Sport and Philosophy of Hospitality: Three Questions on How to Rethink Contemporary Sport Education in Light of Gift and Peace

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ABSTRACT

The ancient Olympic Games were held in spaces and places consecrated for hospitality, to xénia, a Greek word that means “gifts” but also something that refers to and belongs to strangers and foreigners. Foreigners from every part of Greece met in Olympia to celebrate the agón. In this place, a stranger or a foreigner (hostis in Latin), probably a former enemy, became a friend because he was both guest and host (hospes in Latin) in the sanctuary-town, which belonged to the gods and to all of the Greeks, who recognized themselves in its spirit.

This mechanism of hospitality formed the basis of the Olympic peace system and was the fundamental prerequisite for the celebration of agón. The practice of the agón was therefore made possible by a “gift” but also by “forgiveness” that allowed people to meet and compete. We can conclude that at the base of the Olympic (and Greek) ethics there was the concept of hospitality.

Olympia was then the common home of all Greeks, the place where ethics were carried out, were put into practice, and concretely exercised. It is not a pure coincidence that the Greek word “ethics” is linked to the word éthos, which means “house”, “home”. For this reason, ethics can be thought as the art of hosting somebody in our own home and trusting him/her, just as it happened in ancient Olympia during the Olympic Games, which demonstrated that ethics was always a home’s ethics.

Therefore, taking into account this cultural and philosophical framework, this study will develop a methodological approach, derived from deconstructionism, which will be applied to concepts that are both ambiguous and semantically rich in meaning, such as “gift”, “forgiveness”, xénos, hostis, and hospes.

The first objective of this study is to reflect upon the connection between “gift” and “sport” and show the deep interconnection between the two concepts. The second is to use the model of Greek hospitality at the Olympic Games to deeply rethink sport and contemporary philosophy of sport education in terms of peace and multiculturalism.

KEYWORDS

sport, hospitality, philosophy, education, ethics
Introduction

This article aims to achieve two main goals. The first is to begin a discussion on the possible connections existing between some key concepts of the philosophy of deconstructionism inspired by some of Derrida’s philosophical concepts such as hospitality, gift, forgiveness and sport, conceived as recreational and educational human practices in which the concept of otherness and other play a fundamental role.

The second goal is to use the ethical model of hospitality, which will emerge from the first part of the research, to outline a possible way to philosophically rethink sport education as an education really promoting peace and multiculturalism in contemporary society.

We will proceed in a deconstructionist way, answering the following three questions:
1. Is there a real connection between hospitality and sport?
2. If this connection exists, what is the meaning of hospitality for contemporary sport and for sport generally conceived of as a philosophical matter?
3. The third and last question: Is it really possible to rethink contemporary sport education in light of hospitality and of ethics connected with it (that is, the ethics of gift and forgiveness)?

First question

We can begin, first of all, with some historical considerations on sport in ancient Greece, proceeding the same way Derrida’s philosophical approach has taught us.

We know that the ancient Olympic Games were held in spaces and places consecrated for hospitality, to xénia, a Greek word that means “gifts” but also something that refers to and belongs to strangers and foreigners (xénoi), people whom one has to always honor because they could be, as Homer taught, thieves/murderers (that is, “enemies”), friends but also – and this is the most important thing – gods (Reid, 2006).

The Greeks knew that in a matter of a few hours or days, a stranger/foreigner guest accommodated at his/her own home would have revealed his or her real nature: enemy, friend, or god. The alétheia moment (in ancient Greek this word means the concept of “to reveal oneself”), the moment of truth – in which every human being revealed his face – would have arrived, in any case.

Greek ethics were practical ethics, an ethics based on what we could define as a face-to-face-relationship due to the small societies (pôleis) in which it developed and the relatively small territories of the known world in which the populace lived (Vegetti, 2010). Greek ethics were always a social and religious problem of values and a matter of manners; that is a problem of how to give hospitality to a stranger and a foreigner at your home, avoiding conflicts, and honoring the gods. In a nutshell, the main problem of Greek ethics was always the problem of hospitality. Therefore, if for the Greeks ethics was a problem dealing with hospitality, we can say that modern ethics was born in Olympia. Ethics and sport, therefore, have a common deep root and source.

Olympia has proposed a solution to the religious and social problem of hospitality, and this is the reason why it became a pedagogical symbol for the whole of Greece. This mechanism of hospitality formed the basis of the Olympic peace system and was the fundamental requisite for the celebration of agón (Georgiadis, 2009).

Most likely, the Olympic Games were born as a rite for celebrating this holy and sacred hospitality, a fundamental value in Greek religion as well as in Greek social life. The Western pediment of the Temple of Zeus in Olympia shows the drunken Centaurs during the wedding of Peirithous, king of the Lapiths, violating the sacred law of hospitality by attempting to rape the beautiful Lapith women. In the center of this composition, Apollo, god of reason and order in the world, as a sacred referee and judge, intervenes to punish the offenders who violated the laws of hospitality (Isidori, Müller, Kaya, 2012).
In the framework of its mechanism/system of competition and through the games, the Ancient Olympia became a social and an educational laboratory in which this practical – and at the same time religious – ethics of hospitality was tested. Foreigners from every part of Greece met in Olympia to celebrate the *agón*. In this place, a stranger or a foreigner (*hostis* in Latin), probably a former enemy, became a friend because he was both guest and host (*hospes* in Latin) in the sanctuary-town, which belonged to the gods and to all of the Greeks, who recognized themselves in its spirit (Reid, 2011).

In Olympia, all these free men could reveal their real faces, thus showing themselves not as an enemies but as a friends aiming to honor the gods through competition with their fellow men. The function of sport was clear. It was a tested tool – or better, a *medium* – which could reveal the true nature of men (nature of enemies, friends, or gods).

Therefore, we can say that Olympia was really a shared home for all of the Greeks, the place where ethics were carried out, were put into practice, and concretely exercised. It is not a pure coincidence that the Greek word “ethics”, which is linked to the word *éthos* that means “home”, “manner”, and “custom” in the meaning of “what I use to do at my house”, and “at my home”. For this reason, ethics can be thought of as the art of giving hospitality to somebody in our own home and of trusting on him/her, just as it happened in ancient Olympia during the Olympic Games, which demonstrated that ethics was always a *home’s and hospitality’s ethics*.

To be clear, what we call “sport” and the ancients “athletics” in the form of an *agón* was always functional to the concept of hospitality and knowledge. For this reason we can say that the Olympic Games held at their own home – Olympia – enabled people to reveal their *aléttheia*, their fundamental and human truth in front of the sacred statue of the god. This truth that the athletic competitions showed is that we are all human beings, we have the same body, we move and play in the same way and can be evaluated – in the meaning of “we can be given a value as human beings” – and be judged under the same rules, all having the same possibility of beginning an experience of knowledge regarding ourselves, the other, the gods, and the mystery of life. To be clear, athletic competitions were always an opportunity of knowledge, of practical knowledge; an opportunity the Greeks very much appreciated.

But the practice of the *agón* was always made possible in a framework of a hospitality which, in turn, was made possible not only by a “gift” but also by a “forgiveness” that allowed people to meet and compete in a situation of peace and equal opportunities.

The “gifts” the ancient athletes gave to the gods for honoring them were their bodies, their strength in the game, and their *páthos* – a symbol of their human condition and possibility of knowledge (*páthei máthos* and *póno apóbasis*, they said; that is “through suffering [comes] wisdom” and “through hard work [comes] result”) under the limits this same condition imposed on them – and their devotion and commitment for the glory of Greece and the gods themselves. In brief, the gift they gave to the gods was the sport itself.

Their forgiveness was not the result of a sad feeling of fault and sin, like it happens in Christianity, but the result of a relation of exchange with the divinity. A relation of a true for-giveness (as in Italian “per-donare”, in the sense of “to give a gift, a grant, a pawn/pledge/guarantee”) in exchange/return for peace, glory and protection and in order to prevent possible offences to the divinity through the *hýbris* (*arrogance*), that is, to going beyond the limits the gods impose on the actions of a human being. The *áthlon* the winner athlete was given was always the result of a respect for this ethics of gift and hospitality.

After answering the first question, we can conclude by saying that at the base of the Olympic (and Greek) ethics and “ath-l-et(h)ics” (*ethics of athlon-prize*) in the ancient world there was always the concept of hospitality, gift, and “for-giveness”.
Second question

And now the second question is, What remains in contemporary sport of this system of ancient hospitality and gift/forgiveness and how do all these concepts make sense for sport conceived of as a philosophical matter?

We think that much remains of this – and not only in Olympic sport. One can find many traces of it in the body of contemporary sport. For example: in English one says “home team” or “visiting team/visitors” to identify the teams that give hospitality or are the guests in a competition (in Italian one says “squadra di casa” and “squadra ospite”). In all sports and in every kind of competition, both national and international, professional and amateur, there are always well codified and clear rules dealing with a system of hospitality the athletes and their teams have to respect as a part of the competition themselves. There are also rules regulating gifts athletes have to exchange at the beginning or the end of the competition. In Olympic sport, this system of hospitality and gifts is perfectly established and regulated as an integral part of the Games themselves.

This *galateo* of good manners, gifts, reverence, and ceremonies, in which the final *prize/athlon* is only the last step, is a symbol of brotherhood and forgiveness (the latter one is the only fundamental environmental and interior condition that allows for peace and, therefore, competition) and a way for the participants to avoid offence. In the framework of international relations, these ancient rites of sport hospitality are frequently used as a means to promote the politics of states and groups.

Of course, hospitality has lost its religious dimension in contemporary sport; today, it is a lay concept. Nevertheless, contemporary sport and Olympic games have built many of their main values on hospitality, and hospitality in sport has become an opportunity for developing the economic and social systems of leisure and tourism. Analyzed under the light of a more phenomenological and deconstructionist approach, we can confirm that sport has its roots and makes sense in this hospitality.

Hospitality is always “the other” who comes to my home. This other is an *arrivant* (as Jacques Derrida says in French) whom “I shouldn’t ask”: to state his identity, tell me who he/she is, under what circumstances I am going to offer him/her hospitality, whether he/she is going to be integrated or not, whether or not I am going to be able to “assimilate” him/her in my family, nation, or state (Derrida, 2001). Certainly, this hospitality “does not give others a licence to eat your children, insult your friends or trash your car. It means only that, as a place from which to start, an artefact of the other as *arrivant* leaves open the greatest space for the possibility of a non-violent future to come” (Lucy, 2004, p. 6).

The “other” is always a “gift” in the meaning given to this concept by Heidegger (*es gibt*), that is, something or someone which or who is *present* (*there exists*), who *gives* and is *given*; somebody who comes to be in a world of possibility, not only of enmity and war but also of friendship and peace (Derrida, 2000).

The difference between sport and war is that in sport the other always comes with the possibility of peace, of friendship, of co-opetition (that is, cooperation and competition at the same time). That is, as a possibility of challenge for myself – or to better ourselves – in which we, as human beings, can test ourselves and cooperate and compete for achieving, which is always the result of a mutual cooperation and “interaction” (and not a “sum”) of individual aspiration and desires (Frankl, 1975; Arnold, 1997).

In sport, the other always comes not as an unexpected one but as a co-opetitor and ready to play “under the same roof”. I know and I am sure he/she always comes in peace because has accepted the rules of my home, which are also the rules of our home (that is, sport itself), which we have built together and which allow us to meet, to play, and to co-o(m)pete. In sport, in a competition, the only factor that is unexpected is the result of our playing and not the people who meet.

In sport, the other is not an opponent in the strict sense but somebody who, like me, comes to play and wants to achieve the same goals, accepting the same rules I have accepted. These rules are the “norms” (from Greek *gnôrîma*, word coming from the verb *gnôrizein* which means “to know”), which we have to accept not
as a constriction but as a way that allows us to play the game equally and “to know” – in the sense of the Greek verb *gnorízein* – ourselves and us as “others”.

This *gnorízein* is the possibility the other as a gift (*es gibt*), as a *presence* (and *absence* at the same time), provides us in sport (conceived both as a individual competition or match in the sense of its etymology: “a pair of people who fit well together and are quiet”).

This *gnorízein* – the gift we are given by the other who comes to our own home (that is, sport and its shared rules) – is an ethical way to know the world in an apollonian and platonic way (that is, under the light of “know thyself” and “you can discover more about a person in an hour of play than in a year of conversation”) and an opportunity to discover the true *alétheia* of the Being, i.e., the fundamental condition for achieving a higher knowledge of the world.

**Third question**

Now we come to the third question: Does the possibility exist to rethink contemporary sport education in the light of hospitality and gift? We know from our own personal experience that sport very frequently loses this feature of hospitality in contemporary society. There are many reasons: sport based on high competitive and victory/goal-oriented performances, economic and political interests, etc. We think that this possibility exists: it is real, not only metaphysical, and is an educational challenge to rethink of the role of sport in contemporary society.

Nowadays, most people ignore or are not aware of the meaning of sport and its history as a practice of hospitality and gift. This lack suggests to us pedagogical and didactic strategies for intervening. This can occur in school and in sport clubs, for example, where more young students and athletes need a sport education and with whom educators can intervene to change the future social concept of sport.

The first step for putting all these pedagogical strategies into practice is to teach and to conceive of physical and sport education as an education to hospitality. One can use a sort of conceptual map with which we can reflect upon the main key concepts that sum up the meaning of sport in light of the ethics of hospitality and gift.

The challenge of this pedagogical methodology consists of the following steps, which have to be put into practice through practical and concrete strategies thought through educators and then developed together with their students/athletes (this is only a suggestion to educators for future possible application).

1. To recognize that sport is always based on a mutual acceptance of we as “others” who are always given hospitality in the same home and share the same rules.

2. To show the importance of conceiving of sport as a co-opetition, that is, a collaborative practice in which the other is the challenge who makes competing with ourselves possible. In this framework, educators have to show that the intention of sport conceived as a game is not to defeat the other but to test our possibilities and limits.

3. To show the importance of difference, that is, that the other can be, of course, a foreigner, a stranger, but he/she is always a player and an athlete who – like me – is a presence (a gift) I always have to

![Figure 1. Concept map of sport and hospitality](source: own study.)
honor and who comes (as a friend and never as an enemy) in peace to play with me. This presence provides me with the opportunity to test my abilities and skills, and it makes me grow as a human being.

4. To teach the importance of the rules/norms in sport (and social life). They are not conceived of as an imposed system that is mandatory to respect, but as a way, an opportunity, for competition (or life), a combination of play and game. They provide us not only with better understanding of ourselves and the world through the experience of our limits, but also the others, who are not the end, the finish, but a possibility for overcoming these limits.

**Conclusions**

In the ancient world, ethics was always a problem of home: that is, not only a matter of how unknown people coming from different places could meet, exist and coexist together but also of how one could better give hospitality to a person and be guest in a common house. The ancients found in sport and its system a way to make all this possible and in the best way. We often forget their lessons. There are many traces of this ethics of hospitality in contemporary sport we cannot ignore. These traces make sense to sport as a practice of peace and justice. These are the traces we, as philosophers and educationists, have to track down if we want to rethink and use sport as a means for the new ethics of hospitality, a concrete prelude for the future education of our society.

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