

Sport Pedagogy and Well-Being: A Phenomenological Approach

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Abstract: The main goal of this study is to reflect on the concept of well-being and its links to sport and education through the lens of a phenomenological approach focused on sport pedagogy as a science of human health and sport sciences. I argue that well-being is not something stable whose meanings are given once and for all. Rather, well-being is changeable, and thereby related to the meanings that individuals create to make sense of their life. Well-being is thus an existential condition experienced by human beings as a unity of body-mind-spirit which enables humans flourish through movement and playing games. This leads us to a notion of sport as a monad/set of experiences related to the body, movement and play. For this reason, sport represents one of the best form and ways of flourishing for human beings, who, through sport, can holistically achieve the complete fulfillment of their original and natural condition of openness-to-transcendence, being-in-the-world and being-with-others. To conclude, the study argues that sport pedagogy, as a human science, needs to be revisited in a more phenomenological and existential way linked to the pursuit of well-being through sport.

Keywords: well-being, pedagogy, sport, education, phenomenology.

I. INTRODUCTION

Not only is the achievement of well-being one of the main goals of sport education, understood as a socialization process aimed at enhancing human beings' quality of life through the inculcation of social values, but rather well-being represents the a theoretical framework to regard sport as a human practice [1]. We might say that sport and well-being are so intertwined, and their mutual boundaries are so misty, that sport cannot exist without well-being and in the other way around. Well-being is a key topic in pedagogy as a science of sport as well as in education. Actually, the main goal of sport science(s) is to use sport as a means to enhance human life. This goal is also shared with educational science, whose general purpose is to improve communitarian human life through education and value transmission.

Sport pedagogy regards human well-being as a symbol (with all the complex semantic meanings that it implies) and expression of a fundamental individual and communitarian human condition, which is dependent upon bodily and psychic dimensions [2]. These dimensions are socially determined and deeply influenced and affected by the environment the person lives in. To be clear, well-being is an existential phenomenon with three main dimensions: historical, social and cultural. According to the Council of Europe [3], sport has to be defined in a broad sense as: "all forms of physical activity which, through casual or organized participation, aim at expressing or improving physical fitness and mental well-being, forming social relationships or obtaining results in competition at all levels" (art.2a). By drawing on this official definition, we can derive the main components of sport:

- 1) "Body" and "movement" are fundamental bio-physiological characteristics of the person, who, being understood as a metaphysical being, acts and interact into and with the world;
- 2) Well-being as condition and aspiration of the person to achieve a body-mind unity;
- 3) "Social inclusion", "participation" and "social relationships", are values the key values that sport conveys;

4) contest and competition, which allow sport to become a playful and ludic activity in which people meet and challenge themselves as others, or they challenge others (in case of individual or team sport).

The above-mentioned components form both a system and sub-systems oriented towards enhancing people's well-being. In contemporary society, promoting well-being seems to be the main goal of sport conceived of as a physical activity. In our post-industrial society, a very influential myth from the industrial society regarding well-being is still prevalent. According to the myth, there is a sort of natural well-being which is being destroyed and threatened by civilization and cannot be achieved due to the overarching influence of technique. In this vein, sport seems to play a contradictory role. On the one hand, sport, which is related to our body, movement and play, is considered and seen as something natural which belongs to our nature of human beings. On the other hand, contemporary sport, as a product of our performance society and of its commercial view of the world, seems to be something non-natural and technified, a pure result of technology.

II. WELL-BEING AS A PHENOMENOLOGICAL AND EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE

The main questions arising from the abovementioned contradictory situation are: first, "can sport, being a contradictory practice in terms of naturality/non-naturality, really be a means to achieve well-being considering that well-being is a condition related to a supposed "natural" condition of our being?", and, second, "what is the point of view of sport pedagogy on how education should deal with the problem of promoting well-being?"

For sport pedagogy and its critical way of interpreting human phenomena, well-being is not something stable whose meanings are given once and for all. Well-being is something changeable, which is related to the meanings that human beings create to make sense of their life. The ultimate value of sport is tied with and depends upon individual experiences as well as upon cultural and social developments. Social sciences shows that the evaluation of well-being depends upon changeable and external norms, personal beliefs, and individual values. In light of this complex and relative conditions, well-being is something impossible to identify, since its attainment depends on individual prerequisites. For this reason, the ways people attain well-being are not self-evident but are influenced and depend upon specific preconditions which act as variables. Social sport pedagogy shows us how the family, the school, peer-groups, personal experiences, participation in sport activities in gyms, sport clubs and associations, are those agencies who stimulate and determine the momentary or lifelong interest of a person for physical activity and sport.

The impossibility of defining well-being is due to the fact that it is an experience, something strictly tied to our *Erlebnis*, and we need a specific approach to interpret and understand it. To be clear, as well-being is an experience, it does not make sense to approach it by trying to answer the question "what is well-being". The question we should try to answer is "how do I experience well-being and find a sense in it". Therefore, a traditional definitional pedagogical approach to well-being could be unsuccessful from many points of view. This is the reason why we need a new educational perspective on well-being. Phenomenological pedagogy, as a specific sub-field of pedagogy as a science, can help us to better understand well-being as a human phenomenon. Phenomenology is considered in itself as a philosophical methodology strictly linked to hermeneutics and, in some respects, to metaphysics [4].

From a phenomenological standpoint, as stressed above, sport is a natural experience. We might say that, conceptually, sport resembles Leibniz "monads" [5]. Sport is a monad, and body, movement and game are other three monads, independent from each other and existing as such. The four monads are unique, simple and unextended. These four monads are substances, that is, indivisible centres of force. Their functioning is dependent upon internal activity; nothing outside them can physically influence them. The monads have some specific and qualities (mainly: bodily, dealing with movement, and ludic) that make them to be entities [6].

In each of the monads there is a so strong power of representation; for this reason, an all-seeing eye which looks into one of the four monads could see not only all other monads and the other three reflected there as in a mirror, but also observe the whole world mirrored inside them. Therefore, looking at sport, which is the monad that has more capacity of mirroring, one could see reflected the body, and movement and play in it; looking at body, one could see the monad of movement and game and, partially, that of sport, and so on.

Sport, body, movement and play/game are monads that exist in itself but complete each other and give sense to their existence as entities through a continuous interaction among them. Three other monads reflected in sport, and capable to

complete it, are education, well-being and the person. The monad “person” has to be considered as the most important one, and we might call it, using Leibniz’s terminology: the “queen-monad”, which is the term that the German philosopher used for defining the monad of “human soul”.

To sum up, what we want to stress through these philosophical Leibnizian inspirations is that human beings’ well-being should be in close interaction with sport in order to complete its nature and give sense to its existence. Sport are the natural complement of well-being and – we could also say – in the other way around. Sport and well-being are monads that continuously mirror each other reflecting themselves. One could say that sport, movement, games, person, education and well-being are monads that constantly interact with each other. Sport, body, movement, and games are mirrors to each other. Human beings are satisfied through their engaging in sport because sport belong to the nature of Being which has in well-being its best form of “being” and “existing”.

The monad “well-being” is the centre of the set formed by sport, body, movement and games. Well-being is an essential part of *Dasein*, of the person’s “being-in”, which finds one of its specific ways of existing in the framework of its mortal condition of being-to-death. The concept “being-to-death” should be interpreted as condition of the human being who sees death not also as a limit and boundary but also both as a touchstone and a starting point to reflect on the world and her/his mortal existence.

Well-being as a way of being-in of the person in the world should be defined as well-being-in. This well-being-in fulfils itself when the human being has the opportunity to move, play, and express herself/himself through the body. Well-being is a being-in of the body which, through the experience of playing itself in the form of movement and game, turns an anonymous and impersonalized space into the place of Being as person. As well-being is and embodied specific Being of the person which fulfils itself through the body, movement and playing in the form of a game freely played in a place, as well as the sense of well-being are given to the person by a gratifying contact with Being. This gratifying contact is expressed in practicing sport, which, as a monad coupled with body, movement, and play/games, generates a pleasure of aesthetic-perceptive nature (an *aisthesis*) which anyone who practices a sport, a practitioner, an athlete or a player, knows well and understands.

This pleasure is made possible and attained through a (spiritual and bodily) contact with Being by the person who, playing sport, experiences the properties open to transcendence typical of this practice. In this sense, sport can be seen as a “channel”, or a “path” to transcendence, and a way for the person to encounter Being within well-being as being-in which is made possible by the body possibilities coupled with movement and play/game which sum and represent the essence of sport as a human practice.

The experience of well-being through the monad “person” is due to the fact that sport refer to an existential condition of incarnated being peculiar to women and men as living beings who enjoy and benefit from the contact with the (Divine) Being. Well-being as *Dasein*/being-in is fulfilled by the attainment of a unity of body and soul/spirit which can found in the primitive condition of human existence as embodied living life.

Greek culture expressed the unity of body and spirit through the concept of *ughieia* (health) connected to a word root *ug-* that refers to the concept of “to feel good”, “to stay healthy”, “to feel vigorous” because one feels good in body, (mind) and spirit. On closer examination, the modern concept of well-being refers to the abovementioned condition of body, mind and spirit as a unified whole which expresses the essence of being both as an individual and communitarian one. This well-being is experienced by the human being through the openness to transcendence and a contact with the Divine it allows.

III. SPORT AS A PEDAGOGICAL POSSIBILITY TO ATTAIN WELL-BEING

To be clear, sport represents both a transcendental and social possibility to link our body to well-being as being-in (in-the-world and with-others) through the human movement and play/game as a possible antidote against depression, anxiety, boredom, pain, and so on, seen as distancing from Being and being-with-others, and as a loss of recreational-kinetic-bodily-spiritual condition unity proper of her/his original being.

Pedagogy has to look at well-being as a monad related to sport, and sport as a monad/set of experiences related to the body, movement and play. These two monads have to be seen as strictly interconnected, and pedagogy has always to stress that sport represents one of the best form and way of fulfillment for the human being, who, through it, can

holistically achieve the complete fulfillment of her/his original and natural condition of openness-to-transcendence and being-in the world and with-others. Well-being achieved through sport generates from what we can call aesthesis, this is to say, a pleasure and joy of aesthetic (and ethical) nature experienced as a agreeable and pleasant value be perceived when one plays and is engaged as a person (both individual and communitarian) in sport.

Pedagogy as a human science is aware that sport are a home to well-being and the other way around. Well-being, like sport, is tied to the life of persons, and pedagogy have to use the existential and experiential component which originates from sport to teach well-being education as strategy to promote individual social values. This approach of pedagogy to well-being through sport needs specific strategies and methodologies. This is to say, a sets of approaches based on qualitative research methods such as life stories, interviews, biographies and so on, capable to let emerge well-being as a lived experience (*Erlebnis*) related to sport.

Pedagogy has to highlight that sport is an appropriate means to achieve a right way of living one's own life against inactivity and passive recreation and distraction, as well as against intellectualization and bureaucratization of everyday life and all the possible modes of alienation it can imply (caused by the worldwide spread of new communication technologies). For pedagogy, well-Being is both a private and a social phenomenon, and the set of problems it implies have to be faced through an existential social pedagogy of sport. Well-being expresses a positive basic human condition of the human being and of its in being-in. This is a characteristic of human beings in their changeable and at the same time dynamic and flexible relationship toward themselves, their body and their social and cultural environment. Well-being is not stable or fixed, but is an unstable part of an unstable relationship of humankind towards its life environment [7].

Well-being expresses one of the main objectives of human life-long education in which it becomes more and more actual because important features and criteria of life are no longer taught exclusively in the school but by in all our life course by several educational agencies. This calls for a life-long pedagogical effort focused on well-being as a permanent search for a better life both from a qualitative and quantitative point of view. For this reason, one could state that well-being is the most important object of education. Well-being is an umbrella term which contains emotional and ethical experiences such as happiness (or the Greek *eudaimonia*), satisfaction, contentment, equanimity, the harmonious balance of mind and body; is to say, all the main objectives that education has to achieve and that gives sense to it as a human practice [8].

As well-being is an individual experience interpreted in light of a personal set of values and believes, sport can help education to emphasize certain features of well being, and help people to experience what we can call the "right" well-being. In light of this interpretation, it could said that well-being, in any of its forms whatsoever, cannot be a goal of education, but it has always to be justified by the conditions, requirements and problems associated with contemporary living in a technified and media-dominated world which can head people towards a non-active life style.

Sport finds the human well-being in an active life-style which does not only consist in shaping relationships between the person and her/his self, body and environment, but also in a set of "intentional" actions (is to say, oriented towards a scope) aimed at self-implementation and self-actualization. The sports are the path that shows what well-being is. Actually, education, otherwise, because of its being based upon and influenced by values which are always relative, would not be capable to do it. To be clear, education does not have all means to determine whether a person feels well or not. It can only identify prerequisites, teach abilities, help share experiences, provide people with external conditions, arrange and prepare learning situations, and develop motivations to achieve well-being.

As well-being is always relative, it is difficult to materialize and evaluate such an objective, and to decide by what means and contents this goal can be achieved. Well-being is not a goal which can be achieve directly. For this reason, from a pedagogical point of view we could say that sport is a "framework" of "activities" (or better to say, of intentional "actions") which are capable to materialize well-being and explain what it consists of [9].

IV. SPORT PEDAGOGY AND ITS FUNCTIONS FOR WELL-BEING

Sport concretely and in practice shows what values well-being consists of, and the (best) way to experience them. Of course, sport does not directly lead to well-being. But through the experience of our body, it provides opportunities to be actually well and to enrich our everyday life making it more satisfying and fulfilling. As a promoter of these opportunities, sport pedagogy plays a fundamental role. The main task of sport pedagogy as a phenomenological science capable to promote well-being through education and learning can be summed as follows.

1) Sport pedagogy orients education towards both activity and experience. Sport offers human beings the possibility to attain well-being not through a strictly cognitive and intellectual way, but through active experiences which start from the body as an active centre of energy and power. Experience acts as a set of activities which, once they become “intentional actions” through the person’s consciousness who experiences them, they allow people to establish insights and permanent habits towards the searching and experimenting of well-being. To be clear, sport pedagogy is aware that well-being cannot be learned, but only experienced and lived in a personal way by the person. It is also aware that only if experienced, one can reflect on well-being, evaluate it, take it into account as an important thing in her/his life, identify its prerequisites, comprehend the sense of well-being within the human existence, and she/he can strive to turn it into a permanent objective of her/his own learning. In this sense, sport constantly provides education with possible new and unique experiences, and shows the best way towards well-being, offering, in its several and various forms and levels, situations which can make understandable and available the meaning, value and effect of the human movement. In conclusion, sport is a field for both education and socialization in which well-being can be experienced immediately and recognized in its close relationship to our activity as a set of intentional actions.

2) Sport pedagogy uses the body, movement and play/game as a means to provide physical and social experiences. Sport pedagogy is committed to provide immediate bodily experiences through movement, play and game. Among these experiences related to our emotional self and our bodily condition and perception as human beings, the possibility to experience the performance capability, its variable and depending-upon-many-factors limitations has to be highlighted as one of the most important that sport can provide with human beings. Through the experience of limits, one can obtain more information about her/himself, her/his condition and close relationship to personal well-being. Therefore, the main aim of sport pedagogy as a science of education and learning is to help people to experience and live their life in a sportive “way”, or better to say, to find a lasting sportive way of life which, through a creative use of body, movement and play/game, can become a source of concrete, immediate and lasting well-being.

3) Sport pedagogy uses sport for helping people understand that well-being is always a social and communicative experience. The main and specific task of sport as a means to well-being are to provide social experiences, social contact and interaction, providing typical situations of that context: this is to say, to take part in contests, and to win or lose, to act cooperatively, to find friends, to know where one belongs. All this is part of the social life in which one participates on a voluntary basis and in an informal and simple way. In this regard, sport and all its activities are a bridge to social interaction, communication and inclusion. Through participation in sport, human beings can actually, integrate themselves in a social system of partnership and communication possibilities. Therefore, through sport, human beings can gain not only social experiences, self-awareness, and self-fulfilment, but also the feeling of belonging to a group, and respect for (and from) others, as it happens in competitions or sport activities, those which implies a challenge (towards oneself, the nature or the environment). In a nutshell, as one of the main goals of sport as human practice is to promote social contact and to transmit skills for social interaction, we can conclude that sport is a fundamental component of that social well-being which is so important for us who live in contemporary society.

4) Sport pedagogy regards participation in sport as an experience to well-being conceived of as a self-actualization and activation related both to what we are able to do and to the challenges which deal with our abilities. All experiences in sport are experiences of our self, of our abilities, capabilities, limitations, as well as of our dependencies and our autonomy as social beings. Sport situations are experiences evoking a world of emotions and feelings which disclose to the person the possibility of a world of learning and values. These experiences can change our point of view on the world and the environment we live in. To sum up, sport pedagogy is aware that sport as human experiences can change the relationship with the world in which one lives, showing the possibility of new and different life possibilities, and helping to discover new meanings in the social environment we live in.

V. CONCLUSION

Sport as experience of self-fulfilment experienced through the challenge towards obstacles and limitations is of fundamental importance for education to well-being seen as a relaxation through activity, enrichment through free actions and movements, vivification through self-activation of our potential as human bodies capable to move and play games alone or with others. In this regard, sport represents and shows us situations which are not given, don’t exist by nature, and are not necessities of life in a strict sense, but are possibilities to other experiences capable to fulfil our lives through enjoyable and satisfying situations which contribute to our well-being.

These are experiences in which we can learn to do what could be seen as non-utilitarian, extraordinary and superfluous (like sport could seem to be in itself), searching for the limits of what is possible for us as (supposed) free beings and for others (these limits, for example, are expressed in sport by norms, rules and legality). All this is directly connected with well-being. As a human science, sport pedagogy realizes that the actual potentialities that sport has as a means to promote human well-being are always related to personal experiences and emotions, and not to scientific results in a strict sense [10].

To change sport into sources of well-being, a new pedagogy capable to look at well-being as a holistic experience personally and socially determined and not directly attainable (and “scientifically”) is required. Pedagogy knows that sport transmits, for what it concerns well-being, insights and experiences which are unique and cannot be gained elsewhere. Sport pedagogy always uses sport for satisfying habits which are important for life in our contemporary world. These habits allow the person to accomplish performances in which one can experience and project her/himself in her/his freedom, respecting the rules and those others who the rules imply.

To conclude, we can state that sport is always an experience of contacts and interactions. This starting point should change the interpretation of sport into an experience of solidarity, opportunities to learn and to experience what, to all appearances, looks like a set of superfluous and non-utilitarian actions. All this is a path to well-being as a fullness of life, and sport represents an educational enrichment for us as human and living entities.

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