Hubris, Humility, and Humiliation: Vice and Virtue in Sporting Communities

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1. Introduction

In this essay I argue that humiliation felt as a response to sporting defeat may be rationally justified. In distinguishing weak from strong humiliation I show that, while the latter is reserved to those cases where one’s moral status as a person has been assaulted, the former may be experienced by sportspersons who fail to observe certain standards of conduct. To make this case I argue that it is necessary to locate the felt humiliation against the hierarchical nature of sports identities and communities where the notion of honor still resonates. This context makes the idea of a highly committed sportsperson’s humiliation more plausible than the idea that the defeat necessarily occasions a mere blow to their self-esteem. I develop an account of humiliation in close relation to its conceptual cousins: shame, embarrassment, dignity, and humility. I show how, paradigmatically, those who display the vice of hubris are predisposed to weak humiliation and illustrate such in a case study of the boxing contest between Sugar Ray Leonard and Roberto Duran.

2. Sports As Practices: Hierarchy and Honor

As MacIntyre has so ably demonstrated, modernity has loosened the bonds between fact and value, role and identity. Who we are and what we ought and ought not to do and be, are commonly supposed to occupy separate realms. Unlike many other cultural practices, however, sports retain a strong vestige of the view that our roles still issue clear directives for personal action and life-commitments. Sports, with their structural exultation of the heroic still offer a partial vision of what is honorable. While it may be the case that we are less clear of our role-related expectations in our everyday (post) modern lives, sports by contrast offer themselves as a bastion of social conservatism. How is this so? First, at an individual level, there is a strong explicitness surrounding the specified roles we occupy in the sports arenas. As goalkeeper, or umpire, or coach, the expectations that attach to our positions are relatively circumscribed. Second, sports’ ethos too can be tightly bracketed in an explicit system of social structure that is notably hierarchical. It is in these structures, and the expectations that flow from the roles we occupy within them, that sports share many similarities with honor-based heroic societies.

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It has become a commonplace in the literature to eschew previously dominant analytical accounts of sports and instead consider them under some social aspect as "practices". One aspect commonly ignored in the application of a MacIntyrean account of social practices is the notion of ritual. I have argued elsewhere, following Sansone's (16) anthropological thesis of sports as the sacrifice of energy, that the conceptualization of sport as intrinsically social urges upon us a picture of sports as forms of public ceremonies. So I simply assert here that sports give birth to communities and that they are essentially forms of ritual and ceremony in and through, and for, those communities. The shared background presupposed in the very idea of sporting communities is essential. In the more abstract debates of political philosophy it can be difficult to make much sense of communitarian ideas such as "shared ideals", "shared goals", and "shared purposes". In the less diverse and less complex worlds of sports one scarcely has to work hard to conceptualize their contents and contexts. And it is this idea, coupled with the Western heritage of sports as play and display, where spectators are thought to be part and parcel of the activity and not mere adornments, that the crucial structural context to the moral psychology of sports is given. Here individualized evaluations of winning and losing, of bragging and moaning about lost opportunities or refereeing incompetence must be seen in the life of an evolving tradition of each and every sport, told and re-told by deed of print or word of mouth, of hard-earned success and undeserved "tragedies", of hollow victories and glorious defeats.

It is often difficult to dislocate talk of ungracious or hollow victories, humbling defeats, or of moral winners and losers from our self-evaluations regarding winning and defeat. The idea that Western sports have emerged from a civilization that made pre-eminent the honor ethic is one that I will not sufficiently analyze here. Nevertheless, conceptions of honorable conduct are always in the background, with attendant virtues and vices displayed by the winner and loser. What I wish to do is draw on Miller's quasi anthropological theses about shame and humiliation. This, at least, will help to distinguish our position about humiliation and hubris in sports.

Just as the Greek myths and legends give birth to an agonal context that allowed sports to flourish, so the agonal warrior ethic can be found in Norse sagas, such as Beowulf too. And these can help to illuminate a modern sense of emotions such as shame and humiliation in sport. It will repay attention if we bear in mind the structural similarities of honor societies and elite competitive sports, especially those that involve direct competition involving physical contact (such as football, boxing, rugby, hockey). So we might say that the concept of "honor" is deeply intertwined with hierarchical societies. Thus Miller writes:

Honor was more than just a set of rules for governing behavior. Honor permeated every aspect of consciousness: how you thought about yourself and others, how you held your body, the expectations you could reasonably have and the demands you could make on others (....). It was your very being. For in an honor based culture there was no self-respect independent of the respect of others, no private sense of "hey, I'm quite something" unless it was confirmed publicly. Honor was then not just a matter of the individual; it necessarily involved a group, and the group included all those people worthy of competing with you for honor. For the most part, people acted as if the
mechanics of honor had the structure of a zero-sum game or less-than-zero-sum game. The shortest road to honor was thus to take someone else’s (…) (15: p. 116-117)

Nowhere is this better exemplified in late modernity than in the zero-sum structure of sports. And it is almost deified in sports like boxing, where the language of the “champion” and “contender” is most obvious, where the claims to be “the greatest” are the strongest. Honor though is not merely to be thought of as representing oneself appropriately in a social structure. It is noteworthy that, like other dispositions, honor predisposes us to feel and act in regular and interrelated ways. Those who value honor necessarily value reputation and above all the appearance of that reputation. A “loss of face” is the modern vernacular for loss of honor. It follows then that how others see us is critical to our standing in the scheme of things. This is why in pre-modern societies (among other reasons of course) the social concept of shame is the powerful regulator of our thoughts and deeds. Lest it appear I have some nostalgic view of honor, it is worth acknowledging the dangers of the powerful social structures that weave our identities and actions so tightly. Characteristically such structures function to preclude critical self- and other reflection and comment. Moreover, in sports as in academic lives, that shame is commonly the fruit of envy. Academics covet the positions and status held by colleagues who get tenure first, or publish most prolifically, or who attract prestigious national funds. Individual sportspersons are characteristically thought to covet the number one slot in leagues or drafts. Responses to that shame in tight social structures can be equally problematic to (post) modern minds. Falling on one’s sword (the ultimate act of honor in previous shame-cultures) is widely thought unacceptable now, though retiring gracefully after a drunken fall at a party is not. Emotional economies scarcely stand still. How we match social failings and their analogue feelings and subjective judgments are themselves subject to cultural change.

The ancient warrior ethic, if you like, operates tightly since the background beliefs, the framework or supporting structure, is itself tight; there are no gaps or interstices. Nowhere is the tightness of roles and their expectations developed so effectively than in the conflicts of Greek tragedy such as in King Creone who, to execute his role-duties, must execute his daughter for her defiance of the law. Creone knows what he must do because he knows who he is. As MacIntyre puts it:

Every individual has a given role and status within a well-defined and highly determinate system of roles and statuses. (…) In such a society a man know who he is by knowing his role in these structures; and in knowing this he knows also what he owes and what is owed him by the occupant of every other role and status. (…) But it is not just that there is for each status a prescribed set of duties and privileges. There is a clear understanding of actions that are required to perform these and what actions fall short of what is required. For what are required are actions. A man (sic) in heroic society is what he does. (10: p. 122)

What is so interesting about these role related commitments is how an appreciation of them can illuminate our understanding of the moral psychology of winning
and losing in sports. Both Dixon and Hardman et al. highlight the ranking function in sportspersons' self-evaluations in terms of comparative measurements of athletic ability. But there is more to it than this. I have proposed that attention be paid not merely to the fact that certain sports (though surely not all—compare the ethos of heavyweight boxing and ice-skating) still retain the vestige of honor codes. But more importantly I think the relation between differentia—how players are ranked in that structure (favorites, no-hopers, new-stars, fading stars, and so on)—need to be apprehended. What merit is accorded to sportspersons and their sporting status rests partly on how they themselves evaluate their worth within the scheme. The expectations of how they comport themselves alter according to the places they register in the social scales of sports. Tolerance may be given to the new kids on the block who shout their mouths off a little too quickly; it is less easily afforded to those who are old enough, or experienced enough, to know better. What will be termed "structural pretension" within a system of rankings will be crucial to understand felt-humiliation in sports I will argue. The idea that one judges oneself worthy of esteem beyond that which one merits makes one easy prey to the emotion. In social practices, as I have said, we come to know who we are, not merely as athletic performers, in our understandings of what we stand for and where we stand in the catalogue of those who come before us and are the canons of excellence in that activity. And proof of that standing comes not in verbal forms but as action. If we are first or twenty-first we come to know our place, which is verified in the public forum of sporting competition. Virtuosity and incompetence are there for all to see, and esteem and derision follow hard on their heels. Sports are not intellectually complex. They are scarcely comparable to the high arts in terms of their (im)penetrability by the masses. And this brings me to speak of recognition and esteem; for both notions lie close to an understanding of honor and expectations of conduct in the execution or role-related behavior.

I want to re-affirm why, I (13) earlier argued that what MacIntyre (10) sets out generically as external goods (e.g., wealth, status, and social esteem) are not to be thought of simply as the necessarily corrupting components of modern commercialized sports. I argued there that external goods *justly conferred* are proper signifiers that lives are going well. A better way to talk of this relation is not to slip into the old intrinsic/extrinsic dichotomy but to think of the sportsperson who relationally values the sport for the esteem it brings him or her. To be sure, esteem can be wrought from a range of activities beyond sports, but it is a clear (and for some, perhaps, the only) means to that particular end. Talk of esteem as an external good of sports, one that is merely extrinsically valuable, is too crude. Moreover, given that sports have historically been associated with certain of what are called external goods, there comes a point when one wants to ask the role that the word "external" is playing here. But that is a separate point.

Of course there are ways of pursuing these ends, such as esteem, that are more and less morally acceptable. Tony Skillen’s discussion of Rousseau and the fall of social man captures important points about competitive status ranking and the proper means of their pursuit:

This is the sort of thing we find in Thrasymachus, Glaucous and Adeimantus’ defence of injustice in Plato’s *Republic*. They argue that the reputation of virtue is desirable because it brings material rewards. (. . .) But this is not what Rousseau is on about. He is not primarily concerned with people’s
pursuing social reputation as a means to materialistic, asocial ends, but rather with their quest for esteem as a confirmation of their social identities. (...) And without shared ‘recognition’ of superiority, such distinction is worthless. (16: p. 114)

What I think we have then in sports is the demonstration of who we are in the way that we play sports and the myriad ways in which we make comparisons of athletic excellence. And when our sports are played and officiated properly, when we develop our talents and capacities, when we pit them against others, we visit an inner sporting oracle; we come to know the limits of our sporting world, and the sporting world comes to know our limits too. That is the central function of ranking systems such as leagues and titles, demotions, promotions, and so on. But how we win and lose speak crucially to who we are. Keeping a close eye on the relations between ends and means is critical; perceptions of their natures are an inherent part of the context. But we also have to reflect upon the self-conceptions of performers (how, for example, they saw themselves win or lose) if we are to understand properly the weak humiliation visited on or felt by them. Below I argue that, in cases of strong humiliation, the context is relatively unimportant. I will argue that strong humiliation entails an awareness of the violation of basic respect of a person, not the deflation of their self-esteem. I will then show how weak humiliation may be the proper emotional corollary of defeat.

3. “Strong” and “Weak” Humiliation and Structural Pretension

It has been argued by Dixon (2, 3) that humiliation is not a proper emotional response to a sporting defeat, since it conflates humiliation with a mere loss to self-esteem. Since the defeat itself does not morally reduce the opposition as persons, it cannot therefore be considered as an example of strong humiliation:

In general, a loss of self-esteem is a regrettable but morally acceptable consequence of many legitimate actions in the pursuit of legitimate goals. In contrast, inflicting strong humiliation, which brings moral shame and disgrace on a person, is a more serious harm that requires a more substantial justification. (3: p. 67)

This is not quite right. Dixon persuasively distinguishes between a loss of self-esteem and strong humiliation. But he pays little attention to what might be called “weak humiliation”, whose conceptual territory is different from the individualistic evaluation entailed in “self-esteem”. Furthermore, he fails to clarify sufficiently what “strong humiliation” actually is and presupposes that justification thereof is possible. By way of extending this discussion I will begin with the distinction between loss of self-esteem and strong humiliation. Dixon argues that not all lowerings of self-esteem are strongly humiliating. Yet the difference between a lowering of self-esteem and weak humiliation should not be thought of merely as a matter of degree. Dixon fails throughout to distinguish strong humiliation from shame and disgrace and merely says that strong humiliation is a “different beast” (2: p. 67) from weak humiliation. It essentially involves a lowering of moral standing that is not a necessary condition of weak humiliation:
An athlete who competes fairly and with dignity, who prepares assiduously and performs to the best of her ability, and who has a decent minimal level of competence at the game, is absolutely not shamed or disgraced (i.e. strongly humiliated) by a lop-sided defeat. (3: p. 67)

Now in one sense Dixon is absolutely right that the lop-sidedness of the defeat is independent of the humiliation felt, justifiably or unjustifiably, by the humiliated. But the criteria relate only to the loser and not the quality of defeat nor the broader social context that is necessarily to be understood if the actions themselves are properly to be characterized. In all acts of strong humiliation, the context is relatively unimportant for the actions to be understood as humiliating. In Margalit’s discussion of the decent society, “humiliation” is tied to the most basic respect for persons. It is indeed the kind of thing a torturer seeks to inflict on a victim (11: pp. 262-270). We need to know little of the context to appreciate the humiliation of the torturer:tortured variety. In such strong humiliation the humiliated are passive at the hands of the tormentor, whereas in weaker cases the power balance is not as dramatic. So clear is the denial of the status of personhood to the subject of strong humiliation that the imposition of powerless degradation requires little or no awareness of a moral and conceptual vocabulary to modern minds.⁴ In contrast, sports require at least a minimal conceptual background to be understood before winning and losing, and the deflation of recognized status, can be perceived. Moreover, in terms of the violence done to one’s status as a person in strong humiliation, we may say that sports never reach this depth. But are they instances of weak humiliation” to the serious sports person (amateur or professional) rather than merely a loss of self-esteem?

To explore this question requires further attention to the nature of humiliation and related concepts. One’s self-awareness of shame, honor, humiliation, presupposes the transgression of moral boundaries. They relate to actions that are evaluated in light of shared, public norms. As a precursor to his discussion of humiliation, Miller laments the passing of shame proper⁵. He notes how it has contracted from the large role it played in honor societies concerned with saving face or reputation (notwithstanding huge problems in itself; e.g., gendered ideas such as protecting one’s honor by having dresses down to the ankles) into a mere association with not feeling good about oneself or having low self-esteem⁶. Here, everyday locutions, “shame on you”, “you ought to be ashamed”, point to a stronger status-related concept rather than a mere subjective feeling.

Miller’s thesis is that shame and humiliation are to be distinguished along the lines of status pretension. I will rehearse his position here. Humiliation, he argues, is tied to a mode or quality of self-presentation. He writes:

They seek deference from others, they mean to cut figures before others, and in doing so they presume on others; those others will get even. It is the presumption that enables the humiliation and justifies it. Vanity begs for humiliation.

One of the most salient distinctions between shame and humiliation is that, at root, humiliation depends on the deflation of pretension. (15: p. 139)

Before we develop the argument further, we should enquire where this distinction fits with the humiliating blowout literature. In concentrating predominantly
on the score itself and quantitatively the margin between victor and vanquished, neither Dixon nor Hardman et al. developed their theses in relation to the modes of self-presentation of the contestants. This, it seems to me, is critical. To be fair, Dixon makes the point that one may be humiliated where one shows character flaws, but he never expands the point. Pugilistic examples can be particularly relevant here, since the boxing world is saturated with machismo. The mode of self-presentation is critical to boxers, since part of their identity as much as their chances of winning rests in the self-deception they can generate both to gird themselves and psychologically to terrorize the opposition; “respect” here is no Kantian notion, but a cultural shorthand for embodied power.

Now blowout scenarios, however various they may be, are not tied to shame necessarily. For, as we have noted above, shame is linked with a failure in reaching a designated moral as opposed to technical standard. In addition, there is nothing in losing by a large margin that would indicate the propriety of such a weighty emotion. One might say that embarrassment was the proper response to a failure against inferior opposition because of poor preparation. Shame will characteristically be thought too serious an emotional response. Yet if shame occupies itself with the transgression of issues of cultural, moral or religious rules, humiliation in its attenuated form is only tied to the conventional or decorous. Many authors have noted that it holds a perversely incongruous grip on the psyche of some. One might think of those for whom humility had descended to socially crippling self-abnegation. Instead of weighing their talents and achievements in a proper way, their self-evaluations never reach beyond mere self-loathing. Likewise, there are others oversensitive to “proper” conduct who felt that any and all transgressions of etiquette are self-imposed attacks on their integrity. A form of alienation is the endpoint of this view. We can see its development in accounts of those who argue that they do not belong within certain milieu—notably early accounts of racism encountered at golf clubs, or sexism in football cultures, where blacks and women respectively report to being overly sensitive about observing intricate social codes or conventions. Perhaps the grip is strongest though on those who themselves act not in ignorance or gaucherie but rather in pretense. Later I will argue that those who display an arrogant form of pretension are particularly ripe for weak humiliation.

In order to develop the account of humiliation and hubris I need to appropriate some important distinctions from Miller which open the door to thinking about weak humiliation in sports. He talks of pretensions of accident where a person just finds oneself superior in some respect to another, which is to be distinguished from an active putting on of “airs”. It is the latter that is interesting for our purposes. It is not difficult for sports fans to remember any number of pre-fight hypes where challengers for titles describe in rich and colorful terms how bad the champion is; how he has only been matched against cherry-picked opponents; how he’s past his best and should have retired before this fight to save him from the impending woe the challenger will visit on him. The litany of abuse is all-too familiar. Why is such a person, lacking in both humility and due-respect, ripe for a humiliating defeat? Miller writes:

Structural pretension is not merely a matter of fowl among fish. It depends on the fowl occupying, by the usual social conventions of status demarcation, the higher position. The setting must be one in which the fowl has no moral or social right to assert the higher status, but also is likely to be seen as
making such a claim because the context calls for special attention to status differential. (14: p. 142)

Now one can innocently occupy the high ground, but this is no such case. The boxing world has an honor code; it represents an honor community, where virtues and vices are displayed under fire and the public’s gaze. So the disrespect-ful boxer’s quest for esteem and status is cheaply sought at the price of disrespect for the champion who has earned his right to that status and can now play the role of champion (what in ancient Greek thought would be honorifically described as megalospuchia—the great souled man) with the dignity appropriate to a champion. In Aristotle, we find what is odd modern parlance: the idea that a certain level of pride is appropriate to those who are recognized for their greatness. Never-theless, the idea that a certain status attaches to a role still remains in the strongly structured world of boxing as in other martial sports. Working out whether in par-ticular circumstances embarrassment or humiliation attach will not be a mechanical application of criteria. Nevertheless, something general needs to be said to demarcate cases. Again, Miller writes:

If shame is the consequence of not living up to what we ought to, then hu-miliation is the consequence of trying to live up to what we have no right to. (14: p. 145)

As the mealy-mouthed pretender to the throne is beaten in the first few rounds, few shed tears. Where are all his hollow threats now? Where is his vaunted jab, stout defense, granite-chin, self-esteem? He is indeed humiliated before the boxing community and perhaps the entire audience to the extent that they appreciate the standards of the practice and the significance of status ranking therein. In sports, unlike so many other practices, we are positioned publicly. He can lay no such right to that ground again without fear of ridicule. So in these cases, the public deflation of a status beyond our merit occasions weak humiliation. While the negative emotion felt is a form of “emotional punishment” for the flouting of recog-nized, socially-conferred, status it does not amount to an assault on the basic con-dition of the sportsperson as person and therefore cannot be considered a case of strong humiliation. What must be shown below is that it can amount to more than a mere loss of self-esteem.

4. Hubris, Humility, and the Modes of Self-presentation

What I want to do now is to show how hubris, thought of as an exaggerated pride in oneself, specifically in one’s powers and status, is crucially related to the possibility of suffering weak humiliation in sports. Hubris takes its original meaning from the Greek’s description of those who thought themselves superior to the Gods. It entails the moral failing of not knowing one’s place in a hierarchical scheme and vaingloriously sticking to it. Boxing will provide the case study.

In the first title fight between Sugar Ray Leonard and Roberto Duran in Montreal, much bad blood was spilt in the pre-match promotion. Duran had wanted to unsettle his opponent and reduce him to an angry fighter. He did this by a num-ber of taunts and provocations that challenged, among other things, Leonard’s sexuality and heart for a battle. In the fight, Leonard eschewed his usual highly technical skills in favor of a brawl. Naturally, he lost to Duran who had seduced
him into contesting the match in a manner that conduced to Duran’s abrasive style. In the rematch, however, Leonard set out to prove that he had learnt his lesson. The contest was set up as a grudge match wherein two classic styles of boxing were in the starkest of contrasts. In addition to this dichotomy of “artist” and “slugger”, much was made of personal contrasts between the two. Here there was the pitting of an articulate, college-educated, stylish black man against a “hungry”, hardened Latino, who never took a step backward, who had never been knocked out, whose overweening pride now manifested itself in an arrogance that went beyond an all-consuming self-esteem.⁹

In the early rounds Leonard’s virtuosity was clearly on display. He was quicker of mind as well as fist and foot. He hit Duran so many times and with the full array of combinations: it was simply remarkable. Duran just could not get near enough to hit him with any effect. And often when he tried, Leonard just slipped punches by inches in carefully measured movements, apparently with minimal effort, making Duran appear an amateur. When Duran did land a punch, Leonard’s elastic movements assuaged the full force, and with beautiful balance he simply countered to greater effect.

By the middle rounds, Duran was tired and frustrated at his inabilitys, and this was compounded by Leonard’s public demonstration of his own virtues and Duran’s limitations. Without verbal assault, Leonard’s entire performances exuded élan, an aesthetic dimension of which Duran’s own mien was the antithesis. In his biography of Leonard, Toporoff writes:

In the eighth round, a round that has already become an indelible part of boxing history, one that will forever tarnish the Duran legend, Ray Leonard sensed the level of Roberto Duran’s frustration at not being able to have his own way. Now it was Sugar’s turn to taunt and mock the man with hands of stone. A payback for all the insults and humiliations in Montreal. Ray dropped his hands in mid-ring and exposed his chin, a look of teasing stupidity playing on his face. By merely twisting this way and that, he made Duran miss the too-tempting target. Frustration mounted. A few seconds later, again in the center of the ring, Ray wound his right arm like a pantomiming softball pitcher. The so called bolo motion is not one of boxing’s classic punches, but as Duran watched the right hand warming up, Ray popped him with a quick left jab right on the schnoz. It was the sort of move my old man would have pulled on me during our first few weeks of sparring. Duran heard the crowd’s derisive laughter.

With only sixteen seconds left in the round, and with Ray working him along the ropes, Roberto Duran turned away and said to Octavio Meyaran, the referee, “no mas no mas” [no more, no more].

Meyran said “Por que?”

Duran’s non-answer “No mas”

Roberto Duran’s quitting, unhurt in mid-fight, was so big a story that Ray Leonard’s strategic and technical brilliance was overlooked. (…) There were strong rumors of mysterious drugs that had sapped his will. More logical was the explanation that the macho man could handle anything except being made a fool of in public—it had never happened during his life on the
planet: now it was happening for the world to see. So he chose dishonor over humiliation. (19: pp. 140-141)

Now this was no blowout victory. To be sure, Leonard was well ahead on points but, notoriously in boxing, one punch can finish the contest. As long as an opponent is standing, one had better beware. It was rather Duran’s Latino machismo, his strutting airs of masculine invincibility, that made him ripe for the humiliation. Of course, had Leonard fought him toe to toe (man to man as some may say), he would surely have lost again. For Duran was a fighter of frightening will and physical power. Leonard simply out-thought and out-boxed him and did it so publicly that he demonstrated Duran’s limitations for the world to see. I think that this case is probably the limit case of weak humiliation. For the professional sportspersons, their chosen profession represents an identity-constituting commitment. Leonard’s assault on Duran’s identity as boxer was considerably harder to bear than the physical blows he received. Because of the significance of those commitments and the public deflation of his honor as boxer, the loss to Duran exceeds characterization as a loss of self-esteem. It’s not simply that he thinks a little less of himself now. Rather, in full view of the adoring public and the boxing community, his legend lost much of its luster in the nature of his defeat. Though he may recover some of his self-esteem in the future, he can do nothing to erase the humiliation. That much has been recorded.10

However, lest it be thought that I am putting the victor on a pedestal or engaging is some cultural variant of ethical hegemony against Latino machismo, some critical remarks are in order. Having established that weak humiliation is not necessarily tied to the quantitative measure of defeat but rather its quality, and in particular the character of the humiliated, a word or two is in order of the potential viciousness of the victor. Of course, Leonard was now ripe for himself for being brought down a peg or two. But not in the manner that had behooved Duran. To be sure he had mocked Duran but not in the vicious manner in which Duran had questioned his integrity. He had not “shot his mouth off” to use the vernacular. He had not abused Duran—though this may have been as much out of prudence as virtue. To have bad-mouthed Duran may have been to motivate him further. There is an old Aesopian tale about crowing one’s eminence only to be brought low by a creature greater than oneself. Even the greatest of sportsmen and women do well to mind its moral. Such is the nature of sports; they are temporal affairs; they offer time-related goods. The one sure fact a champion must come to know and to obey is that he or she will not be champion forever. Time will have its way and usually sooner rather than later.

It is worthy of note that, after Mackinnon (9), virtue theorists have tended to focus on a range of positive dispositions and rather neglected the negative ones. So it is in the sport philosophical literature that there is little discussion of the vices that are commonplace and the qualities they take on in sporting contexts. So in our potential evaluation of humiliators we must take into account whether we will characterize their acts as vicious, and if so, enquire as to the nature of that viciousness. To what extent do they pursue the humiliation of their opponents in ignorance or full knowledge of their actions and consequences? Are their failings mere weaknesses of will or outright wickedness?

I have little doubt that the full lists of vices display themselves in and across all ranges of sports. What is less clear, but more interesting is the extent to which
vicious acts are the product of what Taylor (18) calls "weak" and "strong evaluation". The weak evaluator is no more than a means-ends reasoner. The ends of his or her actions or desires are never problematized nor alternative visions explored. Here we have a paradigm of sports talk; winning is taken unproblematically to be the exclusive goal of professional sports. How wins are secured is only considered in terms of models of technical reason, where criteria such as efficiency and effectiveness dominate. It may well be the case that Dixon's athletes bent on achieving the widest margins fall most easily into this category. We might think the vice of hubris and the viciousness of strong humiliation-infliction are the products of the weak evaluator, one who is simply morally negligent. Where the margin of victory and defeat are not relevant, there appears little justification for the all-out pursuit of the widest margins. Though the viciousness of such athletes or coaches cannot inflict strong humiliation, we can still ask what good it achieves for the victor, the vanquished, or even the sport itself. But that is to stray beyond my stated purpose. What is the point of the comparison of the abilities? This is the question of the strong evaluator, someone who is capable of critically reflecting the quality of the relations between means and ends and indeed of the ends themselves. How we pursue our goals necessitates discussion of virtue and vice. Here, any deontological or utilitarian vocabulary insufficiency grasps the adverbial nature of ethical discourses. Having said that an aretaic vocabulary is required to capture the phenomenology of victory and defeat, a further caveat is required. How we describe and evaluate action in sport must not be reduced to an individualistic framework. The ethos of various sports' subcultures sometimes fosters viciousness as part of the everyday business-as-usual background of the activity. In particular, coaches who subject young athletes to regimes of physical and verbal abuse in order to improve performances are apt to be described by such a vocabulary. Humiliation may here be the product of a mere weak evaluator but we should reserve our deepest approbation for those who knowingly humiliate their athletes merely for economic gain, or sporting glory, or (worse) for the sustenance of their own domination of the coach-coached relation. To capture the wrongness in terms of respect may be apposite; but to dig beneath that disrespect requires a vocabulary more psychologically robust.

Of course, it is the case that virtues and vices display many formal similarities. As virtues are innervated through particular perceptions, so are vices. As virtues are habituated, so too are vices as patterns of feeling, judging, and acting. As virtues are chosen and ramified by supporting traits, so too are vices. And similarly, the catalogues of virtue and vice are heterogeneous. As Kohlberg (8: p. 9) noted pejoratively, the trouble with virtue approaches is that everyone has their own bag with preferred contents. This is precisely why he urged developmental psychologists to move to a system of rational universal principles to evaluate moral development. Only with a consistent scale could one compare developmental stages of persons in different time and place. To the extent that this is true, it would of course follow that vices varied too in scope and significance. It would be difficult to conceive of anything we might call a society these days in which certain fundamental virtues such as justice and honesty were necessary. Yet each culture, or horizon of significance as Taylor puts it, lauds and laments particular persons and personalities. Humility played no part in ancient Greek schemes of thought, nor later in Hume's writings when he derided it pejoratively as a "monkish virtue". Yet
chief among the theological vices of mediaeval Christendom was pride. Indeed Gregory the Great labeled it the root of all evil. Similar to hubris, the proud man failed to understand his limitations in the place of the pantheon of Gods and men and thereby alienated himself from both. It seems too that an understanding of status within or without a theological horizon is crucial to understanding the nature of hubris or arrogance, which is probably our closest approximation to it, as a vice. I do not take the two to be synonymous. In the absence of detailed analysis, I suggest that arrogance entails hubris, though hubris does not necessitate the haughtiness or dismissiveness that arrogance demands.

In modern professional sport no less than in the great sagas, self-knowledge and self-understanding are part and parcel of the good life. Hubris, if we can situate it in modernity, is a presumption of power in excess of one's capabilities. But I want to hold to an idea that can distinguish it from mere ignorance. The arrogant know their power, but they fail to situate it properly in the contexts that give rise to their overweening pride. A crucial component then of both humiliation and hubris is the idea of thinking rather too much of oneself. It is the direct opposite of humility, which requires an understated though reasonable estimation of one's powers and status. It need not entail the failure to give others their due in an active sense. It is too self-centered, too egoistic. One may be dismissive of others without claiming the greatness of oneself. So, though a dismissive attitude often accompanies hubris, it is not logically tied to it.

What fuels hubris in sports, and what makes those who display the vice so ripe for humiliation, is the bloated importance of big-time commercialized sports and sportspersons. Too many veils of economic interest cloud the athlete's own critical self-interrogation. Irresponsible agents and journalists promote players in the most outrageous of styles. Florid language conduces to the formation of would-be heroic reputations based on the shifting sands of falsely conceived superhuman abilities. Athletes too often live a cocooned world where critical coaches and commentators can either be ignored or dismissed in favor of others who will sing more sycophantic songs. To such athletes then, we may view weak humiliation as a corrective to their conceited self-conceptions. But even where we judge this to be a good, this does not license in any way a triumphalism on the part of those who render the corrective. Humility in victory and graciousness in defeat may be the stock-in-trade platitudes of the physical educator, but they hide a deeper import. The virtues are indeed our best traveling companions in good sporting careers no less than in good lives.

Although there is a limited place for weak humiliation, there can be no such place for its stronger counterpart. Perhaps some linguistic stipulation may help here. To be humbled may be no bad thing in the great scheme of things; but no one (except a masochist) is grateful for humiliation in the strong sense. So the humiliator who seeks pleasure in the degradation of another is simply wicked. The sooner a professional ethics of coaching emerges to outlaw the verbal torture that many athletes old and (especially) young endure, the better for us all.

How, as philosophers of sport, or reflective coaches or physical education teachers, we are to cultivate greater powers of reflection in our sports cultures is no easy matter. One philosophical challenge is to create better taxonomies of the emotionally laden virtues and vices of our sportsmen and women. Sharper distinctions can indeed help all involved in sport to mark out the ethically acceptable
from the unacceptable territories. Crucially, that will entail the analysis of concepts but in a way that is historically sensitive and socially situated. In articulating the shared roots of hubris and humiliation, we can help deliver the resources critically to initiate practitioners.

6. Hubris, Honor, and Power on Loan From the Gods

The honor societies of Greece and Scandinavia, where one was how one acted, and certain modern day sports are still rich in ethical instruction—even if we must learn the modern lessons of non-discrimination to detoxify ancient honor. How one comports oneself—the broad-chested swagger of hubris still is as vicious now as it was in the days of Agamemnon. Yet we might also ask whether our desire for modest millionaires is merely egoistic. We want sports superstars to retain touch with the herd, with a common humanity. How then are we to think of keeping such hubris in check? Is it even possible? The worst excesses of sports talk and posturing can and must be kept in check by sports institutions that are paradoxically in the position both of exploiters and guardians of sports practices and communities. What are called the external goods of sport, such as recognition, wealth, esteem, and status, are perfectly proper in sports when justly conferred. And the muscles of the institutions can indeed be flexed when badmouthing and egregious arrogance offends the best traditions of those sports. To understand the nature and sometimes positive functions of weak humiliation is in part to know the price of hubris and what makes sport the power for good it can be.

Of course, as inheritors of the Greek scheme, we are left with some of its pieces in a puzzle that just does not hang together. Phillipa Foot, long before MacIntyre and others, warned us of this. But in sports, and especially sports like boxing, the heritage is closer to that brutal time. Even if the Gods or “fate” as sources of equilibrium between hubris and humility are no longer available, we can take a lead from Weil’s recognition of the need to appropriate and rein in the power of “force” in such warrior-sports:

Thus it happens that those who have force on loan from fate count on it too much and are destroyed.

But at the time their own destruction seems impossible to them. For they do not see that the force in their possession is only a limited quantity; nor do they see their relations with other human beings as a kind of balance between unequal amounts of force. Since other people do not impose on their movements that hold, that interval of hesitation, wherein lies all our consideration for our brothers in humanity, they conclude that destiny has given complete license to them, and none at all to their inferiors. And at this point they exceed the actual measure of force that is at their disposal. Inevitably, they exceed it, since they are not aware that it is limited. And now we see them committed irrevocably to chance; suddenly things cease to obey them. Sometimes chance is kind to them, sometimes cruel. But in any case there they are, exposed, open to misfortune, gone is the armor of power that formerly protected their naked souls; nothing; no shield, stands between them and tears.

This retribution, which has a geometrical rigor, which operates automatically to penalize the abuse of power, was the mainstay of Greek thought. It is
the soul of the epic. (...) conceptions of limit, measure, equilibrium, which ought to determine the conduct of life are, in the West, restricted to the service function in the vocabulary of technics. We are only geometricians of matter; the Greeks were, first of all geometricians in their apprenticeship to virtue. (20; p. 231)

7. Conclusion

I have argued that sporting contests cannot occasion “strong humiliation”, where this is taken to mean the denial of the basis of respect as a person. I have argued, however, that something more than a mere loss of self-esteem may be effected by a sporting loss and, moreover, that this is independent of the mere margin of the loss. I have argued that structural pretension is logically tied to what has been called “weak humiliation”. In illustrating the vice of hubris, I have shown how such weak humiliation may occur. I have also highlighted the corrective role that humiliation may play for those who opt for hubris over humiliation. In sports, more than most cultural pursuits, greatness is indeed on loan temporarily from the Gods.

Bibliography


Notes

I focus in this essay predominantly on the original position of Dixon (2). Later challenges and revisions are relatively unimportant as they pertain to the notion of lop-sided defeats that are not, as I argue later, necessary to understand how weak humiliation may properly be said to be felt by sportspersons.

In earlier discussion of blowout victories and defeats, Dixon (2-4), Feezel (5), and Hardman et al. (6) appear to favor the idea of a simple continuum between a loss of self-esteem and humiliation (weak or strong). And this fails to capture the grammar of the emotion at hand, though Dixon is more dismissive of the intensity of sports' emotionality than the others. Our sense of who we are and the import we attach to projects such as sports when we are deeply committed to them has an ineradicable social dimension well captured in the phrase “practice communities”.

2See instead Bruckhardt (1: pp. 135-213) and Hatab (7: pp. 31-42).

3I have set out an extended account of values and valuing elsewhere and merely summarize here. For the full account of inherent, instrumental value and their relations, see reference 12.

4In older shame cultures the keeping of face, or of holding to the social expectations of one’s roles, is central. Yet in individualistic cultures the preservation of autonomy and integrity represent a social/moral terrain that the modernist vocabulary of universal rights is designed to promote and protect. As I have said, certain martial sports are pre-modern in certain aspects of their nature and to that degree anachronistic. This fact opens up some latitude in terms of the possibility of imposing strong humiliation on an opponent. I am reminded, however, of a recent story of a top Japanese Sumo wrestler who was involved in a motorbike accident that was publicized in the national press. So strongly did he feel that he had let down the high expectations of his sport and its code of honor (budo is the name given to the warrior ethic) that he offered to withdraw from his club. I am clear then, that much of what I write here is cradled in the history of Western civilization and that the anachronism may not be felt in Eastern or Latin cultures and the tradition-bound practices that constitute them. It might be argued that my later example of Roberto Duran’s overweening machismo and subsequent humiliation entails a certain Western hegemony. Though I try to make clear why I think this is not the case, I am aware that I am at the very least open to criticism here. I am grateful to Cesar Torres for pointing out this potential criticism to me.

5Miller is not clear here. One might assume, however, that by shame proper he means something like a pre-Socratic account of shame as a kind of virtue: a susceptibility to recognize and publicly show one’s recognition of a moral transgression. But there is little too
commend such a conceptual scheme nowadays. A battery of other concepts such as awkwardness, discomfort, compassion, regret, and so on have refined our appreciation of responses to minor wrongdoing. Making a virtue out of a response to wrongdoing would surely be to stretch any scheme too far for the modern mind.

\(^6\) I think that this is precisely the position adopted by both Dixon (2, 3) and Hardman et al. (6).

\(^7\) Who could forget Mohammad Ali’s taunting of Joe Frazier as an “uncle Tom” before their first fight? He was not alone in this regard; names of former world champions such as Naseem Hamed, Chris Eubank, Gene Tunney all trip easily off the tongue in respect of those whose mouths got the better of their manners. It is only fair to note too that Frazier was no saint. In the pre-match media banter, it was Frazier who had called Ali merely a mouthpiece for Islam. He too was made to pay for his mealy-mouthed quip. Ali was scarcely able to occupy the high ground, however, as he taunted Frazier “nigger”, while hitting him in the ensuing contest. Ali’s position was that he had no right to invoke such an assault on his integrity—though he would have done well to dwell on the nature of his own racial abuse of Frazier. Not surprisingly, there is still no love lost between the two nor their daughters who recently slogged it out in a contest better regarded for its hype than pugilistic excellence. I have used the male gender here and throughout the essay for no better reason than the boxing world is predominantly a male world even though this is not exclusively the case.

\(^8\) It cannot be incidental that boxing offers the richest contexts for this work, being so strongly masculinist. Time and space, however, do not allow comment on the important gendered aspects of the issue.

\(^9\) Again there is much work to be done on deconstructing the unusual cultural layers of presentation, but I shall not attempt it here.

\(^10\) I am grateful to Keith Thompson for a discussion on this point.

\(^11\) Stories are legion of the Russian gymnastics coach Bela Karoly who initiated and sustained regimes of terror in his gymasia and for whom the strong humiliation of his charges was part of his coaching armory. But he is only one of many targets who might be singled out. My hunch, for which there is patchy evidence, is that this pattern of domination is not uncommon in sports where children perform at an elite level.

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