

Paralympics as a Spectacular Referent: An Approach from within the Philosophy of Sport

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Abstract: In this article, our main hypothesis is that in the future, if more technology is allowed in the Paralympic Games than in the Olympic Games, the Paralympic Games will be more spectacular than the Olympic ones, becoming a referent. We conclude that this statement is possible, but cannot be confirmed with an absolute statement. This impossibility is generated by the fact of being this article based on a future projection susceptible to some variations such as culture and rules. Nevertheless, we present the difference between physical activity and sports, and between the Olympics and Paralympics. At the same time, we clarify the important role of the spectator and its motivations when approaching the sport. Not less important, we note that if sport becomes too efficient thanks to the technology allowed, can exclude an essential factor of every sport, such as its inefficiency. Due to all this factors, we conclude that Olympics and Paralympics could be seen from different aesthetic motivations, even for those puritan spectators who are mainly interested in the aesthetics and enhancement from the sport and its athletes.

Keywords: aesthetics, Olympics, Paralympics, philosophy of sport, ethics

METHODOLOGY

In this article, we present a hypothetical scenario. This scenario comes from a future projection and involves some main topics discussed by the philosophy of sport since its establishment as a subject. Our main hypothesis is that in the future, if more technology is allowed in the Paralympic Games than in the Olympic Games, the Paralympic Games will be more spectacular than the Olympic ones, becoming a referent.

To understand why this is a potential scenario, and not just a fiction, it is important to see the current status of the art. Nowadays, the technology allowed in the Paralympics is wider than in the Olympics,

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and specially, it is much more integrated in the human body, going from prosthetic running blades to ultra-light wheelchairs made of carbon, among others. (IPC 2021)

It is true that the International Paralympic Committee claims that

Equipment that results in sport performance not primarily being generated by the athlete's own physical prowess but being generated by automated, computer aided, or robotic devices is prohibited in IPC Sanctioned Competitions and Events, and at Paralympic Games. (IPC 2011, sec. 3.2)

This since

Human performance is the critical endeavor to the sport performance, not the impact of technology and equipment. (IPC 2011, sec. 3.1.4)

Nevertheless, this is not out of philosophical controversies. (Burkett 2010)

Philosophy of sport as an academic sub-field started in the 1970s, and its origin can be tracked in the philosophy of play, and specially, in a book initially published in 1949 titled *Homo Ludens* (Huizinga 1998). However, the publication of some books, specially *Sport: A Philosophic Inquiry*, had a great relevance. This book showed that sport deserved a different approach than game. (Weiss 1969) This approach could offer a more realistic knowledge about the world, since not all games are a sport, and not all the sports can be considered a game. (Suits 1973) In fact, this new division showed the vast number of questions related to the sport, and the need to reflect about them from a philosophical view. To fulfill this need, new journals and associations were created, such as the *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* in 1974, or the Philosophic Society for the Study of Sport in 1972. (Osterhoudt 1974) This association changed later its name to International Association for the Philosophy of Sport. Other current associations with a similar function are the European Association for the Philosophy of Sport, or the British Philosophy of Sport Association, in charge of publishing the *Sport, Ethics and Philosophy* journal.

Like all the academic fields, with the past of the time, there are different paradigms and phases trackable within the discipline. Usually, it is considered that the philosophy of sport had three differentiate periods: (1) the eclectic one; (2) the system-based one; and (3) the disciplinary one. (Zalta 2020)

Nowadays, watching at the discipline with perspective, it seems reasonable to affirm that the philosophy of sport efforts have been directed towards some pivotal questions. Those questions involve:

1. Sportsmanship (Keating 1964; Simon, Torres, and Hager 2019; Feezell 1999; Abad 2010)
2. Cheating (Kirkwood 2012; Lehman 1981; Leaman and Morgan 2007; Upton 2011)
3. Performance Enhancement (Douglas 2007; Tännsjö 2010; Murray and Chuan 2020)
4. Violent and Dangerous Sport (Russell 2005; Dixon 2001)
5. Sex, Gender and Race (Camporesi 2017; English 1978; Jarvie 2003)
6. Fans and Spectators (Dixon 2016; Saw 1972)
7. Disability Sport (Boorse 2010; Nordenfelt 2007; Edwards and McNamee 2015), and
8. The Aesthetics of Sport (Kupfer 1975; Mumford 2011; Edgar 2013)

Although all these points can be interconnected, our inductive approach will be, specially, a connection between points 1, 2, 3, 6, 7, and 8. This connection will be presented in five different sections, with the only goal of making our argument cogent. That is it, with all the premises true and strong, leading to a solid conclusion. These five sections are:

1. A differentiation between physical activity and sport, so that the scope of this text can be well delimited
2. A differentiation between Olympic Games and Paralympic Games, with the aim of clarifying the context of this text
3. A definition of sport as spectacle, at least in some contexts, like the one stated in section 2
4. The presentation of some examples of technology allowed, both in the Olympic Games and the Paralympic Games, to exemplify the wider presence of technology in the Paralympics
5. We will present the potential scenario in which the Paralympic becomes the reference as a spectacle, versus the Olympics.

To conclude this section, it has to be specified that this article is mainly of a theoretical nature and based on basic research, not being its results tested in an empirical or any other experimental way. Since the conclusion is inductive, and theoretical, future approaches to the scenario here presented will be of great value to determinate if our hypothesis becomes, in reality, true, false, or null.

PHYSICAL ACTIVITY VS. SPORT

Humans do physical activity since the very beginning of their constitution. The World Health Organization describes physical activity as “any bodily movement produced by skeletal muscles that requires energy expenditure. Physical activity refers to all movement”. (WHO 2020)

As a consequence, it seems reasonable to state that every human, with a body, does physical activity. This happens even at a very low intensity, like when moving in the bed, or going from the couch to the kitchen. The definition and the implications of sport are, nevertheless, more complex.

The Cambridge Dictionary (n.d.) describes sport — among other definitions —, as “a game, competition, or activity needing physical effort and skill that is played or done according to rules, for enjoyment and/or as a job”. Although this definition seems initially to be satisfactory, a review of the literature related to the philosophy of sport shows that significant cases are missing, specially those that could not fall into the category of “enjoyment” or “job”. In fact, for philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle, or Augustine, sport was a way to achieve excellence (Dombrowski 1979; Reid 2020; Jirásek 2015). This is commonly represented by the Latin maxim: “mens sana in corpore sano”. In different cultures, nevertheless, sport has served political, military, or religious interests (Espy 1981; Shaw 2012; Preuss 2004; Jirásek 2015; Allison 1986).

Formalist philosophers identified some categories that a physical activity must have in order to be a sport. Conventionalism supporters such as D’Agostino or Morgan, or interpretivists such as Russell or Simon, challenged or allocated different levels of importance, and nuances, to those categories stated by the formalists (Zalta 2020). Nonetheless, the categories that constitute one sport are, according to Suits (2005): goals; means; rules; and certain attitude among the other players.

All the sports have goals, and mainly, there are two types of goals. As Suits (2005) differentiates, there are pre-lusory goals (e. g. to put the ball inside the basket in basketball or to develop a more aesthetic and muscular body in bodybuilding). The lusory goal is to win.

The means are the procedures and the tools that the sportsman can use to achieve the goal. These means are by definition inefficient, and they are limited by the constitutive rules of each sport. For example, if

the goal of cycling is moving from point A to point B faster than the others, it could be much easier to use the train. Using two wheels, moved indirectly by the legs, in a tight lycra suit in August, it is not efficient. Nevertheless, this is the goal of this sport, and that is why the constitutive rules prohibit to use the train.

A kind of rules are the rules of skill, such as moving one leg after another, or not to sprint in the middle of the mountain, in the cycling example.

The attitudinal point expressed by Suits involves the fact that, if there is no agreement from the sportsmen to play according to the constitutive rules, there is no sport, or there is another sport. That means, that if I would rather not to be faster than another, moved by two wheels, indirectly propelled by the legs, in a tight lycra suit in August, I can try to be faster riding, for example, a motorcycle. But that is a motorcycle sport and not cycling anymore.

OLYMPIC GAMES AND PARALYMPIC GAMES

The Olympic Games are often considered the referent of sport competitions. This is due to the number of different sports that are part of it — 45 for the next summer edition at Paris 2024, winter apart — as well as its long history. In fact, the Olympic Games “are the world’s foremost sports competition and include athletes from all over the world” which origins are “reasonably certain that they occurred in Greece almost 3,000 years ago” (Young 2008; Abrahams 2022).

Regarding the Paralympics, the first edition took place in Rome, in 1960 (Gilbert and Schantz 2008, 129). The goal of the Paralympics is “To Enable Paralympic Athletes to Achieve Sporting Excellence and Inspire and Excite the World”, being those referred Paralympic Athletes, people with disabilities. (IPC 2011; Cambridge Dictionary n.d.)

Factors such as the global competition, and the excellence in performance of its actors, made the Olympics and Paralympics one spectacle.¹

¹ As an example, football, and basketball have their specific competitions which are followed by millions of people (e.g. UEFA Champions League and NBA). They are also part of the Olympics and Paralympics, although with some changes. Other sports, such as the American Football, or Cricket are widely followed sports which, on the contrary, are not part of the Olympics and Paralympics, in part, due to their lack of global impact.

SPORT AS SPECTACLE

Sport has always been a spectacle. Since its early stages, passing through the Classic Greeks and Romans, or the Byzantines, sport attracted interest and attention (Kyle 2014). Nevertheless, its impact has never been as powerful as today; in part, due to the media (McPhail 1989; Wenner 1989). This interest finds its origin into two different categories. One of them is a partisan one. The other one is the purist one.

The partisan approach is that one in which people are following the spectacle not from a neutral and disinterested way. For example, a football fan who supports a team during his whole life. It does not matter if that team is doing a good spectacle or if that specific season players exceed in performing that sport. Another example is people who watch sport because they bet on it.

Although the partisan approach is interesting to be analyzed in order to understand the different motivations that can lead to this situation, this is not the goal of this text (Dixon 2016).

On the contrary, we are taking as a reference the puritan perspective. We are doing this since, although it is not possible to have a fully neutral judgement, it seems to be a judgement presumably more honest. This honesty is much closer to the disinterested aesthetic judgement defended in philosophy by thinkers such as Kant and Hume (Kreitman 2006; Stolnitz 1961).

As a consequence, one spectator from one sport or one specific event, such as the Olympic or the Paralympic Games, can be moved by nationalism, personal sympathy, or economic interests. However, can as well be moved by the performance enhancement of the athletes and their aesthetic performance; a performance enhancement far from the possibilities of the majority of human beings (Edgar 2012; 2013).

TECHNOLOGY ALLOWED

Although technology and innovation are allowed in both the Olympics and the Paralympics, technology is more integrated into the sportsman who participates in the Paralympics, in general. For example, a runner in the Olympics can use sneakers which are light and are specially made for his characteristics, and a swimmer can use a swimwear that perfectly fits his body and integrates him much better in the water conditions. Nevertheless, a Paralympic sportsman can use a prosthetic leg which is lighter than a leg with bones and muscles. The shooters,

use a wheelchair which, due to its characteristics, allows performing the activity with more stability points.

Due to higher levels of technology and innovation in the Paralympics, it can be inferred that in the short and mid-future, and unless there are changes in the regulations or in the definition of what it is the disabled sport, the Paralympics will become more spectacular than the Olympics. This statement is based on the fact that, if the tools used for the sportsman to achieve his pre-lusory goals are more efficient than the ones from the Olympic athletes, the Paralympic sportsman will be able to achieve those pre-lusory goals faster, stronger, jumping higher, etc. This will potentially increase the difference between the Olympics' athletes and the Paralympics' ones, making the Paralympic spectacle and aesthetics of higher interest for the puritan sports fan.

PARALYMPIC GAMES AS A REFERENCE

Following the argument presented in this article, it seems reasonable to note that exists the possibility, in the future, the Paralympic games will become a reference. They will overcome the impact of the Olympic Games, even if by some agents the Paralympics can be seen already as the reference from different perspectives such as the inclusivity. We use the word "reference" thinking on the Paralympics being, quantitatively speaking, for puritan spectators who put special importance in the athlete enhancement and its aesthetics.

Besides, it is important to think that this statement is a hypothetical future scenario, and in consequence it is based on a projection, not having high epistemological knowledge regarding this possibility (Żyluk et al. 2018). Changes in rules or any other sort of cultural modification can heavily impact this projection. Additionally, it is important to remember that the means and rules of sports are often inefficient (Suits 2005).

One factor that could prevent this hypothetical scenario to become a reality, is the fact that if the tools used to achieve the pre-lusory goal are efficient, only the achievement of the lusory goal, which is winning, seems relevant. In that case, other aesthetic categories such as the grotesque would be under-represented in the Paralympic performances, while being much more present in the Olympics. That could lead to a situation in which the Olympics are of interest, statistically speaking, for the puritan spectators who search for some determinate aesthetic categories such as the ugly or the grotesque. On

the contrary, Paralympics could become the reference for those puritan spectators who are moved by the search of beauty. In this case, the Paralympics and the Olympics would end up being watched from entirely different aesthetic perspectives, although all of them are generated by the performance enhancement of the athletes (Kivy 1968). Due to this fact, our hypothesis appears to be possible, but cannot be confirmed with an absolute statement.

CONCLUSIONS

If more technology is allowed in the Paralympic Games than in the Olympic Games, the Paralympic Games will be more spectacular than the Olympic ones, becoming a referent. In our view, this is possible, but without an absolute confirmation for the time being. The article bases on a future projection susceptible to some variations such as culture and rules. At the same time, we stress the important role of the spectator and its motivations when approaching the sport. Also, as we noted, if sport becomes too efficient thanks to the technology allowed, it can be excluded an essential factor of every sport, such as its inefficiency. Due to all these factors, Olympics and Paralympics could be seen from different aesthetic motivations, even for those puritan spectators who are mainly interested in the aesthetics and enhancement of the sport and its athletes.

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