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## Ethical and bioethical implications of contemporary women gymnastics

### ABSTRACT

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Author in this paper refers to ethical and bioethical issues and implications characteristic within female elite gymnastics. Female gymnastics is not the only sport, whose ethics can be called into question, but it is specific, because the female elite gymnasts are mostly under aged girls, and they are faced with both, demanding sport and pressure from parents and coaches. Contemporary athletes are often called modern gladiators. Acute injuries, chronic diseases and various psychosomatic disorders are challenges that female gymnasts are faced with regularly. Fundamental question is how did gymnastics, whose main goal was improvement of human organism condition, became a sport whose hazards exceed its benefits, at least at elite level of this sport. Author presents these hazards, associating them with main ethical theories and principles, bringing to the question the responsibility of parents and coaches, and potential lack of ethics within elite gymnastics.

**Key words:** ethics, bioethics, gymnastics, sport hazards, responsibility

Involving philosophy in sports issues in general, or in this case in contemporary women gymnastics may seem unusual at first glance. Philosophy has not had the exclusive right to ethical issues since long ago, nor ethics in general, so this involvement might not be noticeable from the title of this paper. This, at first glance unusual, connection between gymnastics and philosophy is only a bit younger than the roots of ethics in philosophical circles. Even to an amateur in philosophy is clear that in old Greece gymnastics was a component of something that would today be

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called educational curriculum. It was a widely known philosopher, perhaps because of his name, who pointed out the necessity and importance of gymnastics in a quality educational program. According to Plato<sup>1</sup> "gymnastics education is simple and appropriate..." which a contemporary sports philosopher would agree with, while the rest of the sentence would definitely provoke different reactions "especially if it serves as a preparation for a war."<sup>2</sup> A lot could be held against Plato and the age he lived in wrote his *Republic*, first of all slavery, followed by gender inequality<sup>3</sup>, to use the contemporary vocabulary. And while the contemporary world celebrates its freedoms and equalities, the honest observer might think that Plato's world and the contemporary world are much more similar than most of us would like to admit. Although similar, there are some differences, which may be best seen in the principle of balance. Apart from gymnastics, according to Plato, music and philosophy are also important for education. In considering the effects of gymnastics and music on the body and soul, Plato concludes that "these two natures must be mutually balanced by suppressing one and increasing the other in order to achieve the right balance."<sup>4</sup> Moderation may serve as a common denominator for the top virtue of the Ancient world, at least the one that is aspired to.

However, a contemporary person has been used to an unbalanced life, life of immoderation. On the example of sport or physical activity in general, this statement can be easily noticed. A contemporary relation towards a physical activity ranges from reduced physical activity, which is contributed to by long hours in front of the computer and/or TV, driving or riding, up to physical activity which brings a body to final limits of endurance, as well as the continual moving up of those limits. Is the aim of all great competition not to reach the record, break the old record, set a new record, new limit? These types of questions do not seem to be in the sphere of the ethical, however ethical arbitration is required precisely because of these issues. For example, the wish to go over the limit has motivated athletes to use harmful and illegal doping substances<sup>5</sup>, which has raised a question whether these medals or other types of rewards for the results are deserved and these have in turn resulted in

<sup>1</sup> πλάτος in old Greek means *wide*

<sup>2</sup> Platon, *Država*, BIGZ, translated by Albin Vilhar and Branko Pavlović, Beograd, 2002, p. 87 (*Rep.* 404b 7-8)

<sup>3</sup> In his *Republic* Plato considers the possibility of equality between men and women, even though at first he understands the humor in mutual exercise of older men and women (because of the usual practice of exercising without clothes), he allows for gymnastic education of women.

<sup>4</sup> Platon, *Republic* BIGZ, translated by Albin Vilhar and Branko Pavlović, Beograd, 2002, p. 96 (*Rep.* 412a 1-3)

<sup>5</sup> For more details on bioethical issues related to doping see: Murray, Thomas H., *Bioethics of Sport* (1995), rev. 2000. Schneider, Angela J. in: Post, Stephen G. (chief ed.), *Encyclopedia of Bioethics*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, MacMillan Reference Books, New York, 2003, section on doping.

debates of the meaning of the victory or competition itself, gradually entering the field of ethics.

Although the involvement of ethics in different segments of contemporary life are questioned, the necessity of this involvement becomes obvious only once it becomes too late, i.e. once the certain amount of non-ethics leaves its consequences. If we look at the aforementioned example of (mis)use of doping substances, from the point of view of a sports worker the problem has been created at the moment in which athletes discovered "the magic power" of doping substances, while from the point of view of an ethicist the problem is much deeper, in the final goal of contemporary sport. In no case does this mean that ethicists claim exclusive rights on reflections on contemporary sport or its aim, nor that sports workers<sup>6</sup> do not succeed in approaching the issue with sufficient seriousness and depth. What is in question here are different perspectives which are conditioned by the set aim. Sports workers, which include sports theoreticians, are trying to establish ethical rules and principles within already set sports aims, thus trying to solve problems within sport itself. Ethicists, and particularly bioethicists, if they deal with sports issues, actually look at the broader picture of sport, having in mind aims present outside sport, whether postulated or still requiring setting postulations.<sup>7</sup>

The fact is that the morality of contemporary sport can be doubted, and more and more frequently, it is doubted. The most noticeable sports problem is harsher and commercialization of sport in general, i.e. individual sports and athletes. Contemporary athletes are contemporary gladiators who take their bodies to the limits of endurance with the purpose of financial reward, but also glory and popularity. Naturally, the participants at ancient Olympic Games also attained glory and became honorary citizens of Greek poleis, but the meaning of that different in comparison to contemporary athletes. Ancient athletes were personifications of a typically Greek principle, the principle of measure, body-mind balance, and today's sport is the example of misbalance. For example, some of the highest quality athletes are often uneducated or lacking certain mental and emotional stability and one might ask if these instabilities are the consequence of the great stress their sports bring them. The best athletes are frequently best paid persons in the world, millions are spent on

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<sup>6</sup> For the lack of better term we use the term "sports workers" as a common name for athletes, coaches, referees, sports physicians, and even sports theoreticians. The purpose is not excluding of individuals based on their education, but pointing out the specific elements of sports workers' perspectives. This does not mean that athletes, coaches or sports physicians cannot be ethical and/or ethicists, on the contrary! Morality or immorality is the biggest problem precisely for the sports experts and at the same time the best (bio)ethicists are sports experts because they understand the needs and problems within sport. However, unethical sports workers contribute the most to the immorality of sport, directly or indirectly (by allowing involvement of external factors in sport)

<sup>7</sup> In that sense, a sports worker who is at the same time a bioethicist necessarily has to exit the frame of sport and look at the problem from different perspective.

transfers in football, Olympic Games participants frequently calculate with their results because every record brings them profit. On the other hand, elite athletes subject their bodies to demanding trainings and intake of illegal and, what is even more important, harmful substances in their bodies with the purpose of achieving the best possible results. And in the end, when the glory days of sports gladiatorship pass, a great number of them face serious illnesses, empty bank accounts and frequently, hopelessness.

Contemporary women gymnastic belong to a family of contemporary Olympic sport, and although it is a bit exposed and less popular than football, basketball or tennis, it is not more protected from misuse. Because of its specific components, gymnastics is accompanied by more questions and ethical implications than other more popular sports. Throughout history it has undergone various modifications, from acrobatics in ancient Egypt, some sort of rhythmic in ancient China and India to the general culture of body, which is best known to us, in ancient Greece, over Spartan and Roman soldier training to the roots of contemporary gymnastics of 19<sup>th</sup> century German and Prussian origin. Nowadays, equally men and women do gymnastics and it lends it elements to many contemporary sports and recreational disciplines. Gymnastics discussed here is professional (elite) women gymnastics.

In ancient Greece within *gymnasium* gymnastics was only one of the elements of general education which equally respected the improvement of both mind and body. However, a contemporary sport which is called gymnastics, has opted only for the physical aspect of a human being, i.e. improvement of physical state. The ideal time for taking up gymnastics is between the ages of five and seven, and sometimes training start as early as at the age of three. Naturally, there is no set starting point for taking up physical activities because we are physically active from the moment we are born, and even prior to that, considering the fact that we are physical, but there is a great difference between a physical activity and active engagement in a sport. This difference increases with the level of professionalism in doing sport. In countries whose national teams are at the top of world gymnastics (mostly USA, China and Russia) there are national and private camps and school which recruit children between the ages of five and seven and prepare them for international competitions. In the beginning, these children begin with some basic physical exercises and in the age of nine or ten they train strenuously for almost eight hours per day. In addition to this, these children receive basic education, usually in specialized schools which are adapted to strenuous trainings and all this leaves them with little time for activities necessary at this age, such as play and socializing with peers. This type of life negatively affects the emotional development of these children, who start to suffer from anxiety and sometimes more difficult mental disorders and illnesses.

Trainings consist of several levels of exercise with the purpose of building up total strength and endurance on the one hand, and channeling of this strength and endurance into concrete gymnastics exercises and movements<sup>8</sup>, and consequences of these training can do more harm than good. Still insufficiently developed children are subjected to strenuous physical activities, which can sometimes lead to irreversible damages to skeletal and muscle tissue, irregular development and difficult gymnastics exercises can sometimes end in the damages of smaller or greater intensity, which may include sprains, bone fractures but also more serious damages of vertebra, head, etc.

This involves underage children who cannot legally decide nor have sufficiently developed self-consciousness to make decisions about themselves and their practice, the responsibility is with parents/guardians and coaches. However, parents/guardians and coaches sometimes have wrong motives, they do not take into account the basic postulation, which is child's benefit. Instead, they are motivated by glory and other types of benefit for which children are paying with their bodies and mind, not immediately, but subsequently, but that time it is too late.

Naturally, all national and international associations and committees are responsible for ensuring this sport's ethics, especially with regards to women gymnastics, but it seems that ethical codices are some sort of a compromise, which deals with less important or less ethically questionable implications of this sport, ignoring the key problems. Punishments for the lack of ethics do exist, but it usually takes years for some cases to come out in the open. Minimum age limits for competing have been set in order to, we suppose, protect children rights so the cases which reach the public are those related to breach of those rules, i.e. marginal<sup>9</sup> rules, and those more significant ones are rarely mentioned. The public more frequently finds out about problems related to elite gymnasts so dozens and hundreds of girls who want to become elite competitors suffer different aspects of mental and physical pain far from the public eye.

At the beginning of the 1990s two Olympic gymnasts of American origins lost their lives precisely because of gymnastics. Christy Henrich died from anorexia nervosa,

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<sup>8</sup> Gymnastics exercises include "moves" on the beam up to 1,25m high, doing vaults and other events on the parallel bars at the height of up to 2.5m, performing gymnastics choreography on the floor(12x12m) and jumping over the pommel horse. Floor exercises can be done with the help of props (ball, ribbon, etc.). Routine on the beam includes various specific gymnastic moves, among other somersaults. Exercises on beams are similar to those on the floor. Although the exercises seem gracious and easily performed, they are the result of hard work and one wrong step may have very serious consequences for the gymnast.

<sup>9</sup> When the sport that the child is engaged in directly or indirectly endangers her health, it is marginal whether she will enter the competition at the age of 15,5 or 16 because the child has been preparing since the age of ten.

while Julissa Gomez died from back injuries after falling off the gymnastics apparatus<sup>10</sup>. Unfortunately it took two cases like these to pose certain questions within professional circle and in public. Eating disorders are frequent in young women gymnasts and they are the consequence of inadequate treatment by coaches. Coaches require athletes' body mass level to be on the verge of undernourishment the girls, still children, wishing to achieve the best possible results (i.e. to meet the requirements of their parents/guardians and a coach and indirectly buy their love) go to extremes, risking their lives. When anorexia is noticed, it is already too late if children manage to overcome this psycho-somatic illness, the consequences are permanent for both body and mind.

Professional competitions are extremely stressful for athletes, i.e. for underage girls gymnasts who are just becoming aware of their physicality and personality in general. This is why the age limit for competition is sixteen at the Olympic level, but the girls begin training up to five or six years prior to that and they are faced with the question if they will succeed in reaching the Olympic level, and if they do reach it, will they win. Can the psyche of an eleven years old girl deal with the pressure it is faced with. On the other hand, once they end their professional careers, in their twenties, they face identity problems, considering they skipped all important phases of growing up. Apart from the medals in memory of gymnastics, they usually have different types of arthritis, ossification, sometimes reproductive organs fail to develop properly due to strenuous trainings, inadequate diet and stress. Once their peers' lives begin, gymnasts face difficult life challenges. One of the most defeating facts is the one that some women gymnasts' skeletons look more like skeletons of seventy years old women. It is difficult to suggest that sports physicians take care of these young gymnasts manage to overlook these dangers. Although predictable, it is not easy to avoid the dangers. We assume that physicians are faced with the dilemma of treating a patient as a person and patient and as an athlete because what is best for a patient as an athlete is not in the given moment best for a patient as person.<sup>11</sup> A particular problem in women gymnastics is the fact that patients are underage and the decision is made by parents/guardians, usually following the coach's advice, damaging the child in the long run.

Naturally, it cannot be claimed that every professional gymnast will have problems with some of the psycho-somatic disorders. And it cannot be claimed that female gymnastics is a sport without any benefits. But it is important to point out some of

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<sup>10</sup> Group of authors, "Physical and Emotional Problems of Elite Female Gymnasts" in: *The New England Journal of Medicine*, July 25, 1996, Retrieved from: <http://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJM199607253350412>

<sup>11</sup> More on the doctor-patient relationship: Brkljačić, Morana, "Etika i sport", in: *Medicina Fluminensis*, Vol. 43. No. 3, 2007, HLZ, Rijeka, 2007, pp. 231-232

the problems and question the ethics of this sport on a professional level. It is evident that candidates for professional gymnasts are underage girls who are incapable of anticipating potential dangers and benefits and decide if the professional gymnastics career is good or bad to aim at. So the responsibility is on parents/guardians and coaches but also the entire nations whose representative these girls are. If we are globally sensitive to children rights and their protection, why does this sensitivity disappear when talking about gymnasts or athletes? Cited examples may be valid for any sport and do not have to necessarily apply to women gymnastics. From the ethical aspect, all of us who are responsible for somebody else are responsible to ensure the best possible life for that being. If a parent/guardian/coach prevents a child from living the best possible life, should not that action be judged or at least questioned? On the other hand, it is not the responsibility only of a parent/guardian/coach. It is the responsibility of us all who accept the contemporary sport as we know it.

Although at the beginning of this paper, the involvement of ethics and bioethics in sports women gymnastics might have seemed strange, *lives* of professional young gymnasts that are lost or disturbed in the name of this sport, to implicate ethical questions. The only strange element is that when talking about one sport one can talk about its tendency to decrease the quality of life, or in extreme cases completely eliminate its quality.

The usual opinion is to view sport as an activity which brings well-being to a complete psycho-physical condition of a human being, contributes to his or her socialization and better life in a community. However, these views can make sense only when sport is regarded as recreation, while professional sport does not contribute to a better life. There is almost no difference between the career of a manager in a large corporation and the average professional athlete. Deadlines must be met, results must be reached, the price of humanity has a long time ago been surpassed, and the compensation for the effort is most frequently financial. Naturally, there is a small amount of sports that are different and that is because they are "unpopular". The greater the popularity, the greater the commerciality. The commerciality contributes to bigger profits but it requires almost Spartan discipline and gladiator endurance of well-paid and popular athletes.

Can women professional gymnastics from the point of view of ethical theories<sup>12</sup> be characterized as an ethical sport is a question that imposes itself, but it is a difficult question to answer. It might seem ridiculous that teonomical deontologist discuss the ethics of professional women gymnastics, but nevertheless, this discussion would not

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<sup>12</sup> Classical ethical theories include those most frequently referred to as referential for the reflections of bioethical problems: deontological teonomical ethics, deontological autonomous ethics and consequential ethics theories.

be inclined toward the existence of this sport as we know it. The idea that the competition in physical might determine somebody's personality value should be rejected and judged if we look at it from a dogmatic aspect of classical religious systems. According to teonomical deontologists only God can determine human value and in that case, at least professionally, sport should be rejected as an *ides* since its aim to determine the value and ranking of individual athletes, sports and national teams. Gymnastics, if it would even be allowed since it presupposes the cult of the body, which is generally problematic in most religions, might be allowed as some sort of a competition with oneself, and whose aim should be strengthening of spirit, which would lead to closeness with God, as is the case with yoga in Eastern religious.

On the other hand, taking into consideration the loosely understood ethical theory by Jonas, who renames Kant's classical ethics of obligation into the ethics of responsibility, the question that might be asked is: who is responsible for ensuring ethics of this sport and what does that ethics consist of? On the one hand the responsibility is put on parents/guardians, as well as those responsible for the quality of children's lives in general, and on the other hand on coaches (and other sports workers: physicians, advisors, selectors, etc.) and the society in general. They are, or at least should be, responsible for the segment of these girls' lives related to gymnastics. In that sense, the responsibility is divided between these two sides. Legally, parents/guardians are officially responsible for the well-being of these children, it depends on the communication between sports workers and parents, as well as some ethical bodies responsible for the well-being of children. The correct parental decision depends on their competence, and their competence depend on the information they are given so it can be said that the responsibility is on the side of sports workers, sports societies and organizations and a society in general, which acts as if it has double standards because on the one hand it prohibits child labor, and on the other hand it allows those children to be professionally involved in sport.

Some of the examples show that professional gymnastics can be up to a certain degree dangerous. Parents/guardians should be responsible for informing themselves about these dangers. On the other hand health workers (physicians and psychologists) should provide as much information as possible about the potential dangers this sport has. The relation of danger and benefit is a subject of consequential (lat. *consequentia* – consequence) theory. These theories, the most famous among them being the theory of utilitarianism (lat. *utilus* – useful), are based on the foundation in which the value of the consequence of a certain moral action is established on the basis of the consequence such a value has, i.e. when we talk about utilitarianism, the value of action is established by the principle of usefulness. J. S. Mill states in his work *Utilitarianism*: "The creed which accepts as the foundation of morals, Utility,

or the Greatest-Happiness Principle, holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness."<sup>13</sup> To which extent does professional gymnastics contribute to the improvement of personal or general happiness is difficult to estimate, but it can be pointed out that to a particular extent contemporary women gymnastics produces the reverse of happiness. In that sense, at least when it comes to professional gymnastics, it is ethically questionable and somewhat unethical. It seems that in the process of professionalization, gymnastics lost all those psycho-physical benefits which it still, luckily, has at the amateur level.

Bioethical problems that we mentioned in contemporary women gymnastics can only point to deeper and more hidden problems of contemporary sport and world in general. It is necessary to completely revise the place of contemporary sport from global cultural aspects. But it seems that altering the existing state of sport is a utopian idea because the revision of the relation towards sport would require the revision of the entire world economical and cultural systems, as well as the system of values.

From today's perspective, it is impossible to decommercialize any contemporary sport. What is even less possible, and seems necessary, is the abolition of the concept of sports competition.

The particular problem in the ethics of sport in general is the lack of common denominator, or at least some type of unique base from which all ethical implications would derive. Although in the past years there has been a noticeable improvement in global view of sport in general and ethics within individual sports and sports situations, the question that still requires the answer is: What is the true aim of contemporary sport? When we stop referring to what is on paper (ethical codices of all larger sports organizations and institutions) and look at the situation honestly, we will be a step closer towards the solution.

Until we are trying to hide the unethical elements within sport by engaging athletes, sports teams, national teams, institutions, organizations for achieving "higher" ethical goals (world peace, equality, food for the hungry, etc.), i.e. solving global problems, we will be far from the solution. It would be too harsh, and in any case untruthful, to say that sport as such contributes to global problems, but no matter how defeating it may sound, it is true that sport is a part of those global problems. And the solution, it seems, is not in our change of the view of sport, but the change of understanding the world and the view of the world. If we change the relation toward the world for the better, we will change the sport itself for the better.

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<sup>13</sup> Mil, Dž. S., *Utilitarizam*, Dereta, Beograd, 2003, p. 33.

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