

# the alienated ethical consideration

a (post-)Marxist critique of the sports practitioner

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## Abstract

Throughout one's career, a professional sports practitioner is confronted with various choices to make, ranging from coaching a fair match or offering opportunities for selected individuals to win; showing true sportsmanship or venturing for a better compensation; to even sticking to one's home team or accepting a better offer. This is faced by all sports practitioners within the same industry: athletes, coaches, managers, and even team owners. In making these choices, individuals recognize essential ethical considerations. However, a primary factor that influences them—albeit without them knowing—is their alienated state. The preferences of the sports practitioner mirror society's response to the demands of the Culture Industry. He or she would opt to choose what the Industry is offering and uphold these standards. After all, sports is a social phenomenon that has undergone changes throughout the years, along with other aspects of society. It bears the impact of the *Aufklärung*, the true question of being enlightened and of being cultured. Thus, sports could be seen as constituting another level in the individual's (and even society's) alienated sphere.



This paper seeks to shed light on the ethical considerations of the sports practitioner, in particular the heavy influence of the Culture Industry, the individual's alienated state, and his or her response. I am interested in the play of power-relations among the sports practitioners and society, both dominated by the Industry. The paper does not present an exhaustive claim enlisting all considerations, but merely critiques the present setup. By presenting individuals' (ultimately social) alienated state, I show that their choices are in fact social, even though they would seem to be solely individualistic in terms of their situated-ness in sporting events. Thus, this paper shows the heavy influence of the Industry in the continuous power relations between sports practitioners and society, as well as the alienated state of both.

**Keywords**

Alienation, ethical considerations, power relations

**Introduction**

A particular sport is governed by a main objective broken into technicalities of rules, techniques, environment, and other factors. This is also a historical and social phenomenon knit along with culture and society. A nation's preference for a sport is due to a number of factors that have influenced it throughout the years. Furthermore, this is greatly influenced by the present inclusion of sports in the Culture Industry. Sports plays a huge role in culture and social identification; across the globe, sporting activities constitute one of the top choices for entertainment and leisure. In effect, sports exert a major influence on civilization.

With differences in sports practices, there arises a concern as to the ethical responses of athletes. I explore the particular ethical considerations that the sports practitioner confronts during his or her career, or even in exact moments of gameplay. The term "sports practitioner" refers to all those involved in a sport and is not limited to athletes, thus including managers, owners, trainers, referees, and coaches. In the course of their career, these individuals confront a number of issues that they must make a choice about. Some examples would be whether to arbitrate a match fairly or offer opportunities for

selected individuals to win; whether to show true sportsmanship or venture for better compensation; or whether to stick to one's home team or accept another offer. Meanwhile, I use the term "ethical consideration" for human actions that bear ethical reflection on the basis of certain criteria. These actions are not without anthropological bearing. The mere fact that they take place in the context of a game does not negate their implications for the players involved, as well as spectators. The people watching the game may or may not be brought to believe the outcome of a choice that involves deliberate deception, which determines whether they will continue to support the sport. Thus, the human dimension of sports is fundamental. As is the case with any other instance of choice-making, there are specific considerations that the sports practitioner must bear in mind. It is precisely this idea that the paper explores.

All this has an impact on the alienated ethical consideration. The thought process that the sports practitioner goes through is alienated, primarily because of the Culture Industry and the highly fetishized nomenclatures and ideas that are taken for entities *in toto*. This in no way discredits any sport, especially those that are mentioned in this paper, and their influence on people. However, the paper takes a critical perspective on them and the sports practitioner. In what follows, I present these ethical considerations in a Hegelian fashion, adopting post-Marxist conceptions of sports: as mimesis and anamnesis, and as power relations.

### **Ethical Considerations**

In confronting choices, the sports practitioner must bear in mind several considerations. In the spirit of a (post-)Marxist critique, the following analysis takes a tripartite form and resembles, at least at the start, the dialectics of Hegel's account of freedom and ethics. The analysis thereafter gives justification for the post-Marxist claim.

*Existential (individual) considerations.* It is through these considerations that the unity of the individual is understood. They pertain to "the will's self-conscious and *simple* reference to itself in its individuality (*Einzelheit*); to this

extent the subject is a *person*.<sup>1</sup> The unity of the individual is described as a unity of will incarnated through distinct willing in the person. It is clear that on this straightforward level of consideration, the humanity of the sports practitioner is affirmed and recognized. Furthermore, the basic realization of freedom on the level of the individual is associated with a universal claim. This claim to freedom (to individualization) in fact is shared by all— regardless of disposition.

The resolving and *immediate* individuality [*Einzelheit*] of the person relates itself to a nature which it encounters before it. Hence the personality of the will stands in opposition to nature as *subjective*. But since personality within itself is infinite and universal the limitation of being merely subjective is in contradiction with it and is *null and void*. Personality is that which acts to overcome [*aufzuheben*] this limitation and to give itself reality—or, what amounts to the same thing, to posit that existence [*Dasein*] as its own.<sup>2</sup>

In turn, this freedom is what moves the individual to action. The sport practitioner opts to make a move: that exhibits his or her individuality. The individual is a “being-within-itself (*Insichsein*) without any opposition.”<sup>3</sup> The human person willing is an *Insichsein* in that he or she determines his or her own self. The effects of a decision are multiple. This could mean a change in contract, in the payroll, or even in personal gains (prestige, fame, power, etc.). In analysing these existential impacts, one notices how much of the end results are in the realm of the capitalist industry. What is noteworthy with this type of consideration is that it is quite personal and therefore accords less importance to the team, the integrity of the game, and other factors. It is a personal consideration or a display of subjectivity and self-determination.

This could be translated into various scenarios. Take the example of the referee who accepts a bribe and unjustly umpires the game. In this scenario, the

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<sup>1</sup> Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, ed. Allan Wood, trans., Hugh Barr Nibset, from the original *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts*, Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), §35, 67.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, §39, 70.

Hegel points to a more obvious reason for the pseudo-differentiated *Einzelheit* than being free *in toto*. The personality’s task is *aufzuheben*. The distinguishing factor is not that of *Einzelheit* or any attributes of it, but that of one’s personality. *Persönlichkeit* therefore is what differentiates individuals, which is grounded on the basic ideal of freedom.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, §34, 67.

personal ambition of the referee is considered more important than the spirit of the game. Another example is the decision of the athlete to move teams because of a better offer elsewhere. Rather than living out the entirety of team sports in one's hometown, the individual moves because of the higher pay promised by another team. In taking this consideration as a guiding principle, the individual exhibits the subjectivity of freedom, a personal ambition to be fulfilled in the sporting event.

*Communal considerations.* It is through social interactions that the unity of individuals is better understood, and therefore their differences taken into account.

[What] at first [is] *abstract*—i.e. distinct from the concept—becomes identical with the concept, so that the Idea thereby attains its true realization. Thus, the subjective will determines itself as correspondingly objective, and hence as truly concrete.<sup>4</sup>

The abstract subjectivity of the individual is further understood in light of a true self-determination, as the abstract individuality bears a semblance to the object it refers to. It is therefore in this identity of subject and object that the recourse to the interpersonal or inter-subjective is brought about. "Scepticism is the realization of that of which Stoicism was only the Notion, and is the actual experience of what the freedom of thought is."<sup>5</sup> It is at this stage of scepticism (the former being of stoicism) in which the wider extent of freedom is realized. One is made to fathom how "the external subjectivity which is thus identical with me is the will of others."<sup>6</sup> Such differences make possible the amalgamation of beings, and hence the projection of a multifarious perspective on the world. It is through analyzing differences that teams are realized; the various players

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<sup>4</sup> Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, §106, 135.

<sup>5</sup> Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Phenomenology of the Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller, from the original, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, Erster Teil, *System der Wissenschaft* (Würzburg: Joseph Anton Goebhart, 1807), (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), §202, 123.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, §112, 139.

This is further elaborated by how "the expression of the will as *subjective or moral is action*" (§113, 140), and that "In the moral sphere, however, the welfare of others is also involved" (§112, 139). It is in the moral sphere that the other's welfare is taken into consideration; one's subjectivity or *Einzelheit* is fully recognized only in relation to another.

playing different positions, the specific roles of distinguished members of the training team, the numerous umpires and experts needed for a complete match.

The communal considerations therefore are those taken in light of these differences. In such a relation, a member is expected to fulfil his or her role in that position. Failure to do so or the complete rejection of the subscribed party results to an internal conflict arising in the team. For example, the athlete who wishes to move to another team leads to the former team lacking a member, or the umpire who takes the bribe makes possible the absence of an impartial adjudicator. In taking this consideration as a guiding principle, the individual exhibits a team-spirit-driven motivation for pursuing the game. It is though this consideration that one exhibits his or her individuality, to the extent of willing something despite the aforementioned interwoven structure of the team.

*Game Considerations.* Finally, a third consideration is that of the effect on other people—particularly spectators and fans. The impact of a decision on the audience bears significance because the perceived image of the team, sport, or association can either be shattered or remoulded. This can be characterized by “the gazing of one self-consciousness into another, and itself is both, and the unity of both is also its essential nature.”<sup>7</sup> This is a sublation of both the seemingly contrasting views of subjectivity and objectivity; they find unity in this connection.

[A]nd because it is itself the consciousness of this contradiction, it identifies itself with the changeable consciousness [...] it is merely the contradictory movement in which one opposite does not come to rest in its opposite, but in it only produces itself afresh as an opposite.<sup>8</sup>

It is the continuous dialectic of the opposing poles that brings about a novel burst of clarity. In this third consideration, it is “the ethical spirit as substantial will, manifest and clear to itself, which thinks and knows itself and implements what it knows in so far as it knows it.”<sup>9</sup> It moves insofar as it comprehends; the subject-object relationship brought to the level of the negative dialectic and sublated thereafter is again a primal unity consisting of disjunctions. This is in reference to the entirety of the team or of the sport. The

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<sup>7</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology of the Spirit*, §207, 126.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, §208, 127.

<sup>9</sup> Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, §257, 275.

sports practitioners perform their own component tasks and as a whole are identified under the banner of a team, game, or sport.

Companies that purposely prolong best of series games pique the interest of audiences for series finales. Rather than being spurred by the immediate competition between two teams, the sporting events focus on delaying the end—a great opportunity for more advertisements, more season finale tickets, court reservations, and so on. In taking this consideration as a guiding principle, the sports practitioner exploits audience-drawn participation. What is considered is not the individual's considerations or what is beneficial for the whole sport. Instead, the primal focus is on the direct wants of the audience: they want a game, so more games are offered, by not securing an instant win.

### **Sports as Mimesis and Anamnesis**

Sports is a social phenomenon persistent throughout history. A particular sport with primordial roots in one nation can develop and eventually gain much esteem in another. This is also the result of colonialism and imperialism, but the most significant horizon is that of the alienated state. This section looks into sports as mimesis of nature, thus establishing the crucial link among nature, sports, and the human being.

Ever since the first spark of the Enlightenment, there has been a trend in intellectual development to question enlightenment itself. Material, scientific, or technological advancements do not necessarily equate to "cultured" or "enlightened" individuals. Kant remains firm in his position regarding this: "When then it is asked: Do we live in an enlightened age? So is the answer: No, but we live in an Age of Enlightenment."<sup>10</sup> What technology and advancement of reason have brought us is the capacity for better technology. In relation to sports, this means newer materials for equipment and also better technology for replays and match analyses. But following Kant, this does not directly translate to a more enlightened state.

Several sports are reminiscent of the games of previous times: Boxing arenas, the UFC octagons, and the spectacle of the stage all allude to the

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<sup>10</sup> „Wenn denn nun gefragt wird: Leben wir jetzt in einem aufgeklärten Zeitalter? so ist die Antwort: Nein, aber wohl in einem Zeitalter der Aufklärung.“ Translation mine. Immanuel Kant, "Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?" (Königsberg in Preußen: 30. September 1784, Accessed 2 November 2017); available from [www.sozialistische-klassiker.org](http://www.sozialistische-klassiker.org); Internet.

*Amphitheatrum Flavium* or the Colosseum and even the Greek Olympic games. These combat sports bring together two individuals who are expected to go all out against each other, depending on the rules set by the event, such as by physical contact like grappling (wrestling, judo) and striking (kickboxing, taekwondo), the use of weapons (arnis, fencing), or a combination thereof (mixed martial arts). The Greeks and eventually the Romans had a type of physical engagement in which all of one's power is used to dominate the opponent: Πάγκράτιον, *Pankration*.<sup>11</sup> The mixed martial arts encounter in the octagon quite similarly resembles such an engagement that already took place thousands of years ago. Also the gladiator matches foresaw the whisks of swordsmanship and of simulated bladed weapons.

"Enlightenment's program was the disenchantment of the world."<sup>12</sup> While Kant refers to the Enlightenment as the current state, Adorno sees it as a process by which the human being comes to understand the world, in which the latter's particulars are "intellectualized to become the pure form of ontological entities."<sup>13</sup> This necessarily involves the human being. The mythological era all the way to industrialisation remains steeped in "anthropomorphism, the projection of subjective properties onto nature." Myth was the foundation of enlightenment; due to humans' fearful approach toward nature, myth took place and (intellectual) reconciliation happened. Humans were able to come to terms with reality. Thanks to myth, ontological entities became vital necessities, all through the use of reason.

Sports may be understood as a mimesis of what is seen in nature and human beings' initial reconciliation with it. The oppositions in nature reconcile with each other through such a confrontation. The clash of individualities and polar opposites result to differences in weather and even natural occurrences such as earthquakes and volcanic eruptions. Eventually, more physical forms of reconciliation took place and for the survival of the fittest, the direct bloody encounter among species. Humans undertake a mimesis of this engagement in

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. Jim Arvanitis, *Pankration: The Unchained Combat Sport of Ancient Greece*, ed. David Dubrow (Singapore: Ethos Books, 2015).

<sup>12</sup> Theodore W. Adorno, "The Concept of Enlightenment," *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott, from Volume 5 of Max Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften: Dialektik der Aufklärung und Schriften 1940–1950*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer Verlag GmbH, 1987), (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 1.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

nature and put it up on display. Hence in regard to engagements in sports, we may ask whether these constitute a quest for true sportsmanship or simply the urge to spill blood. What humans did was to make the irrational, rational. "The doubling of nature into appearance and essence, effect and force, made possible by myth no less than by science, springs from human fear, the expression of which becomes its explanation.<sup>14</sup>" It is from this (fictional) encounter with nature (as retold by Adorno) that the split between the animate and inanimate finally happens.

Mimesis eventually becomes anamnesis. Mimicry becomes a making present of the dialectic encounter with nature. "Civilization replaced the organic adaptation to otherness, mimetic behavior proper, firstly, in the magical phase, with the organized manipulation of mimesis, and finally, in the historical phase, with rational praxis, work."<sup>15</sup> Thus, the obvious connection to the initial mimetic behaviour is not clear because of the development of reason from mimicry to history. The arrival of rational praxis became the benchmark of intellectual championing, the domination or disenchantment of nature. However, at times, reason seems to regress into former thinking. This understanding though brings forth a particular idea I would like to play with: a twist on mimesis and anamnesis. This mimicry of nature in more sophisticated terms, albeit unknowing, evokes a certain remembering and making present of the initial encounter. It is all under the banner of sameness which ergo makes it possible. "[T]he adaptation of the self to the thing in the blind act of living no less than the comparison of reified elements in scientific conceptualization—that constellation remains terror."<sup>16</sup> This points to the fearful encounter with nature, the exact enchanted state that nature has, and the brand of sameness that characterizes the historical development from magic to myth to scientific discovery.

What results from this perspective is the idea that sports and nature are closely postulated. As (some) sports mimic this initial enchanted encounter with

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<sup>14</sup> Adorno, "The Concept of Enlightenment," 10.

<sup>15</sup> Adorno, "Elements of Anti-Semitism," *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, 148. The passage continues, "Uncontrolled mimesis is proscribed. [...] The severity with which, over the centuries, the rulers have prevented both their own successors and the subjugated masses from relapsing into mimetic behaviour—from the religious ban on graven images through the social ostracizing of actors and gypsies to the education which 'cures' children of childishness—is the condition of civilization."

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 149.

nature, despite advancements in technology and engineered equipment, the underlying mythical dominance still remains and is constantly made present through each sporting event. The mimesis of nature becomes an anamnesis of past encounters.

### **Sports as Power Relations**

The image of the sports practitioner, especially the athlete, has a great influence on the people, and vice versa. The power constantly shifts from one side to another. I argue that a particular power relation is formed between the sports practitioner and society in several dimensions.<sup>17</sup> This is seen in the numerous advertisements that an athlete has for multiple companies. The reason behind the popularity of such is the image that is formed; the athlete is well known and such ads will increase sales. Whether the sports practitioner in himself or herself is esteemed, or the esteem is due to the crowd, becomes a chicken-and-egg question. Sports' mere inclusion in capitalist society, with its commodity fetishism, makes it susceptible to influences from whatever the media may open up for consumption. The people look up to the athlete and the athlete must maintain his or her reputation, because of the people's great expectations. I posit that there is a power relation between the sports practitioner and the audience.

In his presentation of Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon, Foucault points out how even without the direct infliction of pain, power still exerts an effect on the individual. Surveillance becomes power. "Hence the major effect of the Panopticon: to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power."<sup>18</sup> The constant state of being under surveillance is tantamount to psychological conditioning, and Foucault's description of the subject under surveillance is a striking feature of being a sports practitioner: "He is seen, but he does not see; he is the object of information,

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<sup>17</sup> To limit the scope, my analysis applies specifically to noncombative sports. Noncombative sports range from team contact sports (basketball, football) to individual racket sports (badminton, tennis) to motorized sports (open-wheel racing, motorcycle racing), to animal-supported or Equestrian sports (polo, rodeo), and many others.

<sup>18</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan, from the original *Surveiller et Punir: Naissance de la prison* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1975), (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 201.

never a subject in communication."<sup>19</sup> While the sports practitioner is not unequivocally associated with the prisoner and there are obvious differences between them, such as the ability to communicate, the two experiences share similar facets. The reputation that sports practitioners (models, officials, and other public figures) must uphold is conditioned precisely by the spectacle they display. They are observed and watched by many, whom they do not see directly. In every moment of the game, they are under surveillance.

I consider the above a form of power relation because the sports practitioner is akin to the inmate in the Panopticon, while the audience of the sporting event is akin to the observers behind the glass window. This surveillance becomes two-way, however, which is where the sports practitioner diverges from the prisoner. Since the athlete is observed, he or she is mindful of his or her conduct, whereas those observing him or her are conditioned to act in such a way in acknowledgement of the athlete's skills. The athlete is an authoritarian figure that the masses would blindly follow; in a way, the athlete can condition the people, or better yet, the people condition themselves. This continual shift in power relations ultimately results in a society that is docile and obedient, in which the question of which party acts first becomes tautological. It all boils down to what power is:

The power to affect or be affected is carried out in a variable way, depending on the forces involved in the relation. [...] In this sense force displays potentiality with respect to the diagram containing it, or possesses a third power which presents itself as the possibility of "resistance."<sup>20</sup>

Each individual has the capacity for power, but is also closely tied to power relations. The power referred to is multifaceted as to force, potentiality, and resistance. Force pertains to the reach of influence of the sports practitioner (advertisements, brands, actual games) and that of the people (surveillance and observation). Potentiality pertains to the former's ability to exceed others' expectations about him or her, as well as the latter's constant spectatorship.

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<sup>19</sup> Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 200.

<sup>20</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault*, trans. Sean Hand, from the original, *Foucault* (West Sussex: Les Editions de Minuit, 1986), (New York: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 89-90.

Finally, resistance pertains to the ability of both parties to transcend the present power relation and resist each other's influence.

## Conclusion

In any match or individual career in the sports industry, each sports practitioner needs to make a series of decisions that can ultimately alter his or her livelihood and reputation. Examples of radical shifts include sudden membership in another team and a change in jersey number. Whereas the latter may not really have much of an effect (except for monetary benefits) the former may make people wonder. They may settle for reasons such as better management, good rapport among members, the better name of the team, and many others. But ultimately, a huge influence is how much a franchise or team is willing to pay to get an individual. The impacts are also enormous: by branding games as "pre-" or "post-season," associations have cleverly crafted a way to elicit more sponsorship and income by presenting new players or movement styles. Instead of originally representing hometowns, the names of teams now feature the companies that own them. This can be seen for example in the Philippine Basketball Association, in which teams are formed by business companies. Along with this, stadiums have gradually come under the control of numerous gigantic industries. For example, in major league baseball in the US, which includes thirty teams, only about ten stadiums bear the name of a team, founder, or hometown; the rest are named after major sponsors or companies.

My presentation of the three types of ethical considerations is by no means complete. It is best to consider them as developments in the particular dialectics of choices that sport practitioners face. Ethics as I use the term does not offer an all-encompassing claim, but a negative type of dialectics resulting in a series of events. In looking at the three considerations, one sees the great influence of the Culture Industry. The sports practitioner is alienated in making such ethical considerations. A humanist reading of Marx shows how the toil of the sports practitioner—in light of Culture Industry—is reduced to monetary terms (e.g. better pay, media advertisements, and other factors). This type of alienation is better associated with ideology. Because of the mere fact that this involves a social structure and institution (i.e. power relation), the promulgation of ideology is possible. Thus, Žižek speaks and even reforms the classic Marxist

statement of “they do not know but they do it” into “they do know but they still do it.”<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> The first statement of „*Sie wissen das nicht, aber sie tun es*“ is a well-known Marxist statement found in the *Kaptial* (Karl Marx, , Erster Abschnitt: Ware und Geld’, *Das Kapital: Kritik der politischen Ökonomie, Buch 1: Der Produktionsprozeß des Kapitals*; available from <https://archive.org/details/KarlMarxDasKapitalpdf>; Open source; accessed 2 November 2017). The second statement „*Sie wissen das, und sie tun es*“ is a creative rendition of the first following the thought of Raybone as he presents how Žižek recreates the Marxist dictum into that of the 20<sup>th</sup> century dictum of the adherence to ideology (Cf. Raybone, “Notes Towards Practicing Žižekian Ideology Critique as an Art Historical Methodology”). The German translation is mine for a better parallelism between the two statements.

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