

## FROM VIRTUOSITIES TO VIRTUES IN SPORTS; AN EDUCATIONAL-PEDAGOGICAL PATHWAY WITH EXEMPLARIST MORAL THEORY

### DAI VIRTUOSISMI ALLE VIRTÙ NELLO SPORT; UN PERCORSO DIDATTICO-PEDAGOGICO CON LA TEORIA MORALE ESEMPLARISTA

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#### **Abstracts:**

Over the past fifty years, scientific research, has been (very) concerned with the improvement of achievements, and athletic performance; the rise and growth of the field of research related to the “multivalorial” world of sports, and especially the systemic approach related to it, today allow reflections aimed at the formulation of hypotheses for the use of sports as a component of the educational-pedagogical system oriented to the growth of the person. The ethics of sport is one of the disciplines that is having considerable importance in the scenario of what is now called *sport studies*, that is, human sciences applied to sport. The proposal we formulate, meets the support of a moral education for the person or the athlete, having as its starting point the Virtue Ethics up to the more recently rediscovered exemplarism of Linda Zagzebski, which has directed attention back to the theme of moral exemplarism and the admiration associated with it. We will consider, whether in the philosophy of education and/or behavior education proposing *admirable* examples can be a positive didactic to encourage the cultivation of virtues.

Negli ultimi cinquanta anni, la ricerca scientifica, si è occupata (molto) del miglioramento dei risultati, e delle performance atletiche; la nascita e la crescita del settore di ricerca legato al mondo “plurivaloriale” dello sport, e soprattutto l’approccio sistemico legato ad esso, permettono oggi riflessioni atte alla formulazione di ipotesi di utilizzo dello sport come componente del sistema didattico-pedagogico volto alla crescita della persona. L’etica dello sport è una delle discipline che sta avendo notevole importanza nel panorama di quelli che vengono oggi chiamati gli *sport studies*, ossia le scienze umane applicate allo sport. La proposta che formuliamo, va incontro al sostegno di una formazione morale per l’individuo o per un atleta, avente come partenza l’Etica delle virtù fino ad arrivare al più recentemente ritrovato *esemplarismo* di Linda Zagzebski, che ha riportato l’attenzione sul tema dell’esemplarità morale e della ammirazione ad essa connessa. Considereremo se nella filosofia dell’educazione e/o nell’educazione del carattere, proporre esempi *ammirabili* possa diventare una didattica positiva per promuovere la crescita delle virtù.

**Keywords:** moral education; exemplarism; sport studies; didactics.

#### **Introduction**

Gyula Mándi, coach of the Israeli national soccer team, after losing the match against Italy on October 15 1961, said, “We played well, but God’s left foot beated us.” He was referring to Mariolino Corso, footballer of Inter in the 1960s/70s. A left-footer famous for his virtuosity, his dribbling skills and/or the particular effect he could give to balls in set pieces. He was an anarchic player, unable to follow the rules; with coach H. Herrera, the relationship was euphemistically edgy, but it was impossible to be without his talent. In the 7-1 loss to Borussia Mönchengladbach on October 20, 1971, he had 6 days disqualification for kicking the match director at the end of the game. Great virtuosity, much less virtue, at least in the sense given to athletes as early as antiquity (in the homeland of the first Olympics, philosophy and sports were closely united to express the vigor of mind and body, in order to perfect oneself).

The history of sports is dotted with such characters, above all, perhaps the even more famous one, Diego Armando Maradona, known to many as *Mano de Dios* (an epithet derived from a resounding, false, and clever hand goal against England in 1990) champion of virtuosity and “svirtuosity”.

Aristotle, considered necessary the possession of *phrónesis*, which would enable everyone to distinguish good from evil and to avoid evil, so as to be a “virtuous”, “prudent” citizen and thus also on a sporting level a just and loyal individual (Politics 325 B.C.)

In the last fifty years, scientific research, has been (very much) concerned with the improvement of athletic results and performance; the birth and growth of the field of research related to the “multirivalorial” world of sport, and especially the systemic approach related to it (Castaldo, 2010), today allow reflections aimed at the formulation of hypotheses for the use of sport as a component of the educational-pedagogical system oriented to the growth of the person.

The ethics of sport is one of the disciplines that are gaining considerable importance in the framework of what are now called *sport studies*, that is, human sciences applied to sport (Pigozzi, 2014). The proposal we make, meets the support of a moral education for the individual, having as its starting point the Ethic of Virtues (McIntyre, 1981) up to the more recently rediscovered “exemplarism” of Linda Zagzebski, who has brought attention back to the theme of moral exemplarism and the admiration associated to it (Zagzebski 2006, 2010, 2015, 2017).

We will consider whether in philosophy of education and/or behaviour education, suggesting role models can become positive didactics to promote the growth of virtues.

### **Moral Theories and Exemplarism**

Men do philosophy when they apply to the everyday experience that desire to understand and that critical spirit that they ordinarily apply to each particular aspect of the experience called life.

In the earliest forms of philosophy, the *Aristotelian* school placed Ethics, after Logic and Physics, as the third part of philosophy, and set the goal of seeking as the only good, the pursuit of individual happiness, while, the *Platonic* school placed the pursuit of the Good in a transcendent perspective (Castaldo, 2010).

At the origins of Greek ethic, we find in the Homeric poems the affirmation of the superiority of the virtues-courage or pity toward the gods- typical of the characters’ lives in these works. Ethics and morality are used as synonyms, but this is not fully appropriate:

Ethics, from the Greek *êthos*, is that part of philosophy that deals with custom, that is, human behaviour; it deals with giving a rational explanation for the moral choices of an individual or a collectivity, and it interrogates human habits and attitudes, trying to define concepts such as good/evil, right/wrong, virtue/ vice, justice/crime.

Morality, from the Latin *mos, moris*, is a set of values and ideals belonging to an individual or a collectivity, and is linked to the time in which it fits, can change according to the perception of individuals/collectivities, and has no universal value (Castaldo, 2010).

Antonio Rosmini, an Italian philosopher and presbyter, published the *Works of Moral Philosophy* in 1837; in the preface, he defines Moral Philosophy as a “theory of practice”; it is a term we appreciate, especially from the perspective of defining Ethics as an *Anatomy of Human Action*, that is, a branch of philosophy designed to dissect human action. Therefore, this discipline answers questions such as: how should we live, how should we behave with other people?

Different answers have been given to these questions, allowing us to speak of three ethical paradigms, which respectively concern deontologism from Kantian origin, consequentialism from utilitarian viewpoint, and finally the theme of virtues, mostly from Aristotelian origin (Mango-Castaldo, 2019). Deontological ethical theories place emphasis on the fact that each of us has certain duties (actions we must or must not perform), they assert that acting morally consists precisely in fulfilling those duties, whatever consequences may result.

Fraleigh (1984), for example, argues that boxing is immoral because it involves intentional injury to another man, even with the consent of that injury. Consequentialist ethical theories judge whether an action is right or wrong not by the intentions of the person performing it but, precisely, by the consequences of the action itself. The best-known consequentialist ethical theory is utilitarianism, which has its oldest roots in hedonism (pursuit of pleasure) and eudemonism (pursuit of happiness).

Claudio Tamburrini (2000), for example, defends Maradona in the famous goal he made with his hand; he also tries to make the case, from a utilitarian perspective, for controversial conclusions to the problem of doping (he’s a supporter of its abolition) and gender equality (which is often in favor of the male sex).

The ethical theory of virtue is largely based on Aristotle’s *nicomachean ethics*, and for this reason it is sometimes called neo-Aristotelianism. Unlike the other two, which (albeit in different ways) focus their attention on the right or wrong character of specific actions, this theory is more concerned with the character and life of the individuals in their wholeness, arguing that life should be lived by constantly cultivating virtue, meant as the realization of one's potentials. (Watson 1990; Kawall 2009).

An example could be that of cycling champion Gino Bartali; in an interview for *La Gazzetta dello Sport* (02/01/2021) Pope Bergoglio described him as follows: “He would pedal hundreds of kilometres every day knowing that if they had stopped him, it would have been the end of him. In doing so he offered a new life to entire families persecuted by the Nazis, even hiding some of them in his home. It is said that he helped about eight hundred Jews, with their families, to save themselves during the barbarity to which they were subjected. He said that good is done and not said, or otherwise what kind of good is it? Today we can find further flourishes of Aristotelian thought with the revival of Platonic and Augustinian inspired exemplarism.

### ***Exemplarism***

The theme has its roots in Greek philosophy and has been strongly revived in recent years with the resurgence of Virtue Ethics redeemed by Anglo-Saxon authors, particularly Alasdair MacIntyre.

Exemplars, in general, are those role models who arouse in us the emotion of admiration and, often, the desire to imitate them. Exemplarism found its earliest form in Plato, in the *Timaeus*, and was later reprised in authors such as St. Augustine and St. Bonaventure; according to this earliest form, the things that exist in our world are nothing more than mere copies, shadows of exemplary realities. According to virtue ethics, becoming moral has to do with the ability to recognize an

exemplary model to imitate, rather than with identifying the right action or the exact theory regarding duty or consequences.

Ethics of Virtues considers character formation, which occurs through a process of imitation and instruction by the virtuous, to be fundamental, believing that much of the credit for a good and successful life is to be found in it. Exemplarism permits a reevaluation of the importance of narratives for educational purposes, as a study of exemplary models already present in the tradition and as a search for the most suitable means of proposing exemplary models today. This rediscovery of exemplarist moral theory has a name: Linda Zagzebski, of the U.S. University of Oklahoma; her theory on basic moral concepts-good, virtue, etc. derives from the identification of a moral exemplar in “this or that” person (Zagzebski, 2003; 2006; 2010; 2012; 2015; 2017).

The strong concept of exemplarism is that we know how to recognize (moral) exemplars, thanks to the emotion of admiration, well before we are able to understand what makes them worthy of admiration and imitation from us (Croce, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020; Vaccarezza, & Croce, 2016; Niccoli, 2018, 2020, Calidoni, 2021). How do we find the person who is truly a moral example or exemplar?

According to Zagzebski, the exemplar is admirable and worthy of imitation by virtue of his being admirable and his behavior motivates those who admire him to virtuous action (Croce, 2017); but this is not enough, because the author also distinguishes between moral and non-moral admiration. Citing the world of sports -with Usain Bolt- she considers athletes worthy of admiration of two types: non-moral by the fact that technical talent does not develop particular moral virtues, or even moral, because of the seriousness of trainings, the devotion to the natural talent they have received, and sports honesty (Croce, 2017).

## **Models of teaching**

According to Frabboni & Minerva (2013), “Education connects the dimensions of development of generational seasons (the cognitive and emotional stages of developmental ages) with the symbolic and cultural objects (the structures of humanistic and scientific knowledge) that inhabit the intentionally formative institutions [...]. It is a science that’s there.”

Up to the 1980s, the dominant paradigm in educational research was prescription-oriented, and in it, theory was intended to “indicate” to teachers how they should think about their activities; this led Didactic occupying the exclusive space of the concretization operationalization of classroom work. Laneve (in Moliterni, 2013) “considers didactics a knowledge that is polyreferential, autonomous, of research and action, having a theoretical character and a plurality of fields of attention and a variety of human and technological intermediaries”.

In Sport and Motor Science (MS&S), very often didactic is derived from a performance-based interpretation, centered on task execution, fundamental technical gestures, error correction, amount of practice and distribution and variability; training objectives are directed to the results to be achieved, technically correct (Carraro-Lanza, 2004).

In the Education Sciences, differently, there is more focus on general learning with systematic dialogue, observation, listening (Moliterni, 2013) These two forms, would suggest that in MS&S, there is less need to draw on the didactic-pedagogical heritage inherent in the Education Sciences precisely due to the technical nature of the former. Nevertheless, due to its nature, MS&S, at least by referring to its historical origins, offers food for thought in terms of values and educative considerations (Di Palma, 2021); then do we need to change teaching methodology?

Which one, then, given the broad front that the Teaching Sciences offer? According to the *Centro Studi Impara Digitale* (a non-profit association established in 2012 for the purpose of promoting the development of an innovative teaching methodology and a body accredited by the Ministry of Education) there are many new forms of teaching; we list them in chart form:

Circle Time	IBSE	Backpack-free School
Cooperative Learning	Jigsaw	Service learning
Debate	Expression methodology	Storytelling
Integrated learning	Microlearning	TEAL
Laboratory Learning	Peer education	Tinkering
Scenario-Based Teaching	Problem solving	Twletteratura
EAS	Project Based Learning	Writing and Reading
Flipped classroom	Disjointed school/class	
<i>our adaptation from <a href="http://www.imparadigitale.it/metodologie-didattiche">www.imparadigitale.it/metodologie-didattiche</a></i>		

The core business of all these methods is clearly learning, few references to values, at most those on cooperation, collaboration, sharing. Is there, then, no room for a didactic of Sport and Motor Sciences aimed at overcoming the performance aspects?

### **Exemplarism and Sport**

Do athletes-famous and non-famous- have special duties to act virtuously?

A number of philosophers have investigated this question by examining whether famous athletes are subject to special role model obligations (Yorke-Archer,2020; Pike-Cordell ,2019; Moore, 2017; Feezell,, 2005).

Veronique Popescu (2010) investigates the presence and necessity of moral education in an athlete's training: thanks to a series of questionnaires, we realize that moral training is important for high-level sports; the result can be achieved only if educational management will have as a model a paradigm that never ages, and which is grounded on the idea of Kalokagathia (ideal of physical and moral perfection of man).

In the conclusions, athletes are aware that moral education and coach involvement are really necessary; thus, sports practice becomes an educational-formative process, physical and moral, which aims to develop human skills for sport performances, involving high moral and intellectual characteristics. Moral education is essential in sport training, as it influences and adds value to the final result. Linda Zagzebski presents an original moral theory based on direct reference to virtuous exemplars, whom we identify through the emotion of admiration. Using examples of heroes, saints and sages, she shows how narratives of exemplars and empirical work on the most admirable people can be embodied in the theory to serve both theoretical and practical purposes.

She also mentions sports, but not in a convincing way. Education with exemplarism has always played a large role in educational pathways, where the educator refers to historical, mythical or current models to attract the learner's interest. This consideration makes manifest the other characteristic of exemplarism, namely that of practical and intuitive didactic.

The most interesting thing about exemplars -those arousing the emotion of admiration- as exemplarism conceives them, is their ability to inspire us to become good: meeting a moral exemplar, in person or through narratives, elicits our admiration and may be able to change the course of our lives in a meaningful way (Croce, 2017).

Vaccarezza and Croce (2016) demonstrate how in Zagzebski's exemplarism, sport can hold a place, overcoming the author's view that -quoting Usain Bolt- saw the virtue of the sportsman divided into two typologies: moral and non-moral. Exemplarism and sports, are combined as long as not only the virtuosims are shown, but also the virtues.

The example given by M. Croce (op. cit) of cyclist Bartali (named a Righteous Among the Nations in 2013 for rescuing a very large number of Jews in World War II) stands above all, but we also like to cite Eugenio Monti, a bobsleigh champion: at the 1964 Innsbruck Olympics, the British crew, one of the strongest, had a broken bolt.

Monti lent them one of his own; Nash and Dixon won gold, while Monti and Siorpaes took bronze. To criticism from fans and journalists Monti replied, *They won because they ran faster, not because I lent them a bolt.* (cf. Grion, 2015)

## Conclusions

*“Athletes are so much more than points per game or yards. These are people that our society...worships”* (Darlow, 2018).

A teenager's admiration for the sporting skills of his favorite soccer player can lead him to extraordinary forms of emulation; it is no coincidence that sports marketing offers gadgets or clothing with the champion's photo or jersey number. If it is true -as it is true- the typical question of the Ethics of Virtues (not “how should I act” but “which person do, I want to be”) having an admirable exemplar can be a good viaticum for healthy emulation.

With exemplarism, a guiding figure is offered, a hero accessible to all, that everyone can choose for themselves and that is proportional to their moral expectations; a very valid solution in the sports world where young and old alike like to cultivate their passions by mythologizing their favorites supported by broad media propaganda. The problem arises in the didactic-educational aspects: sport needs to overcome the prestative dynamics typical of many forms of didactics; it needs a teleology, a finalism, in which the virtuous aspects of such practice are discerned. But so be it!

In a recent work, Mango & Castaldo (2019) have shown how faculties of Motor Sciences do not take such needs into account: analyzing PhDs, Research Grants, and specific Master's degrees, the term Ethics of Sport, does not appear at all. Values education in sports, turns out to be an element of a much touted but poorly implemented rhetoric.

Given the appeal of sports virtuositities, couldn't we channel them to train Virtuous citizens/athletes?

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