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Ontological and epistemological approaches to physical activity and sport in the thought of Plato and Aristotle: philosophical dialogues between the past, present and future

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Abstract

The main objective of this research is to examine the ontological and epistemological dimensions of sport activity in the philosophical thought of Plato and Aristotle, exploring how these universal thinkers integrated gymnastic and athletic practices in their systems of thought. From this objective arose some questions of interest, such as: In what way does gymnastics, together with music, constitute an essential educational element in the political-pedagogical project developed in the Republic? Or in what sense does the pentathlete represent a

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model of virtue and beauty that illustrates the doctrine of the Aristotelian middle ground? The results obtained allow us to conclude that, in philosophical terms, when it is possible to link conceptual rigor with practical relevance, the philosophy of sport can reclaim its primordial place as a tool for transforming sporting reality and not only as an interpretative exercise. As the rereading of Plato and Aristotle suggests, the real triumph is not in beating others, but in turning each stage of being into a gymnasium for the soul.

Keywords: philosophy of sport, sports activity, Plato and Aristotle, physical activity, physical education, sport.

*Aproximaciones ontológicas y epistemológicas a la actividad
deportiva en el pensamiento de Platón y Aristóteles: diálogos
filosóficos entre el pasado, presente y futuro*

Resumen

El objetivo principal de esta investigación consiste en examinar las dimensiones ontológicas y epistemológicas de la actividad deportiva, en el pensamiento filosófico de Platón y Aristóteles, explorando cómo estos pensadores universales integraron las prácticas gimnásticas y atléticas en sus sistemas de pensamiento. De este objetivo surgieron algunas preguntas de interés, tales como: ¿De qué manera la gimnasia, junto con la música, constituye un elemento educativo esencial en el proyecto político-pedagógico desarrollado en la República? O ¿En qué sentido el pentatleta representa un modelo de virtud y belleza que ilustra la doctrina del término medio aristotélico? Los resultados obtenidos permiten concluir que, en términos filosóficos, cuando se logra vincular el rigor conceptual con la relevancia práctica, la filosofía del deporte puede reclamar su lugar primordial como herramienta transformadora de la realidad deportiva y no solo como ejercicio interpretativo. Como sugiere la relectura de Platón y Aristóteles, el verdadero triunfo no está en vencer a otros, sino en convertir cada estadio del ser en un gimnasio para el alma.

Palabras clave: filosofía del deporte, actividad deportiva, Platón y Aristóteles, actividad física, educación física, deporte.

1. Exordium

In general terms, sport has transcended throughout history as a determining social and cultural practice, even configuring itself as an ontological vehicle of collective identity, from ancient Greece to the present day. In the words of Reid et al. (2020), the first Olympic Games, held in 776 BC, represented not only athletic competitions but also religious and political manifestations that unified the Hellenic world as a cultural unit, laying the foundations for what would later evolve into complex institutionalised sports systems. This sporting tradition, interrupted for centuries, resurfaced in 1896 with the modern Olympic Games, consolidating sport as a transcendent element in the human experience and evidencing its ability to persist through different eras and social contexts, maintaining its competitive essence while acquiring new symbolic dimensions.

In this order of ideas, contemporary international sports competitions constitute authentic geopolitical scenarios where nations deploy soft power strategies to increase their global prestige. As USC's analysis of the Paris 2024 Olympics developed by Raffio points out: "We live in an era where reputation is central to the security of nations. A mega event like the Olympic Games becomes a key platform for the host and participants alike" (2024, para., 5).

A similar phenomenon occurs with the World Cup, where countries such as Qatar have invested astronomical sums to transform their international status, turning the sporting event into a diplomatic instrument to redefine their position on the world stage, demonstrating that these competitions transcend athletic

competition to become arenas where symbolic capital is disputed between hegemonic or emerging powers and nations.

From Holt's (2024) point of view, the philosophy of sport emerges as a reflective discipline in the face of the need to understand a phenomenon that exceeds mere physical performance and is historically established as a social practice loaded with diverse meanings. For these reasons, sports activity can and should be the object of philosophical reflection because it embodies values, anthropological conceptions, and ethical principles that reflect particular visions of the human condition, excellence, and social relations (Reid et al., 2020).

The authors of this research defend the idea that the philosophical analysis of sport allows us to advance in established debates on sports activities and to propose new perspectives on issues that connect directly with essential questions about human nature, virtue, bodily beauty and the dialectical relationship between the physical and the intellectual, thus constituting a fertile field to explore the ontological and epistemological dimensions that underlie the apparently mundane but deeply significant practices such as sports.

The main objective of this research is to examine the ontological and epistemological dimensions of sports activity in the philosophical thought of Plato and Aristotle, exploring how these classical philosophers integrated gymnastic and athletic practices into their systems of thought. Regarding Plato, questions arise such as: In what way does gymnastics, together with music, constitute an essential educational element in his political-pedagogical project developed in the Republic? How does Plato's concept of *agōn* (competition) articulate with his vision of justice and human excellence? As for Aristotle, it is worth asking: In what sense does the pentathlete represent a model of virtue and beauty that

illustrates the doctrine of the middle ground? And how is physical activity integrated into his conception of eudaimonia (happiness) as "activity in accordance with virtue"? These questions guided our philosophical exploration through classical Greek thought, without losing sight of its current usefulness.

The study of sports activity in Plato reveals a complex approach that transcends the only instrumental consideration of physical exercise. In his dialogues, particularly in *Republic* and *Gorgias* (Plato, 2016), Plato draws parallels between athletic competition (*agōn*) and the moral struggle for virtue, as evidenced by his idea: "The struggle to be good rather than bad is important, Glaucon, much more important than people think" (Quoted by: Reid et al., 2020, p. 29).

Hermeneutically, this conception underlines that, for Plato, the value of gymnastics does not lie exclusively in bodily development, but in its contribution to the formation of character and the balance between body and soul. It is notable that, despite his apparent emphasis on the spiritual, Plato promotes gymnastic education for both women and men in the *Republic*, suggesting a more complex vision of corporeality than the one traditionally attributed to his idealistic thought (Plato, 2018).

For his part, Aristotle, who coincidentally established his school in a gymnasium (the Lyceum), develops a distinctive perspective on athletic activity, which reflects central elements of his ethical theory. In this argumentative context, his admiration for the pentathletes responds to the fact that they exemplify the ideal of moderation and balance, essential characteristics of his doctrine of the just mean.

As Reid (2010) points out, Plato's main disciple praised the beauty of pentathletes because it reflected his own ethical theory. The main source of athletic beauty is, of course, training, and the teaching of ethos is the primary form of moral education in Aristotle. In essence and existence, Aristotle's appreciation of sport as an activity that cultivates virtues through habitual practice connects directly with his concept of happiness as an activity according to virtue: (Nicomachean Ethics) (Aristotle'S, 1998), thus establishing a systematic link between physical excellence, moral development and human fulfillment in his philosophical program.

This scientific article is structured in five main sections that follow this introduction. The first section establishes the conceptual framework for philosophically analyzing sports activity, exploring the ontological and epistemological categories necessary for the study. The second section delves into the Platonic conception of sport, examining the place of gymnastics in his educational system and the agonistic dimension as a metaphor for the virtuous life. The third section analyzes the Aristotelian perspective, focusing on the figure of the pentathlete as a model of virtue and the relationship between athletic habit and moral development. The fourth section offers a comparative analysis of both philosophical conceptions, identifying significant convergences and divergences. Finally, the fifth section explores, by way of conclusion, the contemporary relevance of these classical reflections for the current philosophy of sport, suggesting lines of research that could enrich both sports studies and the philosophical field in general.

2. Philosophical and conceptual framework

The philosophy of sport is an interdisciplinary field that examines the conceptual, ethical, and metaphysical dimensions of athletic practices, integrating perspectives from aesthetics, philosophical anthropology, and political theory, among others. Since classical antiquity, figures such as Plato, Aristotle and currently Heather Reid (2010), have consolidated this discipline in their particular time and space through research that transcends technical analysis to explore phenomenologically how sport shapes collective identities and expresses civilizational values. Its purpose lies in unveiling the ontological assumptions and axiological implications inherent in apparently mundane activities, revealing their ability to illuminate essential aspects of the human condition. More precisely:

While sport has been practised since pre-historic times, it is a relatively new subject of systematic philosophical enquiry. Indeed, the philosophy of sport as an academic sub-field dates back only to the 1970s. Yet, in this short time, it has grown into a vibrant area of philosophical research that promises both to deepen our understanding of sport and to inform sports practice. Recent controversies at the elite and professional level have highlighted the ethical dimensions of sport in particular. Lance Armstrong's use of performance-enhancing drugs raised new issues in the ethics of cheating, middle-distance runner Caster Semenya has challenged prevailing rules around sex classification in sport, and Oscar Pistorius's prosthesis has problematized the distinction between able-bodied and disabled sport. While philosophical analysis may help to achieve a deeper understanding of sport, such analysis may also illuminate problems of philosophy beyond sport, ranging from the nature of skill to the ethics of altruism. (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2020, para. 1)

From an ontological perspective, sports hermeneutics proposes that athletic practices function as cultural texts that require contextualized interpretation to unravel their true meaning. As Lopez & Andrew (2016) point out, sport cannot be reduced to self-referential systems of rules, but rather constitutes an intersubjective set of signifying practices inserted in networks of historical-cultural significance. This clearly hermeneutical approach reveals to the consciousness that the essence of the sports phenomenon lies in its ability to symbolize existential conflicts typical of the human condition, such as: –the overcoming of limits and the negotiation between cooperation and competition–, establishing a permanent dialogue between physical action and its symbolic interpretation, within specific socio-cultural frameworks, as Gadamer (2004) would say.

From the point of view of the authors of this reflection, phenomenology complements this approach by investigating how athletic corporeality structures conscious experience. In fact, works such as *An Introduction to the Phenomenological Study of Sport* authored by Martínková & Parry (2012) show that qualified sports execution generates "specific modes of being-in-the-world", where the body ceases to be a passive object to become a vehicle of practical intentionality. The ontology here emerges from the interaction between sensory-motor capacities and environmental challenges, configuring a sporting reality that is only fully revealed through the participation embodied in athletic practices.

In this order of ideas, at the epistemological level, in the words of Lucariello & Tafuri (2018), sport generates tacit knowledge that challenges traditional rationalist models. According to the cited authors, their research shows how expert athletes develop "embodied understandings", that is, forms of procedural

knowledge that integrate perception, action and environment, which are inaccessible through external observation alone. This *enactive knowledge* suggests that sports epistemology must transcend the representational paradigm to incorporate neuroscientific and contextual dimensions inherent to bodily performance. In fact, sports activity is so complex that it requires an interdisciplinary and cognitive structure, much more so when:

The body contributes to cognition in surprising ways – ways that more standard computationally-oriented approaches to cognition often fail to appreciate. Sports psychologists have been quick to notice the significance of these ideas in their efforts to understand athletic performance. Indeed, some sports psychologists have been instrumental in expanding and developing research programs within embodied cognition (29). We believe that continued erosion in the disciplinary boundaries between embodied cognition and sports psychology will bring tremendous benefits to both fields. (Lucariello & Tafuri, 2018, p. 73)

In addition to the above, sport as a social phenomenon generates systemic knowledge about group dynamics, applied ethics and uncertainty management. Therefore, it is worth highlighting how sports sciences combine quantitative methodologies with qualitative approaches that recognize the constructed and situated nature of sports phenomena, hence the relevance of the philosophical perspective to reconstruct their differential and unique nature (Holt, 2024). This methodological plurality associated with the understanding of sports reflects the epistemic complexity of a domain where objective measures of performance coexist with subjective experiences of meaning, demanding flexible interpretative frameworks that articulate various forms of validation of knowledge.

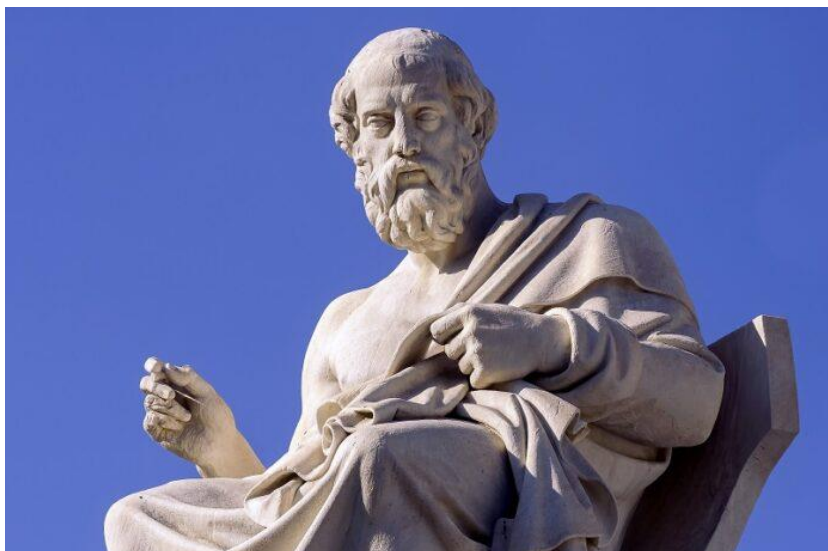
From the coordinates of Aristotelian thought, the interrelation between ontology and epistemology in the philosophical study of sport is manifested in

how conceptions of its essence determine the methods for knowing it. If sport is conceptualized as a hermeneutical practice (interpretative ontology) (Gadamer, 2004), then its study will require phenomenological methodologies that capture lived experiences (qualitative epistemology). On the contrary, if its dimension as a regulated system (formalist ontology) is emphasized, empiricist approaches that measure discrete variables will predominate. According to Lopez & Andrew (2016), this dialectic reveals that all sports epistemology implies prior ontological commitments about the nature, essence or substance of what is investigated in terms of objects and subjects.

3. Platonic conception of sport

In his life, Plato develops an idealist philosophical vision where material reality is considered an "imperfect imitation" of the "Perfect Forms" that exist in the eternal realm of ideas (Plato, 2016). This duality between the sensible and the intelligible world constitutes the core of his thought. For the creator of the Philosopher King, people possess innate knowledge of these "primary ontological Forms" because they come from the realm of Ideas, at birth, and return to it after death. Therefore, in the words of Copleston (2004), innate knowledge explains why we can recognize imperfect examples of concepts such as beauty, goodness, or justice in the material world. In teleological terms, Platonic idealism states that true knowledge is not found in sensible experience, but, rather, in the rational contemplation of these immutable and perfect Forms, hence the justification of philosophy.

Image 1. Plato at the University of Athens

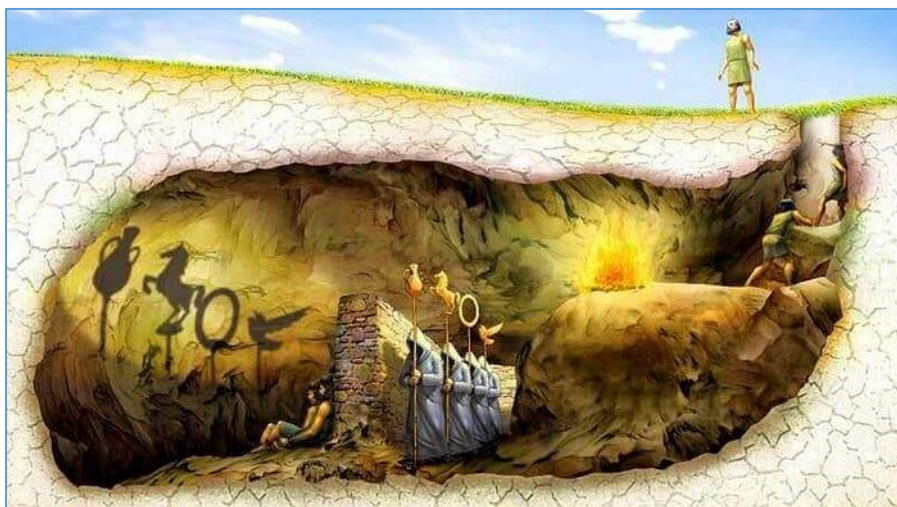


Source: Azparren, 2024.

In his dialogue Protagoras, Plato (2016) demonstrates his philosophical method to access the knowledge of these ideal forms, insisting on the epistemological need to develop precise definitions and, particularly, ethical concepts. At the end of this dialogue, Socrates expresses the existential urgency of redefining virtue as a necessary step to resolve an aporia (state of perplexity). According to the analysis of Politis (2012), Plato uses this aporia when the main question--whether virtue can be taught--has been argued equally in both directions by Socrates and Protagoras. In this rhetorical dialogic context, this state of perplexity does not represent a failure, but a starting point for deeper philosophical inquiry. The dialectical methodology reflects, therefore, his conviction that we can approach true knowledge through systematic reasoning and rigorous questioning.

In this order of ideas, the allegory of the cave, presented in Book VII of the Republic (Plato, 2018), masterfully illustrates Plato's epistemological and metaphysical theory. In his metaphorical and deeply symbolic narrative, Plato describes prisoners chained from birth in a dark cavern, contemplating only shadows cast on the wall, produced by objects carried behind a wall by the light of a bonfire. These shadows constitute his only sentient reality, representing the common, distorted, and incomplete human sense perception. In contrast, when a prisoner is released and forced to look into the light, he experiences pain and confusion, symbolizing the difficulty of the educational process in the search for the true self. By becoming accustomed to looking at real objects and eventually the sun, the freed prisoner symbolizes the philosopher who has attained the contemplation of forms and the idea of the good.

Image 2. Plato's Cave Allegory



Source: Loeb, 2023.

In this narrative thread, when the prisoner returns to the cave, he faces two difficulties: his eyes accustomed to the light cannot see well in the dark, and when explaining the higher reality he has contemplated, he is ridiculed by the other prisoners (Plato, 2018). In our hermeneutical criterion, this part of the allegory illustrates the fate of the philosopher in society and the resistance to true knowledge. At the same time, the metaphor of the ascent represents the educational path proposed by Plato, it is a difficult process, for what it represents, of conversion of the soul from the sensible to the intelligible. Here, both music and gymnastics education have crucial roles: music educating the soul and gymnastics, on the other hand, preparing the body as a suitable vehicle for a well-formed soul. The ultimate goal is to make it possible to distinguish between appearance and reality, preparing the individual to contemplate the true world of Ideas.

In addition to the above, in the Republic, Plato establishes that the education of guardians must include two essential elements: *musikē* (music) and *gymnastikē* (gymnastics), where the first nourishes the soul and the second the body. (Plato, 2018) Unlike Sparta, where gymnastics predominated, Plato gives primacy to musical training over physical education, establishing that: "a good soul, by virtue, makes the body the best it can be" (Plato, 2016, p. 315). Guardians, as "athletes in the greatest of competitions," must maintain a strict regimen that includes abstinence from poisoning and a proper diet. Thus, physical training for Plato does not primarily seek muscle development for its own sake, but is part of an integral (holistic) educational program aimed at the balanced development of the individual, where the disciplined body serves as an appropriate instrument for a virtuous soul (Copleston, 2004).

In the words of Pisk (2006), Plato conceives sport in three hierarchical levels that correspond to its tripartite division of the soul. The most basic level, associated with the *appetitive soul*, is an ontological space where it is oriented towards the acquisition of material goods through prizes won in competitions. The second level links the emotional soul (*thymos*), in the search for satisfaction in the achievement of honor and glory.

However, it is the higher level, corresponding to the *rational soul*, where external competition transcends to reach its fullness in the perfect execution of movement and, at the same time, the ideal cooperation between reason and body is achieved. Continuing with Pisk (2006), in this higher stage, the essential thing is to compete and beat oneself, something achievable by anyone regardless of their physical abilities compared to others. This agonistic conception reflects the Platonic vision of the virtuous life as a continuous struggle for self-mastery and the search for the true self, in the beautiful, useful and good.

One of Plato's most common questions found in his dialogues is "What is something?" By asking this question Plato usually brought his co-speakers to the recognition that in fact they do not have a full comprehension of what something is, although they have a partial comprehension of it. The awareness of one's incomplete cognition is the first step to be made on the philosophic way to truth. As in ancient times also today Plato asks us – the modern philosophers of sport – "What is sport?" or more precisely "What is good sport?" Probably the best of Plato's answers to this question can be found in the basic concepts of his philosophy regarding his hierarchical division of the state and human soul into three parts. Since sport is derived from human being also the goodness of sport can be divided into three stages. The lowest stage of sport corresponds to the first part of the soul – the appetite soul. On this stage sport is based on the gaining of material goods through prizes won at competitions. In the philosophic view, this is the lowest possible stage of goodness of sport. (Pisk, 2006, p. 67)

Table 1. Argumentative synthesis of Platonic thought on sports activity.

<i>Level of Sport</i>	Part of the Soul	Orientation	Objective	Philosophical Value
<i>Lower Level</i>	Appetitive Soul	Material	Earning prizes and rewards	Lower philosophical value
<i>Intermediate</i>	Alma Emotiva (Thymos)	Social/Competitive	Achieving Honor and Glory	Moderate philosophical value
<i>Higher Level</i>	Rational Soul	Transcendental	Perfection of movement and self-control	Maximum philosophical value

Source: Authors' elaboration based on the hermeneutic reading of Plato, (2016; 2018) and Pisk, (2006).

It is clear that the Platonic hierarchical scheme of sport reveals to rational understanding the deep integration between its ontology, epistemology and ethics. The gradation from the material to the rational reflects, in his argumentative system, the upward movement from the world of appearances to that of Ideas. At the highest level of sport, where the individual competes with himself in pursuit of perfection of movement, we likewise observe a practical manifestation of the dialectical process: an inner dialogue that leads to the true and the good. (Plato, 2016).

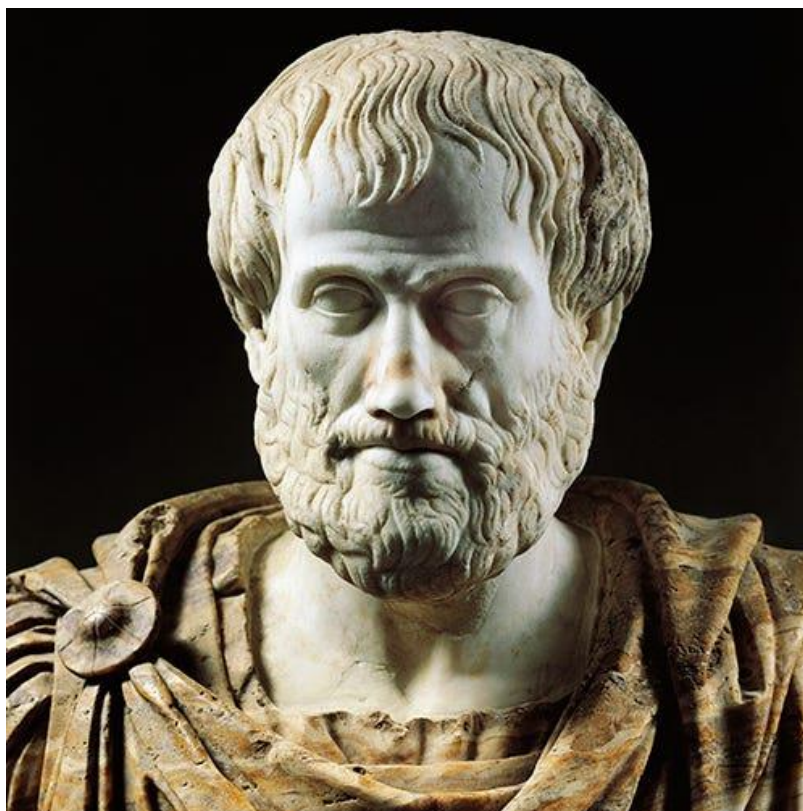
In this common thread, the harmony between body and soul anticipates current debates on mind-body integration in sports psychology. The Platonic hierarchy does not imply rejecting the lower levels, but recognizing their limitations and subordinating them to higher purposes, suggesting that the

authentic value of sport lies in its material and symbolic capacity to elevate the human being towards the active contemplation of the ideal, through bodily excellence.

4. General coordinates of the Aristotelian vision of sport

Simplifying ideas for expository purposes, Aristotle builds his philosophy on the basis of a kind of teleological ontology, where every being tends towards a specific end (telos) that determines its excellence and existence (Aristotle, 1927). For the Stagirite, human nature is defined by rational capacity, and virtue (arete) consists in actualizing this potential through actions that balance opposite extremes (Aristotle'S, 1867). This principle of the *just mean* does not imply mediocrity in any way, but the search for an optimal point between excess and defect, adjusted to particular circumstances. In his Nicomachean Ethics, Aristotle illustrates this concept with courage: situated between cowardice (defect) and recklessness (excess), so it represents the appropriate disposition in the face of danger (Aristotle'S, Nicomachean Ethics, 1998).

Image 3. Aristotle.



Source: Biography, 2023.

Broadly speaking, Aristotelian ethics is distinguished by its focus on character formation through habituation (ethos). In the words of Konch & Kumar (2018), unlike Plato, who prioritized abstract knowledge, Aristotle argues that moral virtues are cultivated through the repetition of virtuous acts, analogous to how a musician develops his skill by systematically practicing on his instrument.

Though nobility and justice are concerned with governance and politics, Aristotle still thought the citizen's habits must be good. The citizens with their good habits contribute to the prosperity of the state. It might

happen that some persons are already pursuing good habits to live a good life. Aristotle's concern here is mainly to show that every person must strive for justice or have a love of being noble. Hence, there is a need for exercising choice followed by the inculcation of virtue and practice of good habits. (Konch & Kumar, 2018, p. 2)

For these reasons, the process is not mechanical: it requires practical discernment (phronesis) to adapt actions to each concrete situation of daily life (Aristotle, 1927). Habit, therefore, is not just routine, but a conscious exercise that shapes the individual's emotional and rational disposition toward excellence. But, more specifically, the key is then to reach the right medium, through the personal and collective cultivation of good habits.

5. The Pentathlete as a model of bodily and moral virtue

In this order of ideas, Aristotle praises the pentathlete not only for his physical prowess, but for embodying the harmony between opposing qualities: strength and agility, endurance and precision. In fact, in the *Rhetoric* (Aristotle's, 1867), he compares his beauty to that of the virtuous man, whose soul balances rationality and passions. In this sense, the pentathlon, by combining running, jumping, wrestling, discus throw and javelin, requires versatility, avoiding extreme specialization that, according to the philosopher, deforms the body and character, which evidences the mind-body unity, dissociated in the West by the Cartesian thought of modernity.

In this relational vision, it is linked to the concept of *kalokagathia* (beauty-goodness), where the aesthetic and the ethical converge (Aristotle, 1927). The athlete does not seek only victory, but the intrinsic perfection of his performance, reflecting at all times a soul educated in moderation (just the mean). Moreover,

Aristotle criticizes educational systems that prioritize "brutal physical training"--as in Sparta--, because they generate "beasts useful for war, but incapable of governing themselves" (Aristotles, 1978, p. 268). Instead, he proposes gymnastics that strengthens the body without sacrificing the flexibility necessary for civilian life.

The process of athletic training serves Aristotle as a metaphor for ethical training. Just as the pentathlete develops muscles through gradual exercises, the individual builds moral virtues through repeated acts that strengthen his will (Aristotle, 1927). This parallelism underlines that excellence, both physical and ethical, is not innate, but the result of the sustained effort of the person who seeks to perfect his or her virtues and abilities at all times. In *Ethics* (Aristotle'S, 1998), the philosopher states that *kalokagathia* arises from the combination of virtues, analogous to the coordination of skills in the pentathlon.

However, Aristotle warns that sport only has educational value if it is subordinated to noble ends. For these reasons, according to Copleston (2004), the obsession with victory or honor empties athletic practice of meaning, reducing it to a means to obtain external rewards. In contrast, the true athlete--like the virtuous man--acts for the intrinsic good of his activity, cultivating friendships (*philia*) and contributing to the development of the community in which he is immersed. For the authors of this research, the Aristotelian view anticipates modern conceptions of sport as a space for social cohesion and personal development.

Table 2. Keys to understanding Aristotle's sports thought.

Aristotelian Concept	Relationship with Sport	Educational Function	Associated Virtue
Telos (Ultimate End)	To achieve physical and moral excellence.	It orients training towards human fulfillment.	Practical wisdom (Phronesis).
Just Medium	Balancing Over- and Under-Exertion.	Prevents physical injury and undue character deformations.	Moderation (Sophrosyne).
Kalokagathia	Body beauty as a reflection of virtue.	Integrates aesthetics and ethics in the formation of the person.	Nobility of character.
Habituation (Ethos)	Repeated practice of athletic techniques to achieve excellence.	Develop discipline and self-control.	Fortress (Andreia).
Philia (Friendship)	Competition as collaboration.	Fosters loyalty and mutual respect.	Justice (Dikaiosyne).

Source: prepared by the authors (2025), in accordance with the interpretation of classical works (Aristotle, 1927; 1867; 1998; 1978).

The synthesis offered in Table 2 reveals how sport, in the Aristotelian vision, transcends the playful to become a microcosm of ethical life. In this philosophical scenario, each element --from the search for telos to philia-- ontologically reflects principles applicable to citizenship education. Consequently, it is not wrong to say that the pentathlete symbolizes the indissoluble unity between body and soul, so that his training not only molds the muscles, but perfects, and this is the most

important thing, the moral capacity to discern and act virtuously in complex contexts. This vision challenges modern dichotomies between the physical and the intellectual (Descartes, 2010), proposing instead an integral education where the stadium and the gymnasium are laboratories of civic virtue for the modeling of the human condition.

6. Comparative analysis of sports conceptions in Plato and Aristotle

Plato conceives sport as a pedagogical instrument to harmonize the tripartite soul, where gymnastics disciplines the body and prepares the way towards the contemplation of the Ideas. In Republic II (Plato 2018), it establishes that the education of guardians must balance mousikē (music) and gymnastikē, prioritizing the former to prevent physical training from promoting excessive aggressiveness. Sport, on the other hand, at its highest level, transcends external competition and becomes, rather, an inner struggle for self-mastery, reflecting at every moment the dialectical process of ascent from the shadows of the cave to the light of truth (see image 2). According to this hierarchical vision, sports practices are classified according to their connection with the parts of the soul: from activities aimed at material rewards (appetitive soul) to those higher ones that seek perfection of movement (rational soul) (Plato, 2018).

In this order of ideas, the Platonic agōn is not limited to athletic rivalry, it seems to symbolize the philosopher's struggle against ignorance. In the words of Pekgöz (2022), in Laws, Plato criticizes sporting events that exalt victory over virtue, proposing instead competitions that evaluate war skills and collective coordination. Therefore, the true value of sport lies in its ability to turn the stadium

into a microcosm of the ideal polis, where every physical gesture reflects a higher moral order for being and doing. It is a conception of sport and gymnastics in particular associated with virtuous education:

Plato, physical education and gymnastics, tries to make human as a whole virtuous. In this respect, his gymnastics training expresses an education that includes not only the physical side of the human but also the inner side of the person. To be good as a whole, to achieve beauty and harmony, depends on performing gymnastics training that beautifies the body and music training that perfects the soul together and in harmony. (Pekgöz, 2022, p. 4128)

For its part, the Aristotelian perspective sees sport as the condition of possibility to achieve balance and develop the intrinsic potential of each person. In this sense, the Stagirite places sport within the framework of eudaimonia, understood as a rational activity in accordance with virtue (Aristotle'S, 1998). Unlike Plato, he does not establish a rigid hierarchy, but proposes the right mean, so that the pentathlete personifies this balance by harmonizing strength, speed and precision in various disciplines. In Politics VIII, (Aristotles, 1978) he argues that gymnastics should avoid both Spartan excess (which produces "beasts of war") and Athenian negligence, seeking rational balance in bodily development that serves the contemplative and, at the same time, productive life.

For Alexander the Great's tutor, the habit of sport categorically cultivates moral virtues through the conscious repetition of acts, analogous to how a musician perfects his technique. According to Krawczak (2017), this process requires phronesis (practical wisdom) to adapt the training to each particular context, avoiding extreme specialization that distorts the body and character. The pentathlon, by integrating contrasting skills, stands as the model of integral

education where the physical and the ethical are integrated into the daily practice of the athlete.

For several reasons, Aristotelian *kalokagathia* (beauty-goodness) synthesizes aesthetics and ethics in sports practice. Under this argument, the ideal athlete not only possesses a harmonious body, but his physical excellence manifests a moral virtue internalized in his being (Aristotle'S, 1998). From our point of view, this conception anticipates contemporary theories of *embodied cognition*, where body movement is not a mere reflection, but a form of situated knowledge (Slack, 2004). Unlike Plato, for whom the body is a material obstacle, Aristotle sees it as a necessary vehicle for actualizing human potential. However, the philosopher also values sport as a space of *philia* (civic friendship). Competitions, when oriented to the common good, strengthen social ties and foster mutual respect. However, he warns that the obsession with victory corrupts this end, reducing the athlete to an instrument of other people's ambitions (Aristotle, 1927).

In this study it should be clarified that, beyond their contributions, there are many outdated aspects of the sports conceptions of Plato and Aristotle. Both philosophies are partially anachronistic in the face of the commodification of modern sport, a general phenomenon studied by Lopez & Andrew (2016). The Platonic model, based on a rigid division of roles, clashes with societies that value social mobility and diversity of talents. On the other hand, the Aristotelian idea of the right mean loses relevance in disciplines where extreme specialization (e.g., marathons, weightlifting) is rewarded economically. However, its emphasis on integral character formation remains in force in movements that promote inclusive sports and holistic physical education.

The authors of this research think that *Aristotelian kalokagathia* (Aristotle'S, 1867) offers an antidote to the objectification of the body on social networks in the digital age, while Platonic agōn invites us to rethink competitions as spaces of self-knowledge rather than spectacle (Plato, 2016). Both philosophers, however, underestimate the potential of sport to question power structures, something central to current decolonial approaches typical of the critical and counter-hegemonic social sciences of the twenty-first century.

Table 3. Comparative synthesis.

Aspect	Plato	Aristotle
<i>Objective of the Sport</i>	Dialectical Ascent to the World of Ideas.	Actualization of human potential (entelechy).
<i>Body</i>	Temporary Obstacle to the Soul.	A necessary instrument for virtue.
<i>Education</i>	Gymnastics subordinated to musical training.	Balance between physical and ethical training.
<i>Agōn</i>	Metaphor of the philosophical struggle.	Philia and Community Development Space.
<i>Virtue Principal</i>	Justice (harmony between the parts of the soul)	<i>Phronesis</i> (situated practical wisdom).
<i>Social Criticism</i>	Sports oriented to material prizes.	Extreme specialization and commercialization.

Source: prepared by the authors according to the reading of Aristotle (1927; 1867; 1978); Slack (2004) and Plato (2016).

In general, Table 3 reveals to the understanding that Plato and Aristotle construct their sports conceptions from opposing ontologies: dualism vs. hylemorphism (Copleston, 2004). For Plato, sport is an ascetic means that purifies the soul of bodily ties; for Aristotle, in contrast, it is an end in itself where body

and soul collaborate in the actualization of the aretē. This divergence explains why the former prioritizes sports practices according to their connection with the rational, while the latter values them for their ability to express balance.

In any case, both conceptions share a teleological vision, according to which sport is not only entertainment, but an essential component of the human project in the search for its true being. Their criticisms of commercialization anticipate current dilemmas, but their reliance on top-down education systems limits their applicability in pluralistic contexts such as today's societies. The dialectical tension between his models is still in force and can be summed up in the question: should sport serve to transcend the material (Plato) or to perfect our immanent existence (Aristotle)? The answer, perhaps, lies in synthesizing both philosophies: using the body as a way of accessing the sublime, without denying its intrinsic material and spiritual value.

7. The contemporary relevance of Platonic and Aristotelian reflections on sport: by way of conclusion

Before the questions: In what way does gymnastics, together with music, constitute an essential educational element in his political-pedagogical project developed in the *Republic* by Plato? And how is the concept of Plato's agōn (competition) articulated with his vision of justice and human excellence? We categorically affirm that the Platonic integration of gymnastics and music in the *Republic* transcends corporal or aesthetic training and constitutes a model of political education, which prioritizes harmony between body and soul as the basis for social justice. For Plato (2016), gymnastics not only disciplines the body, but

symbolizes the training of the rational soul to resist disordered passions, while music educates emotional sensitivity to the beauty and truth of being.

Definitely, this pedagogical binomial reflects the dialectical conception of the ideal city that he exposes in the Republic (Plato, 2018), where each individual fulfills a specific function according to his or her natural capacities. The Platonic *agōn* (competition) is not reduced to athletic rivalry, it is rather a mechanism to hierarchize virtues, where human excellence is measured by the ability to overcome one's own limitations, in pursuit of the common good, which brings us closer to the world of ideas. Justice, in this philosophical framework, emerges when each part of the soul (and of the polis) competes internally to reach its maximum expression without usurping the functions of the others.

Current philosophical criticism could question whether the exclusionary model of the Platonic republic, based on a rigid tripartite division, is applicable to pluralistic societies such as contemporary ones. However, its heuristic value lies in the fact that physical and artistic education should serve to develop critical citizens, not only technically competent athletes or musicians. Essentially, the *Platonic agōn* invites us to rethink modern sport as a space of ethical self-knowledge, where self-improvement prevails over the obsession with records or commercial sponsorships.

Thinking of Aristotle, we ask: In what sense does the pentathlete represent a model of virtue and beauty that illustrates the doctrine of the middle ground? And how is physical activity integrated into his conception of eudaimonia (happiness) as "activity in accordance with virtue"? Aristotle elevates the pentathlete to an ethical model not because of his physical versatility, but because he embodies the *phronesis* (practical wisdom) necessary to apply the right mean

in varying contexts. Each discipline of the pentathlon requires balancing opposing forces: the race requires sustained endurance, the javelin throw precision and calculation. This alternation between intensity and moderation reflects the virtuous life, where happiness (*eudaimonia*) arises from actualizing our rational potential through contextually appropriate actions (Aristotle, 1927).

Physical activity, in this Aristotelian scheme, is not an end in itself, but a means to cultivate habits that perfect character. Aristotle thus anticipates modern visions and practices such as *enactivism*, which conceives cognition as a corporeal process. The pentathlete develops moral virtues through repeated movements that synchronize mind and body, as Avinger (2012) argues. His criticism of Spartan training – which prioritized brute force – is still valid in current debates on youth sports, where premature specialization limits the integral development of children in elementary school.

In this common thread, the philosophy of current sport faces the challenge of rescuing the ethical sense of *agōn* in an era dominated by spectacle and the commodification of sports activity (Lucariello & Tafuri, 2018). In this context, the reflections of Plato and Aristotle offer hermeneutical and phenomenological frameworks for questioning and investigating what should be identified, such as:

- Ontology of Professional Sport: Are Sports Still Autotelic Activities or Have They Become Simulacra That Prioritize Entertainment Over Virtue?
- Body Epistemology: How Does Physical Training Generate Non-Propositional Forms of Knowledge?
- Sports bioethics: Is it possible to apply the Aristotelian mean to dilemmas such as genetic improvement or the use of technological prostheses?

In sports philosophy, a promising area is the study of non-Western sports (Asian martial arts), from the logic of the Platonic *agōn*, philosophically analyzing how competition and self-perfection are integrated. In the words of Parry (2024), likewise, the notion of *kalokagathia* could enrich current debates on bodily representation in mass media, questioning standards of beauty unrelated to virtue.

Thinking about the ontological and epistemological challenges in the sports marketed in the hegemonic West, football and the Olympic Games pose a difficult paradox, and that is that: while they are presented as vehicles of universal values, their economic structure turns them into commodities subject to capitalist logics. From our point of view, ontologically, this requires redefining whether sport is a social practice (with internal rules) or an economic fact (governed by supply/demand). This dichotomous reality, epistemologically, challenges the researcher to distinguish between tacit knowledge of athletes/coaches and media discourses that construct simplified narratives of sporting activity for mass entertainment without any will to virtue.

For these reasons, in the 21st century, philosophy must investigate how to preserve the integrity of sport when stadiums become "advertising platforms" and athletes become "personal brands". A philosophical view inspired by Aristotle could propose ethical codes that subordinate sponsorship contracts to the virtuous development of athletes, prioritizing their integral training over economic returns. However, in the face of this ethical proposal, it is worth asking: Is the ethics of the fair mean possible in the sport that is practiced in consumer societies? Obviously, there are no easy answers to this question.

In any case, the authors of these reflections recommend, in order to strengthen the philosophy of sport, to consider the following general ideas:

- Critical interdisciplinarity: Collaborate with sociologists, neuroscientists and coaches to avoid reductionism in sports activity. For example, studying doping not only as a personal fraud of the athlete, but as a symptom of systemic pressures of the society of fatigue of which Byung-Chul (2012) speaks.

- Recovery of non-Western traditions. Here the epistemological need is imposed to analyze how African, indigenous or Asian philosophies conceive the body-mind-spirit relationship in physical activities.

- Philosophy applied in sports environments. It is about implementing practical ethics programs in sports academies, using moral dilemmas derived from real cases.

- Metaphysics of performance. It tries to explore how technologies such as VAR in football or *hawk-eye* in tennis alter the nature of competition, creating hybrid realities between the human and the digital.

Finally, in philosophical terms, when conceptual rigor is linked to practical relevance, the philosophy of sport can reclaim its primary place as a tool for transforming reality and not only as interpretive erudition. As the rereading of Plato and Aristotle suggests, the true triumph is not in defeating others, but in turning each stage of being into a gymnasium for the soul.

Thinking about the challenges and horizons of the philosophy of sport in the twenty-first century, it is convenient to delimit a set of ideas that, although dispersed, may have some value as inputs for calm reflection on the subject. The main epistemological challenge lies in overcoming the mind-body dichotomy inherited from modern rationalism. (Descartes, 2010) Sport, as an embodied

practice, generates forms of tacit knowledge (for example, tactical intuition in football) that escape traditional empiricist frameworks.

Consequently, the opportunity arises when developing a corporal epistemology that integrates situated knowledge (sports technique) with distributed cognitive models, recognizing that the stadium is a laboratory of collective intelligence. This requires rethinking research methods, combining phenomenology with neuroscience to study how athletic gestures construct patterns of meaning susceptible to empirical and rationally based philosophical research.

In ethical terms, the commodification of professional sport stresses classical moral principles. While Plato and Aristotle linked virtue and beauty, today doping, corruption and youth exploitation reveal an axiological crisis in sport (Lopez & Andrew, 2016). In this sense, the opportunity lies in reconstructing a sports ethic, which articulates Kantian universalism (global rules) with ethics of care (local contexts). Concepts such as Aristotelian *kalokagathia* could be re-semanticized to include, for example, bodily diversity with ecological sustainability, transforming codes of conduct into tools of intergenerational justice.

With regard to the ontological dimension of being sporting, the emergence of electronic sports (eSports) and augmented realities challenges traditional metaphysical definitions. If for Heidegger (2001) sport was a way of being-in-the-world, how can we categorize practices where body and avatar are intertwined? In the digital age, philosophy must explore whether movement is still the essence of sport when executed using digital interfaces. Herein lies the possibility of developing a processual ontology, where sport is defined not by its rules, but by its ability to generate liminal experiences that transcend the playful and the work.

As for the aesthetic issue so present in the classical era of the great Greek thinkers, the media aestheticization of sport today that is manifested, for example, in slow-motion replays and 360° transmissions, everything seems to indicate that its artistic dimension has been trivialized, reducing beauty to immediate visual impact. In the face of these phenomena, the opportunity arises to recover an *agonistic aesthetic* that values the tension between technical perfection and human vulnerability. And it is that the "sporting error" (a fall in gymnastics, a failed pass) could be reinterpreted as a moment of authenticity, where the sublime emerges from the imperfect struggle against the physical limits of the human person. In view of this renewed vision, the need arises to promote new theoretical frameworks that merge artistic criticism with interdisciplinary studies.

The authors of this research believe that the challenges pointed out demand lateral *thinking*: capable of navigating between the philosophical tradition and contemporary emergencies. In the twenty-first century, epistemology must embrace bodily wisdom; ethics, reconciling virtue and systemic complexity; ontology, redefining the human-technological and; aesthetics, finding beauty in the fragility of the human being. Definitely, the sport of the twenty-first century, as a metaphor for the postmodern condition of which Lyotard (1989) speaks, offers a privileged field to rehearse answers to universal questions, such as: What does it mean to act with excellence? Or how do we inhabit bodies in permanent transformation without losing our own identity? The philosophy of sport can not only illuminate these issues, but also become a space for the creation of new languages and knowledge for the human.

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