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“Athl-Ethics”: Virtue Training in Mencius and Aristotle

Abstract The late Zhou of China and the Classical age of Greece both saw great impetus in intellectual thought and were marked by intense warfare. Being closely linked to warfare in antiquity, sports was a vital, commonplace activity whose jargon and practices naturally informed philosophical discourses. One can thus observe convergences between athletics and ethics in texts which took shape in these times and places, a phenomenon which I shall refer to as “athl-ethics.” In this paper, I separately examine and then compare athl-ethic phenomenon in Mencius and in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Both texts are rife with sports metaphors. I regard the use of sports-derived imagery as a thin form of athl-ethicism. Sports, however, did more than inspire useful analogies. Physical training and competition were considered occasions for nourishing and practicing virtue. This generated thicker forms of athl-ethicism.

Keywords athl-ethics, sports, moral philosophy, Mencius, Aristotle

1 Introduction

The idea that sports and philosophy were bedfellows in the West continues to surprise many. Socrates convened with young men in public gymnasia. The Academy and the Lyceum were fully functioning sports facilities to which Plato and Aristotle annexed schools of higher learning.¹ Athletics pervaded Greek culture and lurks behind the discourses of classical thinkers. Think, for instance, of Plato’s discussion of *eros* incited by the contemplation of well-toned bodies, or his portrayal of Socrates as a war hero (*Symposium*, 220d–221c). Likewise, Xenophon gives an account of Socrates scolding a young Athenian for belittling

¹ As a scholar of Greek civilization puts it, “Plato’s Akademy and Aristotle’s Lykeion ... were first and last gymnasia and that there is no inherent reason to separate the activities of the mind from those of the body” (Miller 2004, 185); see also Spivey 2004, 239; Kyle 2007, 166.

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physical fitness upon which the very freedom and survival of the polis depended (*Memorabilia* 3.12.1–4). Condoning the athletic bent of Athenian education, Aristotle recommended a program of graduated physical activity: light gymnastics in childhood, strenuous training in adolescence, and regular exercise throughout adult life.² These are some examples of how sports emerge in early philosophical literature—particularly ethical writings—and I call this phenomenon “*athl-ethics*.”

Attending to *athl-ethic* phenomenon in Western antiquity led me to observe a similar tendency in early China. Military exigencies which snowballed as the Zhou dynasty degenerated fueled the need for athletic training. Sporting practices of the era included archery and charioteering (two of so-called *Six Arts* 六藝), as well as wrestling, running, jumping, and tug-of-war (Wilkinson 2013, 331–33; Riordan & Jones 1999, 22, 26–27). In China as in Greece, sporting culture was part of the context of early philosophical discourses. The fact hardly receives attention from scholars. It is worth exploring *athl-ethicism* in China for at least two reasons: it gives a fresh perspective of early Chinese thought and provides a platform for comparison with Greek thought. *Athl-ethic* phenomenon also yields much insight into virtue: its nature, characteristics, exquisite examples, and, above all, how it comes about through habituation. My investigation of *athl-ethicism* focuses on Mencius while the scope of comparison will be between him and a Western coeval, Aristotle.

The paper has three parts. The first is a reconnaissance of *athl-ethic* passages in the *Mencius* (M). As I read the text, the phenomenon is manifest in three ways: (1) use of sports metaphors; (2) treating sports as an area of applied ethics; and, (3) taking sports to be formative grounds for moral living. The second part recapitulates *athl-ethic* phenomenon in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (NE) and paves the way for comparative notes between Mencius and Aristotle based on how they relate sports and morality.

2 Athl-Ethics in Mencius

In this section I discuss three ways that athletics and ethics converge in Mencius. The most conspicuous of these is the use of metaphors inspired by sports. I consider sports metaphors a thin form of *athl-ethics* because they do not posit a real relation between athletics and ethics. They merely construe likenesses between the two realms. A thicker form of *athl-ethics* would be the treatment of sports as field of moral practice, while a third form commits to a stronger relation

² Often noted by sports historians and scholars of antiquity, e.g., Miller 2004, 238; Lord 1982, 26.

between the two in taking athletics to be propaedeutic to morality.

2.1 Sports Metaphors of Mencius

Though a thin form of athl-ethics, sports metaphors are valuable because they invite us to take the speaker's point of view. They disclose his perception of a subject and help reveal the structure and salencies of his thought around moral themes.³ What kind of sports inspired Mencius and what do these reveal about his philosophy?

I have identified at least three sports figuratively employed by Mencius: archery, weight-lifting, and chess. The last of these is an intellectual game but I shall treat it as "sport" in the broad sense of the word: leisurely, competitive activity engagement in which strengthens skills and capacities (mental powers, in the case of chess). Archery was an iconic sport in China and Confucius himself is portrayed as a fine archer in early Confucian literature.⁴ As James Behuniak (2010) notes, archery is a metaphor that suggests a lot about early Confucians who used it to explain ethical experience. The *Mencius* alone yields a dozen archery-related passages which showcase the three forms of athl-ethic phenomenon that I have indicated.

As metaphor source, archery illustrates Mencian moral thought in the following ways. In 2A7, the ideal person (*ren zhe* 仁者) is compared to a shooting archer:

仁者如射，射者正己而後發。發而不中，不怨勝己者，反求諸己而已矣。

The benevolent person is like an archer: he adjusts himself before discharging. If he misses the target, he does not complain against the winner but instead examines himself (for the cause of failure), that is all. (2A7)

The passage summarizes important features of the moral exemplar. It states *ren* as the chief matter to consider in any undertaking. We can infer from the whole passage and the metaphor employed that *ren* is the single objective of the gentleman: *ren* is to the gentleman what target is to an archer. Another feature of the gentleman is "not complaining" (*bu yuan* 不怨) which, I believe, represents his conscientious attitude towards adversity, be it personal weakness, hostility, or scarcity. This is a *characteristic* of students of the Way expressed through

³ "A good metaphor sums up, amplifies, and focuses on the speaker's beliefs" (Moran 1989, 110). This is not the place to discuss the cognitive content of metaphors, but I do so at length in Camus 2015, 2017, and 2018.

⁴ The *Sheyi* (射義) chapter of *Liji* describes Confucius taking part in an archery ritual. I dedicate a section to Confucius as archer in Camus 2018.

semantically related phrases such as “not worrying” (*bu you* 不憂) and “not being anxious” (*bu huan* 不患), recurring expressions in the *Analects* (An).⁵ Another feature highlighted through archery metaphor is the gesture of examining oneself, a method of self-cultivation practiced by the gentleman.

5B1 is likewise inspired by archery but highlights different entailments. The passage narrates how sages and worthies acted according to principle in assuming or renouncing office. Using the image of a shooter, Mencius sets forth two essential virtues of a gentleman as displayed by exemplary figures named in the passage. These virtues are wisdom (*zhi* 智) and sageliness (*sheng* 聖):

智，譬則巧也；聖，譬則力也。由射於百步之外也，其至，爾力也；其中，非爾力也。

Wisdom is like skill; sageliness is like strength. As with an archer shooting from a distance of a hundred steps, reaching the target is a matter of strength, but hitting bullseye is not (merely about) strength. (5B1)

The parallelism between an archer and a gentleman is neat and powerful. Just as the former needs muscle power and shooting skill to hit the target so must the latter possess wisdom and sageliness to advance in the Way. What I find interesting about the passage is how it links sageliness with strength (*li* 力), a character often pitted against virtue (*de* 德) and benevolence (*ren* 仁). Instead in 5B1 *li* represents the untiring persistence of moral men to act honorably in and out of office.⁶

Apart from displaying moral qualities of conscientiousness and self-examination in 2A2 and wisdom and sageliness in 5B1, archery also helps illustrate a challenge in disseminating the Way, that of maintaining a high standard despite lackluster response from pupils. Two passages can be cited in this regard.

羿之教人射，必志於彀；學者亦必志於彀。

Yi in teaching archery taught men to draw the bow with full strength, so his pupils did the same. (6A20)

羿不為拙射變其彀率。君子引而不發，躍如也。中道而立，能者從之。

Yi did not adjust the standard for drawing the bow for the sake of a mediocre archer. Leaping, the gentleman draws the bow without discharging. He stands

⁵ For *bu you*, see An 9.29, 12.4, 14.28, 15.32; and *bu huan*, An 1.16, 4.14, 14.30.

⁶ The two ways of relating *li* with morality occur in the *Analects* and in *Mencius*: negatively, as brutal force or coercion opposite to virtue (An 14.6, 14.35, M 2A3); positively, as earnest effort or determination (An 4.6, 8.21, M 1A7).

in the middle and those who are able follow him. (7A41)⁷

In these passages, the legendary archer Yi is a stand-in for the gentleman-teacher. It is interesting to note that instructor-pupil mirrors teacher-disciple in moral learning, a relationship which establishes an ethical standard and distinctive duties.⁸

Passages cited thus far show how archery displays multiple aspects of the Confucian gentleman. In other passages, however, shooting is a negative metaphor that reveals the root of moral failure. In 6A9 chess lesson in a garden is an analogy for differentiated reception of moral instruction.

今夫弈之爲數，小數也；不專心致志，則不得也。弈秋，通國之善弈者也。使弈秋誨二人弈，其一人專心致志，惟弈秋之爲聽。一人雖聽之，一心以爲有鴻鵠將至，思援弓繳而射之，雖與之俱學，弗若之矣。爲是其智弗若與？曰非然也。 Chess is but a small art, but without focusing the mind and exerting the will, it cannot be learned. Chess master Qiu was the best in the land. If he were to instruct two pupils (in a garden) and one pays full attention while the other is preoccupied with shooting a swan that is approaching, though both attend the same lesson, they will not learn equally, and certainly not because of disparity of intelligence. (6A9)

The passage sets forth intense training as an aspect of sports that is analogous to the single-mindedness needed for moral progress. Contrasting dispositions of chess students illustrate why some progress and others do not. Negative use of archery metaphor exemplifies the failure to focus and apply the heart-mind (*bu zhuan xin zhi zhi* 不專心致志).⁹

There is passing allusion to another sport, weight-lifting. 1A7 ratifies Mencius' bedrock idea that wisdom is within anyone's reach: not achieving it boils down to thwarting inherent capacities for it.

有復於王者曰：吾力足以舉百鈞，而不足以舉一羽 ... 則王許之乎？ ... 然則一羽之不舉，爲不用力焉 ... 故王之不王，不爲也，非不能也。

Suppose someone were to tell the King, "I have strength to lift a hundred units of weight, but not enough to lift a feather" ... Would your Majesty allow

⁷ On a literal reading of 7A41, leaping and standing in the middle may refer to ritual steps in a shooting performance which the instructor demonstrates (Selby 2000, 57). More philosophical significance can be drawn from these words.

⁸ Point contributed by an anonymous reviewer.

⁹ Taking *zhi* to mean the direction or orientation of the heart-mind, as Shun Kwong-loi does: it connotes "firmly directing one's heart/mind at a certain goal, in the way that one aims steadily at a target in archery" (Shun 2016, 8).

that? ... Indeed, the feather is not lifted simply because strength is not applied... So it is that your Majesty (does not exercise kingly influence): because you *would not*, not because you are *unable to*.

It is plain to see from the foregoing that sports metaphors touch upon core issues of Mencian ethics. Athletics exemplifies gentlemanly virtues, means and dispositions for self-cultivation, and the root of moral failure. Given the importance of these, it is evident that Mencius’ sports metaphors deserve more attention.

2.2 Sports as Area of Applied Ethics

I now turn to the idea that sports is a field of moral activity. This a stronger form of *athl-ethics* which takes sports and morality not only as parallels but converging in practice. It could not be otherwise considering the pervasive character and high value accorded to *ren* and rituals (*li* 禮): if one “may not depart from *ren* for the space of a single meal” (An 4.5), nor “look, speak and move in violation of rituals” (An 12.1), then leisurely activity must be inculcated with morality as well. The *Analects* presents Confucius as model when describing his humane manner of fishing and bird-hunting (7.26).

A figure that comes to mind is the “determined scholar” (*zhi shi* 志士) commended for steadfastness in ritual observance. Acting as game keeper in a royal hunt, he risks his life by defying a hasty command by the king (An 15.8; M 3B1, 5B7). Likewise, a charioteer of proven skill, Wang Liang, is praised for refusing to drive for an archer who disregarded hunting codes (M 3B1).

Though only in passing, Mencius portrays sage kings as “humane athletes” who knew how to make enthusiasm for the chase compatible with benevolent rule. A number of passages can be cited some of which contrast sagely dispositions with unbridled pursuits of later kings. The formula proposed by Mencius is for sovereigns to turn extravagant pursuits (e.g., in music and chase) into pleasures shared with the people (*yu min tong le* 與民同樂, 1B1–2). When the King of Qi defends his sprawling hunting grounds by saying that King Wen of old had a larger park, Mencius re-joins that the latter’s park was public and not zealously guarded (1B2). In 1B4, the king asks about the enjoyments of worthy men. Mencius’ response takes the *xun shou* (巡狩)—a long hunt that served political purposes—as a sample occasion for moralizing pleasures and pursuits. As did past rulers, the *xun shou* should be done for the sake of the people and not be excessive:

天子適諸侯曰巡狩，巡狩者巡所守也... 春省耕而補不足，秋省斂而助不給... 今也不然：...方命虐民，飲食若流... 先王無流連之樂，荒亡之行。

The Son of Heaven's visits to the feudal lords were called *xunshou*, through which he watched over what was his to guard ... In Spring they oversaw the plowing and repaired what was needed; in Autumn they oversaw harvesting and supplied for the insufficient ... Not so today: the mandate is ignored, people are maltreated, food and drink are wasted ... The early kings did not have unbridled pleasures nor reckless practices. (1B4)

Other ways that sporting activities compromised morality were abuses in obtaining resources (such as land-grabbing for expanding parks, 3B9) and disproportionate enthusiasm leading to neglect of duty (hence the confession of the Prince of Teng who was hindered from learning because of obsession with horse-riding and swordplay in 3A2).

The passages leave us with mixed impressions about sports in Mencius. On the one hand, sporting events were occasions for exercising *ren* and rituals and revered figures engaged in sports in ways that edified. On the other hand, sports tended to be an overriding passion that led to excesses and negligence. Perhaps because of this Mencius listed sporting pursuits among desires that typically ensnare men (7B34). We can thus speak of both convergence and divergence in how Mencius relates athletics and ethics. In all, sports was an ancient “boon” that had become a moral “bane” among rulers of his time: a cause of greed, oppression, or distraction from the Way. Perhaps this double-sidedness of sports partly accounts for its lack of popularity as metaphor and as field of moral practice among later Confucians.

2.3 Sports as Training Ground for Morality

The third form of *athl-ethics* implies a stronger, causal relation between sports and morality: athletic experience prepares us in some way for moral living. I now rally passages which accord propaedeutic role to athletic activity.

Zengzi once remarked that “the scholar (of the Way) must be broad and strong for he carries a heavy yoke and the path is long” (An 8.7). These words may be figurative but it is easy to infer literal truth as well: the early disciples of Confucius needed physical stamina to endure perilous travels, laborious tasks, and scarcity. Mencius expresses similar thought when describing the ordeals of sages and worthies. The passage implicates “Heaven” (*tian* 天) in giving charge and training subjects for the charge:

故天將降大任於斯人也，必先苦其心志，勞其筋骨，餓其體膚，空乏其身，行拂亂其所為，所以動心忍性，曾益其所不能。

When Heaven confers a high office to a person, it first makes him bear suffering, puts his muscles and bones to toil, lets him undergo starvation and

deprivation, upsets his plans. Thus is his mind roused, his nature toughened, and his inabilities made up for. (6A9)

Compared to Zengzi’s remark, 6A9 is more straightforward and specific in describing physical strain, a key element of athletic experience to which Mencius accords positive value.¹⁰ Through mental and physical labors that stimulate and fortify, the officer-gentleman acquires prerequisite conditions for his mission.

6A9 does not relate moral experience to a particular sport but takes it to have a common ground with the latter: self-exertion or *agon*. To briefly state how sports is propaedeutic to morality: athletic practices such as charioteering, horse-riding, archery, hunting, and martial dances are forms of art (*yi* 藝), leisure (*you* 遊), or amusement (*le* 樂) that were inherited from remote antiquity and informed by ritual beliefs and practices. As such, they were valuable to early Confucians as instruments for moral education.¹¹

Archery was practiced as a ritual sport during the Zhou and perhaps earlier. It is clear from the *Analects* that inherited rituals surrounding the sport (such as polite gestures among shooters of saluting and sharing drink) made it a suitable vehicle for disseminating the way of the ancients and nourishing social virtues (An 3.7, 16). Compared to the *Analects*, Mencius’ references to archery are downright metaphorical and abstract, as though it were a distant reality. Notwithstanding, it is Mencius who is explicit about the propaedeutic function of archery in his account of education in the first dynasties. In 1A3, he explains to the ruler of Wei that the kingly way is primarily about caring for the living and mourning for the dead and in this context recalls ancient *Xiang Xu* 庠序 education which inculcated filial piety and fraternity. A related passage gives clear evidence of the role of a sport in moral learning. In 3A3, Mencius explains that “Xu” actually means archery and gives us to understand that this and other names for earlier systems of education commonly emphasized proper behavior according to one’s role in family and society (*jie suo yi ming ren lun* 皆所以明人倫).

What Mencius believed about education and archery in antiquity helps explain a harsh comment against Archer Yi in 4B4. The latter fell victim to his protégé envy when the latter ambioned becoming the best shooter. Mencius unexpectedly casts the blame on Yi (*Yi you zui* 羿有罪) and follows up the anecdote with the contrasting story of an able shooter who resisted injuring a senior archer in battle because he had been trained in archery by a gentleman.

¹⁰ David Wong explains how *agon* (Greek for contest, or intense competition) and *he* 和 (harmony) are athletic values that co-exist in both Greek and Chinese ethical thinking, cf. Wong in Fraser et al., 2011.

¹¹ Note the *Analects*’ treatment of martial dances and ritual archery in An 7.6, 8.8, 11.1, 14.3.

The second narrative sheds light on Mencius' criticism of Yi. Over and above shooting skill, ethical conduct was meant to be taught through archery, and Yi neglected this.

In recap, there are ample, poignant examples of athl-ethicism in Mencius. Despite his frustration with unscrupulous sporting pursuits of contemporary rulers and princes, Mencius acknowledged ancient esteem for sports and its usefulness for moral learning. Unfortunately, sports metaphors do not draw as much attention from scholars. Meanwhile, sports practices held little import as means of self-cultivation among later Confucians.¹² The matter is worth a thought. Perhaps the very nature of sports conditions its treatment by intellectuals. As a field of practice that relies heavily on physical prowess, sports seems inherently off-putting to scholars. There is early glimpse of this tendency in Confucius' supposed disinterest in "feats of strength" (An 7.21), and from Mencius' remark about Feng Fu. The latter, a tiger handler-turned-scholar, is said to have cast aside his scholarly garb on one occasion to wrestle a beast at the people's behest. "The people were pleased," Mencius says, "but the scholars laughed at him" (*zhong jie yue zhi qi wei shi zhe xiao zhi* 眾皆悅之，其爲士者笑之 7B23). Scholarly disdain for sports can also be intimated from the recurring contraposition between the *de* 德 of sages and worthies against the brute strength (*li* 力) of military-athletic personages (An 14.5, 33; M 2A33).

3 Athl-ethics in Aristotle

Investigating athl-ethic phenomenon in Mencius had the sensation of standing on unfamiliar grounds. However, it was not a particularly difficult task but a matter of scouring through the text to locate references to physical activity. Attempting the same procedure with Aristotle proves overwhelming. Such references in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (NE) are pervasive and variegated. It is not easy to classify them nor to decide where to begin discussion.¹³ For the sake of convenience and to facilitate comparison, I will discuss Aristotle following my three-fold treatment of athl-ethicism in Mencius, limiting myself to synthesizing what can be said of Aristotle under each part. A brief contextualization of athl-ethic

¹² A Qing dynasty Confucian, Yan Yuan 顏元, thus complained about an "effeminate and out-of-touch" tradition and proposed reviving the Six Arts, see Yang 2016. Concerning metaphors, those inspired by nature, craft, and aesthetics (acknowledgeably dominant metaphors in Confucian texts) are the types typically discussed by scholars. Nevertheless, there is growing attention to sports metaphors and practices, e.g., Mattice 2014, 9; articles by Lisa Raphals and by David Wong in Chris Fraser et al., 2011; Behuniak 2010.

¹³ Besides athletic practices, there are frequent remarks about gymnastics as science and other bodily disciplines such as medicine, nutrition, and warfare.

phenomenon in Aristotle is in order.

The centrality of sports in ancient Greece is so well-known that there is hardly need to state it. What is worth mentioning is that allusions to sports by classical thinkers are closely bound to theories about the upbringing and education of the young (*paideia*) and about what constitutes noble leisure for adult citizens.¹⁴ In the *Laws* Plato envisioned ideal schools as having open spaces for dancing, horse-riding, archery and other types of activity that would replace brutal sports (7.804c–e). Further, he thought that a sport like hunting fosters multiple excellences (7.823e). Xenophon held hunting in even higher regard claiming that “all who loved hunting were good people” (*Cynegeticus* 13.18). To be sure, theories about *paideia* and leisure were varied and there would have been considerable gaps between beliefs and actual practices, between the ideas of intellectual elites and the masses, and between city-states. Even so, it is generally true that for the Greeks athletics was crucial for “schooling in *arete* and moral sensibility” (Spivey 2004, 239) and not simply about “glorifying physical prowess” (Paik & Bell 2004, 12).

3.1 Sports Metaphors of Aristotle

Athletics is a major source of imagery in Aristotle who uses it to illuminate different facets of his moral philosophy. It is the kind of metaphor that greets us in the initial lines of the *Nicomachean Ethics* where the teleological framework of ethical inquiry is articulated with projectile jargon (NE 1.1, 1.2). For the sake of comparison with Mencius, I bracket moral science and concentrate on moral praxis in my summary of athl-ethic phenomenon in Aristotle.

To begin with, Aristotle describes happiness as the “prize” (ἄθλον) of virtue (i.e., what is won through competition or struggle) and considers that it arises from a combination of learning and “training” (ἄσκησις) (i.e., training or exercise to which athletes subject themselves, NE 1.9 1099b).¹⁵ It is likely that Aristotle is not only speaking figuratively. As we shall see, he accords an important role to athletics for moral development. In any case, the text offers sustained and elaborate comparisons between virtue, or excellence, and athletic entailments.

To name some of these comparisons, the operative nature of virtue—its being a form of activity rather than a mere state—is explained in terms of athletic experience:

ὥσπερ δ' Ὀλυμπίασιν οὐχ οἱ κάλλιστοι καὶ ἰσχυρότατοι στεφανοῦνται ἀλλ' οἱ

¹⁴ So much so that not knowing how to swim or to dance was tantamount to being uneducated, Sweet 1987, 161.

¹⁵ Terms like *athlon* and *askesis* carry strong athletic connotations even when used in contexts beyond military and athletics.

ἀγωνιζόμενοι ... οὕτω καὶ τῶν ἐν τῷ βίῳ καλῶν κάγαθῶν οἱ πράττοντες ὀρθῶς ἐπήβολοι γίνονται.

As in the Olympic Games it is not the most attractive and the strongest who are crowned, but those who compete ... so in life it is those who act rightly who will attain what is noble and good. (1.8 1099a)¹⁶

In 1.12, Aristotle likens the virtuous person to a seasoned athlete who performs excellently and thus deserves praise: “we praise the good person and virtue in general for what they do and are able to accomplish, so with the strongman and fast runner” (1101b). In Book 3, the paradox of the virtue of courage—that is, glory amidst pain and anguish—is illustrated through athletic drama: “In gymnastic competitions ... (boxers) are of flesh and blood, blows stress and hurt them, as well as strenuous training ... So with courage, death and wounds will hurt ... but the courageous will withstand them” (3.9 1117b). Extended parallelism between moral virtue and skill can be found between Books 2 and 6 and generates multi-dimensional use of archery metaphor. The prerogative for archery owes to the conception of virtue as a mean between excess and defect, the extremities, as it were, surrounding the target. Accordingly, he describes virtue as “the kind of thing that hits the mean” (2.6 1106b), and that which “makes the aim right” (6.12 1144a).¹⁷ Further, in its affective and operative resonances virtue is like shooting skill that hits bullseye: virtue enables one to achieve what is harder, that is, to do or feel rightly (2.9 1109a–b). By following reason in emotions and deeds the virtuous person is like an experienced archer who has a good eye for the target and can shoot accurately, masterfully tightening and loosening his grip on the bow (6.1 1138b). In sum, archery imagery neatly brings together the following characteristics of Aristotelian conception of virtue: that it is a mean (center of target) lying between vices of excess and defect (peripheries of a target) and takes excellence in practical reason—or *phronesis*—to determine (experienced eye). Further, the acquired, disposition to act excellently is like shooting skill, while the drives and appetites that are moderated and directed by reason are like the bowstring manipulated by the archer.

Notwithstanding the ubiquity of sports metaphors in Aristotle, his recourse to them is controlled. He is not carried away by the power of athletic imagery but readily points out ways in which excellences are *not like* sports. Skills like accurate shooting are *poietic* (i.e., concerned about making or producing things) and can be morally ambiguous: an archer can shoot flawlessly regardless of his character and what he uses the skill for. Virtuous acts, in contrast, are *praxic* and

¹⁶ Translations of NE passages are from Crisp 2000.

¹⁷ Other kinds of sports-related analogies are used to explain the mean of virtue, e.g., the differentiated diet of gymnasts, runners, and wrestlers in 2.6 1106a–b.

have to do with the rationality of a person’s deeds and conduct.¹⁸ In the final chapters, Aristotle envisions happiness according to the higher excellences as one that is free from the strain and striving that characterize physical activity. In this regard, the best life—philosophical existence—is unlike athletic experience (NE 10.7 1177b).

3.2 Sports as Benefits Free Citizens

How can athletics be governed by morality? I am hard up to think of a forthright answer from Aristotle, or a guiding principle similar to Mencius’ idea of “sharing with the people.” There is instead implicit understanding that sporting activities should be integrated into what counts as a flourishing existence for a polis citizen which, as Aristotle describes it, involves diverse pursuits such as drinking and playing, “athletics, hunting, and philosophizing” in the company of friends (NE 9.12 1172a). Aristotle takes for granted that health together with knowledge and goodness are elements of a good life (NE 1.8 1099a; 3.1 1111a). Besides, the concept of *arete* did not only mean moral virtues but a wide range of excellences from physical to intellectual ones. This is poignantly illustrated by Aristotle’s classification of poor physical condition (particularly as a consequence of “neglecting exercise,” literally being *de-gymnasized*, ἀγυμνασίαν) as a veritable vice, that is, voluntarily acquired poor disposition (3.5 1114a).¹⁹

One way to approach the question of how to practice sports morally is by rephrasing it as “how sports can be practiced *excellently* and *rationally*.” This is what the question would have amounted to in the Greek mind and is easier to navigate in Aristotelian text. Excellences which Aristotle regards essential for military-athletic pursuits are courage, endurance, and temperance (NE 3.9, 10; 6.5), so exhibiting these qualities when training or competing would count as virtuous sports practice. As for “rational practice of sports”, the idea may sound strange but Aristotle considered gymnastics a legit field of knowledge even like medicine: it entails deliberation and rightly determines the mean in exercise and diet (1.6 1096a; 3.3 1112b). Therefore, exercising the mean in training and competition would count as rational practice of sports. This is not mere inference but evident in Aristotle’s theory of exercise: one should follow an exercise

¹⁸ See the distinction between activities about making (ποιητόν) and those about doing (πρακτόν) in NE 6.4.

¹⁹ His words are unequivocal and worth transcribing: “people are responsible for turning out like this, through the slackness of their lives ... It is not only the vices of the soul that are voluntary; those of the body are too ... for nobody blames someone unattractive by nature, but we do so if he is so through not exercising and looking after himself” (trans. Crisp). There is evidently more than simple parallelism between health of body and of soul in the Platonically-inspired analogy that we find in 2.1 and other places.

regimen that is not so severe that it impairs the body nor so consuming that it impedes mental development (*Politics* 8.4).

The contrast which Aristotle draws between the leisure of citizen gentry (i.e., “free men” ἐλευθεριώταται) and that of the mass is also useful for answering the question (NE 4.8 1128; 10.9 1179b). For instance, he criticizes the tendency of the mass to seek inordinate gratification in sensual pleasures (e.g. food, drink, sex) as brutish and praises citizen gentry’s physical pleasures (e.g., a nice spa in the gym) as appropriate and refined. His defense is interesting and I think boils down to the idea of integration: “those produced in the gymnasium through massage and heat are indeed exceptions here, since the touch characteristic of the intemperate person is to do not with the body as a whole, but certain parts of it” (3.10 1118b). To the extent that sporting activities are forms of relaxation or diversion, what Aristotle counsels about the latter may well apply to sports: to be of good taste in social conduct, staying clear of offensive speech or ridicule as befits a self-possessed person (4.8 1128a). Likewise, right sense of purpose and priority are marks of educated enjoyment of leisure. Accordingly, it is right to seek amusement and relaxation in order to boost capacity for serious and virtuous work, whereas hard work and toil for the sake of amusement is unreasonable and childish (10.6 1176b).

Aristotle is more generous than Mencius in his view of sports’ relation to morality, but he too had his share of concerns over deviant athletic pursuits. Sports historians explain that by classical times athletic culture was undergoing changes which intellectuals regarded as degenerative. Accordingly, sports became more violent and specialized making dedicated athletes increasingly useless even for warfare because of the strict diets and optimum conditioning that they needed to compete.²⁰ Aristotle’s disdain for this development may be gleaned from his disapproval of Spartan training which made men “brutal but not noble, which is what really matters” (*Politics* 8.4 1338b; Lord 1982, 59).²¹ Further, his caution against exercises that ruin the body or encroach upon learning signify excesses in athletic practice: “parents who devote their children to gymnastics while they neglect their necessary education, in reality vulgarize them; for they make them useful to the state in one quality only (physical courage)” (*Politics* 8.4 1338b). Once again, integrating athletics into the good life with its hierarchy of ends is the key to moralizing sports.

²⁰ See Spivey 2004, 30; Miller 2004, 216; Sweet 1987, 121–22. Other scholars explain that the negative attitude expressed by classical thinkers represent minority view and see a positive process of “democratization” in formerly aristocratic sporting customs, see Kyle 2007, 176–79; Fisher in König 2010, 66–75.

²¹ The translation of this and the succeeding quote from the *Politics* are Benjamin Jowett’s. Aristotle’s contrast between the simple courage of professional soldiers and trained athletes on the one hand, and the noble courage of citizen warriors and amateur sportsmen on the other is relevant, see 3.8 1116b.

3.3 Sports Is Propaedeutic to Higher Learning

The ways that sports prepare one for moral living are manifest in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Aristotle concurs with Plato that excellences of character are concerned with pleasures and pains (2.3 1104b). In this light, athletics is indispensable for training our spirited nature to react rightly and with good measure to pleasures and pains.²² Such training must take place in childhood or later instruction will be futile. Notably, young adults are vulnerable to powerful and shifting passions which lead them to feel and act irrationally. This and their inexperience would make them unreceptive to learning without prior habituation.²³ How in concrete does sports equip a person for moral living?

The lack of self-mastery (*ἀκρασία*) caused by overriding non-rational desires is a chief obstacle to following reason among youth and irresolute adults. At times movements that conflict with reason come in the form of violent emotional impulses like anger (*θῦμος*), other times in the form of powerful appetitive desires (*ἐπιθυμία*). These movements in the soul can come with such force as to upset reason’s calculative function (*λογισμός*; cf. 3.1 111b; 3.12 1119b).²⁴ Athletic training—with the toil (*agon*) and trials (*athlon*) that characterize it—enable a person to endure what is hard, that is, to put up with pain or renounce pleasure (cf. 3.9 1117b). The importance of having “grit,” so to speak, cannot be understated: the fine-tuning of reactions to pain and pleasure underlies the ethical pursuit and is touchstone of character excellence.²⁵

Interestingly, a more direct way that sports hones reason can be found in Plato who strongly advocated land-hunting for training young men. Land-hunting, he maintained, trains them in toil, skill, and courage (*Laws* 824a). Moreover, since quadrupeds are cunning creatures, hunting for them calls reason into play, for instance, in observing the habitat, understanding animal behavior, or *weighing and deciding about one’s options*, the very function of calculative reason.²⁶ I have not encountered such strong endorsement for hunting in Aristotle but he

²² For a thoughtful study of athletics in Plato’s theory of education see Patterson in Grubbs & Parkin 2013.

²³ The significance of habituation in childhood is mentioned in several places, e.g., 1.3, 2.1 6.8. It is best explained in 10.1 1172a.

²⁴ *Logismos* is used interchangeably with *logistikon* (*λογιστικόν*), explained as the part of reason which is the same as deliberating and different from the scientific part which contemplates, see 6.1 1139.

²⁵ Aristotle powerfully describes the drama and demand of acting morally in terms of pains and pleasures entailed in 3.1 1110a–b.

²⁶ Cf. Patterson in Grubbs & Parkin 2013, 377. Plutarch’s explanation of Plato’s endorsement of hunting is helpful: “Clever animals improve the powers of reasoning and deduction of those who pit themselves against them, and those animals which are (swift) increase the strength and endurance of those who pursue them. This is what makes hunting a noble sport” (Plutarch, *Moralia* 965F–966A, as quoted in Sweet 1987, 174).

does associate accurate shooting with deliberative ability. As mentioned, knowing when to tighten or loosen the bowstring (i.e., managing drives) and having an experienced eye in pointing an arrow towards a target (i.e., practical wisdom) involve calculative reasoning (6.1 1138b).²⁷ Here too, there may be more than simple analogy between athletics and moral practice, for though the language used is figurative and shooting is a skill rather than a virtue, reasoning ability is nonetheless exercised through sport.

Finally, participating in sports competitions also paves the way for ethical living in that it gives occasion for athletes to inspire each other with the virtues they exhibit. This, in turn, gives rise to goodwill, the starting point of friendship, a special virtue:

ὄλως δ' εὖνοια δι' ἀρετὴν καὶ ἐπιείκειάν τινα γίνεται, ὅταν τῷ φανῇ καλὸς τις ἢ ἀνδρεῖος ἢ τι τοιοῦτον, καθάπερ καὶ ἐπὶ τῶν ἀγωνιστῶν εἶπομεν.

Goodwill develops because of some virtue and excellence, when one person appears noble or courageous or some such thing to another, as we suggested happens in the case of competitors at the games. (9.5 1167a)

These words may remind us of a widespread idea in Mencius' time about sports (particularly shooting) revealing the athlete's virtue (*she jian guan de* 射箭觀德). However, what Aristotle had in mind were combative contact sports typical of Panhellenic events.

4 Comparative Notes

Exploring athl-ethics phenomenon in Mencius and Aristotle opens many avenues for discussion. The foregoing study suggests, for instance, a presupposed continuity between mental and physical experiences that flies in the face of post-Cartesian mind-body problematics. In this section I am only able to do a cursory recapitulation and bring up a few points of comparison.

Common concerns as well as differences emerge from the theme of sports and morality. As image source, sports has distinctive characteristics such as vigorous effort, strengthening of powers or abilities, striving for an objective, and enduring hardship. These athletic entailments exemplify aspects of moral experience. In a special way, the painstaking development entailed in sports mirrors—or *is potentially part of*, according to stronger forms of athleticism—moral habituation, that is, the slow and demanding process of cultivating virtues and character.

²⁷ See also archery metaphor in 2.6 1106b and 2.9 1109a.

Mencius alludes to sports such as shooting, hunting, weightlifting, calisthenics, and chess. While there are allusions to most of these in Aristotle, the latter naturally gravitates towards traditional Greek sports such as javelin-throwing, running, and combat sports. Archery emerges in both as a well-used metaphor—something expected on the side of Mencius but surprising with regard to Aristotle.²⁸

Archery is a good platform for comparing the two. Both employ figures of shooting-archers to summarize their idea of moral exemplars. The same kind of image is cast with different features and resonances. Mencius’s archer—a paradigm for the gentleman—has *ren* as aim and displays wisdom, sageliness, conscientiousness, and self-responsibility as outstanding characteristics (2A.7; 5B1). On the other side of the spectrum, Aristotle’s sharp shooter—a paradigm for the man of reason—has the relative mean as aim: with practical wisdom (*phronesis*) to discern the mean and moral excellences of courage and temperance to moderate affective and appetitive drives, he is able to feel and act rightly (NE 6.1). Archery metaphor thus generates different accounts of moral exemplarity but also brings to the fore a common sense of (1) saliency (having focus: *ren*/the good), (2) the moral way being arduous but worthwhile (master standard/achieving what is praiseworthy), and (3) the need to train oneself to acquire moral ability (shooting with strength/accuracy).

As field of practice, sports for Mencius is moralized when it observes inherited rituals and is exercised with consideration and moderation. For Aristotle, the bottom line is for athletic pursuits to be harmoniously integrated in the flourishing life of a citizen. Courage, temperance and endurance are the principal qualities honed and exhibited through sports. The social virtues emphasized by Mencius are not in the foreground of Aristotle but are also part of the picture: educated conduct as well as goodwill and friendship were expected from sportsmen. Mencius does not reject athletic pursuits *per se* (the early kings were athletic and shared their interests and resources with the people) but frequently lamented the oppression, excesses, and negligence of sports-loving princes. Aristotle expresses similar sentiment in cautioning against giving oneself to physical exercises to the detriment of higher pursuits.

As for the propaedeutic function of sports, Mencius positively views agonal

²⁸ Greek attitude towards archery was complex. On the one hand, beloved gods and heroes of the Athenians were archers (e.g., Apollo, Odysseus); on the other hand, actual society regarded long-distance fighting cowardly. An important skill in remoter eras, archery was overshadowed by combat fighting, the norm in Golden Age battlefields and sports arenas. Classical philosophers’ regard for the bow is thus disjunct from mainstream culture. This, however, may be explained by the resurgence of archery in the mixed fighting strategy inaugurated by Athens around the fifth century and its inclusion in the training (in public gymnasia that doubled as philosophical schools!) of citizen candidates.

experience as it stimulates the heart-mind, cultivates endurance, and improves abilities (6A9). Moreover, he acknowledges the potential of ritualized sports to refine social behavior. Mencius was particularly interested in getting his moral doctrine across rulers and sports-related passages particularly concern them. In these passages, Mencius lays stress on the singular importance of *ren*, a virtue associated with rulers. For Mencius as much as for Aristotle, the bearing of moral training (whether of feudal lords or of polis citizens) on the survival of the political institution is clear.²⁹ Aristotle also lived in times of political turmoil. He considered athletics necessary for health and strength, personal goods with wider repercussions inasmuch as the citizens themselves were the warriors of the state. The chief importance he bestows on athletics—with its elements of toil and competition—is the taming and moderation of lower drives, a prerequisite for the smooth functioning of reason. This too was an important matter for the polis inasmuch as its policies and organization depended on democratic citizens.

5 Concluding Remarks

Athletic experiences resemble ethical ones in succinct ways. More importantly, there are dispositions, abilities, and qualities pertinent to athletics as much as to moral endeavors. Athletics is thus not only *like* moral experience but also potentially *part of it*.

An off-shoot of the study is greater appreciation of the richness and complexity of early sporting cultures. Stereotypes about these still linger, purporting, for instance, that Chinese sports was “private and not political,” while Greek sports was about muscle power and “glorifies warfare and competition” (Pail & Bell 2004, 12, 17–18, 33), or again that Chinese athletic performances are internal and non-competitive unlike the external and competitive face-offs in Greece (Raphals in Fraser et al. 2011, 8).³⁰

A thoughtful take-away from the study is the insight it gives about free activity. Mencius’ references to sports are often in the context of some consuming interest (*hao* 好) or means of enjoyment (*le* 樂), while Aristotle considered sports a form of play (*παίδια*) or leisurely activity (*σχολή*). Notwithstanding differences in conceptions and actual practices around forms of free activity, both show in their treatment of sports that how we spend spare time can make us nobler or baser.

Acknowledgments I thank my fellow participants in the symposium Comparing Virtues,

²⁹ Pointed out by Michael Nylan.

³⁰ Raphals is more cautious acknowledging that ritual and sacrifice are common to both sporting traditions, as well as self-cultivation of excellences, *ibid.*, 9–10.

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