristeocles – gained the pseudonym “Plato” thanks to his gymnastics teacher (who today would be labelled as a “coach” or an “instructor”), as “Plato” meant broad-shouldered.

Władysław Witwicki, a translator and a commentator on the works of this philosopher, who was the founder of the first schools in Western civilization (the “Academy”), on account of its location (on a former sports facility) and predilections of the founder (who himself was the winner of many prestigious competitions) – which could also be considered a prototype of today’s University School of Physical Education – wrote: “Plato has already served then in the Athenian army. He started his service as an eighteen-year-old young man (...) he willingly came back from the fields to leave for Athens, in order to talk with friends, to practise sand wrestling and to bathe” [4, p. 11–12]. On the other hand, Andrzej Tyszka notices, that “(...) the image of the great philosopher, in the form of the classical bust, was dug up on the edge of an ancient stadium in Olympia amongst the busts of other winners” [5, p. 160]. Only the winners could place such their sculpture in a stadium (unlike zanes, which cheaters had to put up their busts at own expense due to not following ethical principles, now known as “fair-play”). These “monuments of shame” (zanes) “(...) were set up as a warning along the wall the terrace leading to the stadium entrance” [6, p. 39].

Greeks wishing to spend their leisure time effectively had a lot of sports centres to choose from, where they could practise athletics and weightlifting from dawn till dusk, suited to their taste and liking. Werner Jaeger highlights this fact, that: “At the gymnasiu, an Athenian of those times felt more at home than in his own (…) where he came to sleep and to refresh himself. (…) everyone who had something to say or wanted to learn something of more general meaning (…) went with it to friends and acquaintances at the gymnasiu” [7, p. 585]. Sports centres functioned as our erstwhile “community centres”, and of today’s fitness clubs, to which – during one's spare time – one comes not only to shape the body with diverse exercises, but also to establish useful contacts, to relax, to rest among interesting people with similar preferences and (probably) of similar financial and social status.
At ancient sports centres (private and national) it was also possible to brush up on one’s general and detailed knowledge of the world. “The environment, in which Socrates socialized, was not (...) some (...) lecture hall. The appropriate background for his speeches was the busy life of an Athenian sports stadium (gymnasium), where his presence soon became not only a daily but a necessary marvel to behold, both as a gymnast or a doctor” [7, p. 585].

Admittedly Socrates left no writings for us, but he often and willingly danced, thinking it of an exercise well disposed towards preserving good physical fitness and health. A painter from the turn of the 18th and the 19th century – Jacques-Louis David – in the picture “Death of the Socrates” presented this sage at the last moments of his life in such a way that the musculature of his torso, hands and legs were not only clearly visible but even emphasized. What is more, the eminent master Socrates was then about 70 years old, but (in the painting) he was deprived of the physical deficiencies so characteristic of the elderly. After Socrates’ death, as a token of mourning, all the gymnasia and palaestras were closed, which for us, in today’s time, may perhaps be seen as something unprecedented. Today we find other ways of honouring those who rendered a great service to physical culture and sport, an example being the deputy-mayor of Poznań who died in 2009, for whom football fans said an enthusiastic farewell at the municipal stadium [8, 9].

In the classical “golden age” of Greek culture (between the 5th and 4th century BC), the ideal model of an excellent citizen became widespread, the idea of kalokagathos. “The word kalokagathos consisted of two adjectives. The first of them, kalos, meant an extremely fit man, an athletic participant in Olympic competition, beautifully and harmoniously built. The other word kagathos (good) expressed the ideal of a perfect man both morally and intellectually” [10, p. 63]. At first, this model was implemented only by aristocrats, it then gradually, however, became democratized (democracy being yet another important Greek “invention” – besides the Olympics and philosophy) and becoming more common in a larger number of people in the lower social classes and groups. Plato, seeking perfection in man and a utopian society built on such an approach: slaves, women and poorer people, was convinced that if “(...) somebody does a lot of gymnastics (...) and doesn’t touch music and philosophy (...) isn’t he gaining confidence (...) isn’t he becoming ever braver? [If] he doesn’t try to learn and does not redeem himself with thinking or any other cultural interest [he] becomes an enemy of intellectual and spiritual culture; someone who isn’t able to prove anything effectively in a discussion and acts in a barbaric manner as a wild animal” [11, p. 180].

A thoroughly fit body, but also intellectually well educated, was the sign of a man having high social status in Plato’s days. In order to practise sport it is necessary to have the time and adequate means. The social system dominating in ancient Greece supported such an approach: slaves, women and poorer people of low social status who could not afford servants did all the hard work. The musculature of the aristocrat differed significantly from the one of a slave or a craftsman. Similarly, in today’s society, a bodybuilder differs in appearance, we could say, from the manual labourer or farmer (although all of them perform equally hard physical work). Plato’s disciple, coming from an old family of doctors – Aristotle (the founder of yet another school of philosophy, the “Lyceum”) – with protocol precision described both the natural as well as the social world of his time, reminds us: “Cretans (...) granted their slaves all the same rights as them, but forbade them the access to gymnasiums and possessing weapons” [12, p. 51]. The special kind of military-sports competence, directly tied with improving the body and increasing its potential, was reserved exclusively for the elite: wealthy and free citizens.

The free Greek practised all sports disciplines and in all sorts of competitions, unlike us today, who only perform individual activities, selected on account of individual preferences or current needs (losing excess weight, getting in shape before the holidays). In the hot Mediterranean climate, marked by high temperatures and humidity – conditions conducive to naturally exposing the body in public (in particular, being naked when practicing sport) – there was no effective way to hide the body from astute, critical observers; the quality of the body and its appearance, and in particular any lackings, physical flaws and any other significant departures from the norm. What today’s readers can readily see in the preserved writings of ancient thinkers (of dramatists, philosophers, historians and poets) is a careful description of a speaker’s physical attributes or of any person with a precision usually ascribed to women. If we were to describe today some distinguished member of the public, such as an important academic (e.g. a university professor), we would concentrate on their university degrees and academic titles as well as research achievements. We would be far less interested in their appearance, instead we would describe his or her spiritual depth, the substantive value of their works and the like. When we characterize Leszek Kolakowski, who died in 2009, an outstanding Polish philosopher and academic professor who was greatly appreciated abroad, we would only bring attention that he had already been using a walking stick during his studies, that he was tall and remarkably slim – and we end it there. Yet here is a description of the ancient philosopher Menedemos, provided by Diogenes Laertius: “(...) till his advanced years he kept good physical fitness. He had a strong body, firm and tanned, from spending time in the open air, like an athlete. He was of average height, as portrayed in his statuette, found in an old stadium in Eretria; the sculp-
tutor, certainly on purpose, presented him not in robes, but almost naked, almost entirely showing his whole body” [13, p. 154]. And by no means was such a character description an isolated case in ancient times.

Those Greek citizens who wanted to hold important state positions and to climb the ladder of social hierarchy naturally tried as hard as possible to camouflage the deficiencies of their imperfect body; their effort, however, was in vain. Even during the zenith of ancient Athens (as a cultural centre), the majority of men knew each other personally, by sight or at least having heard of one another from time to time. Quite naturally they met in such public places as gymnasia, baths, the town market (performing polyfunctional roles), the stadium or the theatre. Social approval for the widespread use of eugenics (of which Plato was also a supporter) effectively eliminated the more disabled humans from Greek society. The Spartans in this respect were exceptionally rigorous, entirely and ruthlessly ridding frail and imperfect children right after their birth. Few exceptions confirm to this rule. Even in a scene from the film “300” conveys this notion very well. A horribly deformed Spartan, miraculously kept alive thanks to the boundless love of his parents, wants to help his countrymen, but even in a time of great peril this is made impossible to him. The commander of the army, Leonidas, as a first impulse, tries to immediately kill the cripple, piercing him with a spear.

If a disabled man (to some extent) was to be (somewhat) accepted, he had to be in possession of some extraordinary abilities (in art or craft). Just as blind Homer, whose canonical texts, the “Iliad” and “Odyssey”, were passed on orally, on which entire generations of Greeks based their ethical and utilitarian values. The gift of making speeches secured the political career of a few outstanding figures. A famous Athenian politician can serve as an example here – Pericles. Plutarch from Chaeronea describes him: “(...) he was a child of normal physical build, apart from the fact, that he had an elongated head that was disproportionately large. That is why in almost all of the images of Pericles he is shown a helmet on his head. Apparently artists didn’t want to make him an object of ridicule” [14, p. 59]. The equally famous politician and orator – one of the most outstanding speakers of ancient Greece – Demostenes was described in a similar way. He could be regarded as the “father of speech therapy”.

Due to a serious speech defect from birth, he would walk to the beach and put stones in his mouth in order to correct his speaking skills. With time, as a result of these spontaneous rehabilitation treatments, his linguistic abilities achieved perfection. The last example is a “different Olympic champion”, described by Pausanias: “Pyrrho of Elis (...) achieved one victory in the pentathlon in Olympia, second in Nemea (...). In childhood he suffered muscular dystrophy as a result of rheumatism which made him take up the penta-thon in order to become a man healthy and immune to illness. These exercises were supposed to give him a series of dazzling victories in the future” [15, p. 140].

The careers of Paralympic competitors arise in a similar way. They usually begin from an illness or disability, continue with treatment and rehabilitation and then smoothly pass into training, and then, after acquiring essential motor competence, they continue on to competition; often at a world-class level. In this respect, an unprecedented case was the challenge presented to contemporary sport by the legless runner from the RSA, Oscar Pistorius, who after winning numerous gold medals and breaking the world records in the 100, 200, 400 m run, demanded from the International Association of Athletics Federation, the IAAF, and International Olympic Committee”, the IOC, the right to start with fully abled competitors in the Olympic Games in Beijing in 2008. And after many up and downs he (legally) became entitled to do so, although he didn’t qualify to go to the games [16, 17]. Pistorius started at the Paralympic Games and once again won all the most important runs.

In ancient Greece, a disabled body led to one becoming a social outcast in most cases. The examples that were given above were the few exceptions to this rule. For example, Aleksander Krawczuk gives the following story: “One of the slaves, a boy named Tallus, suffered from attacks three or four times a day. He fell to the ground with froth forming around his mouth, he banged his head on the floor in all directions, he looked horrible. (...) Not for the world would any servant eat with him from the same bowl, nobody would drink from the same cup on which he first put to his lips. And as soon as he entered the room, everyone spat in his direction in order to turn his bad spirit away” [18, p. 47]. There is a similar parable among contemporary people, fearing contact with people afflicted with AIDS or HIV so as not to become infected through touch. It is also the case of the present-day disabled. Many people are convinced (and often the disabled as well) that their disability was a punishment for some alleged sin or offence. An even clearer and even more drastic example of discriminating against the disabled is given by Plutarch of Chaeronea. The one and only Alexander of Macedon, the hegemonic leader of the world at that time, was a participant in this event which occurred in his youth when he was Aristotle’s disciple.

“And once after having a bath, a young servant who was very disabled and of funny appearance, but who could sing beautifully, stood too close to Alexander.” Later, the combustible properties of petroleum were tested on him, which the Greeks encountered for the first time in Babylonia [14, p. 182]. Out of curiosity, some experimenters set fire to the cripple! Although he was quickly extinguished, the boy was badly burnt and suffered for the rest of his life.

The social marginalisation of those who diverged
from the universally accepted canon of physicality was not only accepted by enlightened and educated figures, but even those who were responsible for educating others. An example can be seen in the meeting of two eminent thinkers, one of whom was paralysed. Upon meeting each other, the healthy colleague refused to shake hands with the cripple, who was none other than Speusippus from Athens, the successor and later director of Plato’s “Academy”. Or, when “(...) one day a man met Diogenes who was being carried on a little cart to the Academy and greeted him, the man replied: ‘but I cannot greet you, you who agrees to live in such a state’. Finally, being a man of advanced age and depressed, he committed suicide” [13, p. 216].

Diogenes of Sinope, as a cynic living in a barrel in the centre of Athens, ruthlessly and brutally expressed opinions that were probably shared by many citizens. At the same time he became the executor and instrument of social pressure. When the duty of educating children that were put into his care fell on him, he carried it in such a way, “(...) that apart from other abilities the children learnt to ride a horse, to shoot arrows from a bow and a sling as well as to throw the javelin. And in the palaestra he didn’t allow the director of the school to bring the boys up as athletes, but only to use exercises that would give them a healthy complexion and which exercised the body” [13, p. 326].

As a philosopher he criticised the contemporary system of physical education, however, in practice, he carried it out. “He also said that people are going in competition with each other when it comes to performance (...) such as with leg exercises, yet no one competes in order to become morally perfect” [13, p. 325].

Ancient Greek culture was tied to physical culture and in many respects was identical to it (for instance, in the form of agonistics, where the Greek word agon meant competition). Plato willingly gave his lectures outdoors, with intervals for resting and physical exercises. This mobility was in harmony with the style of his pioneering works, which were philosophical dialogues (like the protocols of a “verbal duel” or of “mental wrestling”). The unhealthy Epicurus of Samos had a school in Athens in a garden (hence the customary name given, “The Philosopher from the Garden”). Aristotle, on account of his “leisurely pace” when giving lectures, was called “Peripatetikos” (“The strolling”, from the Greek word peripatos – to stroll, walk), which even to today he is still sometimes called “The Great Peripatetic”. Care of the body and good physical fitness was an ethical imperative carefully obeyed in some philosophical schools (e.g., the Pythagoreans, i.e., the pupils of the schools of Epicurus of Samos). It also laid the idea of kinesiotherapy (Greek kinesis – movement, Greek therapeo – to cure, lit. “treating with movement”), which in its archaic beginnings enjoyed great success in ancient Greece. Its supporters were the greatest minds of those times, with the philosopher and sports champion Plato as well as the “father” of European medicine, Hippocrates, at the head.

Plato was 33 years younger than Hippocrates, who, when he arrived in Athens in search of knowledge, first directed his steps to the philosophical schools. Aristotle and Plato named Hippocrates “The Great”, although he was of a rather inconspicuous, frail physique. Hippocrates’ teacher, Herodicus, “(...) as one of the first amongst Greek doctors recommended physical exercises for different diseases. Exercises that were intensive enough to have injured his patients. Hippocrates was opposed to these practices (460–337 BC) and was a great supporter of taking walks, marches and runs, fulfilling both preventive, as well as healing functions” [19, p. 25].

It would be perfect, if these two spheres of typical human activity – ethics and sport – went hand in hand with each other. For this, however, physical culture requires the support of philosophy, which includes ethics. Aristotle, both the philosopher and the doctor, found the following solutions: “(...) gymnastics will establish, what type of exercises are for the body beneficial and the best – obviously, what is natural is the most beneficial, therefore the best conditioned body requires the best form of training – it will also establish (as this is what gymnastics are) what type of exercise for the largest number of people are the best (...) Even if somebody doesn’t want to achieve the degree of agility and ability which is featured in competition, it nevertheless remains the task of the teacher to give them the training and physical endurance to at least introduce one to this art” [12, p. 147].

On the other hand, in the “Nicomachean Ethics”, Aristotle expressed the following opinion: “But not only are spiritual defects dependent on will, but also the physical errors of some people, whom we also criticise; but nobody criticises the ones, who are naturally ugly, however, we criticise those who are ugly through the lack of physical exercises and their neglect. (...) It is similar with illness and disability; as no one could abuse one who is blind from birth or who suffered after an illness; rather we would feel sorry over him. However, everyone would reprimand the man who lost his eyesight due to drunkenness or other excesses. So it is that those physical ailments that are dependent on us can in fact be reprimanded, while the ones which don’t depend on us, cannot be” [20, pp. 132–133].

The holistic development of a person, according to Aristotle and Plato, cannot go beyond the borders of common sense, one should search for the “golden balance”. Physical exercise is supposed to be the means to a goal, which is the harmonious development of a human being and all of his abilities; both intellectual and moral (spiritual), as well as physical. Aristotle held the view that the beauty of a person can be built on the material basis of his corporality. Aristotle regarded the pentathlete as the upholding example of a beauti-
ful athlete. This is what he wrote about pentathletes: “The beauty of a young man is connected with having a body capable of bearing great hardships and the trails of strength, and at the same time gives pleasure to those who look at them. Therefore, pentathletes are the most beautiful, as nature equipped them with both power and speed” [21, pp. 85–86]. This last sentence may be the perfect presentation of the perfect man, something Friedrich Nietzsche dreamt of when he wrote about his “superman”. All, of course, under the condition that while doing physical exercise he would also indulge in a little philosophy.

Footnotes
1. The first Olympic Games date to 776 BC, whereas philosophy as a science appeared only about 100 years later in the same region of the world, which can be considered as a puzzling social phenomenon.
2. Only the delicate Hephaestus was a “god-cripple”, being club-footed, but he distinguished himself with a number of useful practical skills, that others, according to Greek mythology, willingly took advantage of. While on the subject of mythology, it is worthwhile to mention the Amazons, a tribe of brave women deprived of their right breast (Greek amadzones – without a breast), as it interfered in effectively firing the bow and arrow. Today, a woman after a mastectomy (a resection of the breast) is sometimes described as an “Amazon”.

References

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