

Catharsis in the biodromal perspective and with focus on sports and outdoor activities

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ABSTRACT

*Background: The old concept of catharsis (purification, purgation) is known from Aristotle, who saw in it both *raison d'être* of arts, especially of theatre and music, and the special benefit for spectators. Yet our inspiration is also taken from Plato and his dialogue *Sophist*, where catharsis is used against diseases, deformity, vices and ignorance. Modern inspiration is sought in reality of today sports and outdoor activities.*

Objectives: Search for manifestation of catharsis in the field of sports and outdoor activities.

Determine the place of catharsis in the lives of individuals and societies, using an interdisciplinary approach. Specify the type of movement, demonstrated in catharsis.

Methods: Phenomenological approach, analyzing concrete manifestations of catharsis, especially in the field of emotions, morality, medicine and sports practise, helps us to find an invariant of catharsis. The philosophical synthesis needs also to use hermeneutics.

*Results: A specific emotional “transformer”, for which was created a neologism *metapatheia*, forming complement to the established concept of *metanoia*, is seen in catharsis. Today sport, especially its outdoor form, can play specific role of trigger for catharsis. The specific existential movement showing itself within catharsis can enrich the concept of three movements of existence according to the Czech philosopher Jan Patočka.*

*Conclusions: Catharsis ought to be understood not only as an instrument for reduction of tensions of different type, but has potential to play an important bio-hygienic role in our lives and be part of *Ars Vitae*.*

KEY WORDS

catharsis, existential movement, outdoor activities, philosophy of sport, psychology of sport

SOUHRN

*Východisko: Starověký pojem katarze (očistění, očista) je znám díky Aristotelovi, který v ní spatřoval jak *raison d'être* umění, zejména divadla a hudby, tak i speciální benefit pro diváky. Inspirovali jsme se však také Platónem a jeho dialogem *Sofisté*, kde katarze funguje jako prostředek proti nemocem, deformacím, nečinnostem a ignoranci. Moderní inspirací je pak realita současného sportu a outdoorových aktivit.*

Cíle: Hledat projevy katarze v oblasti sportu a outdoorových aktivit. Vymezit pomocí interdisciplinárního přístupu místo katarze v individuálním i společenském životě. Specifikovat typ pohybu, který se v katarzi projevuje.

Metody: Fenomenologickou analýzou konkrétních manifestací katarze, zejména ve sféře emocí, morálky, medicíny a sportovní praxe, hledáme její invariant. Filosofická syntéza využívá posléze i metodu hermeneutickou.

*Výsledky: V katarzi shledáváme specifický emoční “transformátor”, pro který jsme vytvořili neologismus *metapatheia*, komplementární s již etablovaným pojmem *metanoia*. Dnešní sport, zejména ve své outdoorové podobě, zde sehrává roli katarzního spouštěče. Katarzi se vyjevuje specifický existenciální pohyb, který může obohatit koncept tří pohybů existence českého filosofa Jana Patočky.*

*Závěry: Katarze by neměla být chápána jen jako redukce tenzí různého typu – má potenciál sehrát v našich životech důležitou biohygienickou roli a stát se součástí *Ars Vitae*.*

KLÍČOVÁ SLOVA

katarze, existenciální pohyb, outdoorové aktivity, filosofie sportu, psychologie sportu

INTRODUCTION

“Tragedy is a representation of a serious, complete action ... accomplishing by means of pity and terror the catharsis of (such) emotions.” This is the famous sentence from Aristotle’s “Poetics” (VI 1449b), associated usually with *catharsis*. *Katharmoi* (agents) are *eleos* (also compassion or grief) and *fobos* (also fear or thrill) in original Greek language here.

Other *katharmos* acts within music: *enthusiasmos* (see Aristotle’s “Politics”, VIII 1340a). These Aristotle’s findings are subject of many discussions up to now – especially for art historians and aestheticians. An emotional and ethical aspects will be a matter of interest for us as well.

Yet even earlier on in Plato’s “Sophist” remarkable thoughts concerning catharsis were expressed: “There is the purification /*katharsis*/ of living bodies ... effected by medicine and gymnastics ... and of souls ... effected by chastisement and education.” (227a). To put it briefly: medicine against diseases, gymnastics against deformity, chastisement against vices and education against ignorance. A lot of inspiration for carers of soul and body!

Our paper is an attempt to find modern parallel to these old concepts and determine the role of catharsis in the lives of human beings. Because our main interest directs to sports practise, we will search a special context of it in each analyzed manifestation of catharsis.

Methods

Phenomenological method proves to be the most advantageous instrument for formulation such an enigmatic concept like catharsis. Firstly we shall follow manifestation of the cathartic phenomena in emotional sphere, later in ethical and bio-medical areas. Of course, other areas (especially artistic, pedagogical and religious) could be added, yet our selection is influenced with our focusing on sports practice, forming horizons of our reflections.

Because the effect of catharsis observed in the structure of human personality is mediated primarily by the emotions, this area is more extensively analysed. To find the opposite and the closest emotion ought to help to determine the notion of *catharsis* more precisely.

The final philosophical synthesis needs to use some instruments of hermeneutic method, especially deeper interpretation of partial findings and their continuous getting to compare with the whole of human being.

Emotional manifestation of catharsis

There are two possible explanation of cathartic effect here:

- A. (*negative*) emotions are evoked to be discharged;
- B. emotions are cleaned out → refined.

Transformation of emotions is the result in both cases – it can be expressed with neologism META-PATHEIA, forming complement to the established concept of *metanoia*. Transformation of knowledge is strengthened with transformation of emotions in optimal case.

Catharsis itself can be recognized as a specific emotion with a role to appeal to the other emotions. Does some other emotion play the same or similar role? Using Paul Ekman’s taxonomy of positive (“enjoyable”) emotions (see Ekman, 2007, 190-212), we can find *elevation* (beside 10 others). It seems to be the closest to catharsis – according to determination of the author of this term, Jonathan Haidt, “elevation is elicited by acts of virtue or moral beauty; it causes warm, open feelings in the chest; and it motivates people to behave more virtuously themselves. (Haidt, 2003, 276). Although there is a potential to transform emotions in both cases, differences are more numerous: elevation opens people up and turn their attention outwards, towards other people, therefore its effect is altruistic, the effect of *catharsis* is above all cleansing and secondary working within the area of own personality; affective phenomenology (what it feels like) can be described as a feeling of elevated sentiments and/or a feeling of moral improvement in the case of elevation, while less pleasant (if not unpleasant) feelings are joined with *catharsis*. (See especially Plato’s types of catharsis, or situations within a tragedy according to Aristotle. Only when *enthusiasmos* is a mediator between trigger and catharsis, the scene is similar to elevation.)

To find an opposite emotion to *catharsis* will be useful for more accurate determination as well. It ought to be situated at the purity – pollution axis. If *catharsis* leads (in an optimal case) to purity, our sought emotion ought to cause a certain type of pollution. A pollution of a human being as a whole, or of its parts (body, mind, soul, “heart”, memory, ...). We assume anxiety is the emotion with named impacts. Anxiety of our everydayness, not biodynamic anxiety of our existence joined with a phenomenon of death. Anxiety as a subject of psychologists, not of philosophers (see especially analyzes of Kierkegaard and Heidegger). While *catharsis* is

a process of getting to cleanse, anxiety of getting to fill up. A short feeling of fear or surprise is changed with a relief within catharsis; emotion of anxiety is burdensome. Catharsis opens the door for possible restart of life; anxiety closes it and is joined very often with a feeling of hopelessness. We could continue in getting to find further opposite processes and/or states.

The area of sports so far has considered especially cases sub A – discharging of emotions is expected within spectators as a result of sport competitions; it is usually spoken about „reduction of psychic tension“. The most quoted author here is Gordon Allport (1954 and later), though father of this concept is Sigmund Freud.

Yet one condition has to be fulfilled: high-quality of the performance with power to trigger catharsis. A parallel experience was described within art – especially theatre one (see e. g. Wilson, 1988). Yet the critical point of catharsis lies in situations of “bad” performance/competition (repeated fouls of players, hostile atmosphere etc.): emotions (especially in the form of pent-up frustration) are not discharged but transformed into aggression, not into catharsis. There are hundreds studies concerning this topic with social impacts – let us name only synthetic one from Gordon W. Russell (Russell, 2008).

Reduction of physical tension can be added to psychic one in the case of athletes as a result of training – cathartic effect of this type is generally accepted within sports.

Yet we ought to think through also the effect of B in the cases of long distance athletes of all types (especially their states of heavy exhaustion with decline of form/shape, or when experiencing so called exceptional human experiences) – the most often runners are mentioned here.

Defeat/loss is more cathartic here than victory/win or states of flow because it leads to emptiness, which represents ultimate border of a specific cathartic movement. Athletes speak often they hit rock bottom. We can consider deep(er) catharsis in these situations.

All situations mentioned above can be experienced in the course of outdoor activities (not necessarily within sports) as well. Struggle with own body, mind and will is combined with influence of natural surrounds here. We can regard natural phenomena as another trigger of catharsis.

Ethical manifestation of catharsis

Ethical consequences of catharsis lead to the forming of virtues. Observing six core virtues which have crystallized across the millennia and across cultures, we can find minimally three of them as a result of an optimal process of catharsis: wisdom/knowledge, love/humanity and (openness for) spirituality and transcendence. American psychologist Martin Seligman named – after comparison of many „catalogues of virtues“ – courage, justice and temperance as well beside our selection (Seligman, 2004, 269).

Catharsis ought to be practised in cooperation with selfreflection – both with wider impact on level of our knowledge, morality and quality of life. It is in the line of Patočka’s thought that permanent (self) reflection is also purification of fundamental relations to the world and to others (see e. g. Crowell, 2011, esp. 9-14).

Yet positive ethical effect needs strong *katharmos* – e.g. examples of sacrifice or heroism, but also of betrayal, cowardice or injustice; influential acts of (un)fair play in sports etc. – and activity of our purified mind in the next step. We would like to underline the last claim: an old wisdom talks about *horror vacui* in our mind as well and necessity to fill in an empty space. See e.g. a short story about return of an “unclean spirit” in Luke 11:24-26.

Especially mountain climbing gives us a lot of examples where mentioned stages of catharsis are manifested. Only one illustration here: the well-known story from the Siula Grande (the Peruvian Andes) with two main character, Joe Simpson (“the one who survived in hopeless situation”) and Simon Yates (“the one who cut the rope”). Emptiness is well demonstrated in the title of Simpson’s bestseller: “Touching the Void” (Czech translation „Setkání se smrtí“ has death as keyword here, yet void or emptiness is more accurate – minimally considering catharsis. Maybe we could speak even about touch the nothingness in the context of Simpson’s fight for life.) and Joe had felt its power during his unbelievable descent/fall from the mountain. The whole situation was described and analyzed from ethical point of view in JOA in 2012 (see Hurych, 2012, 131-133).

Simon Yates expressed feelings of emptiness as well: “I was alive, and for the moment that was all I could think about. Where Joe was, or whether he was alive, didn’t concern me in the long silence after the cutting. ... There was no guilt, not even sorrow. I felt haunted by emptiness.” (Simpson, 1997, 103-104).

Simon's *catharsis* was long process and Joe was undoubtedly right, writing that Simon "ruminated questions of conscience that might have remained a decade or so after the event." (Simpson, 1997, 203). He had to face numerous heated debates about the ethics of his decision and harsh or unfair criticism in subsequent years. According to his book "Against the Wall" (1997), he came to persuasion that his conscience is clear. Maybe more important is that the same persuasion had Joe Simpson (see Simpson, 1997, 203).

Because the whole case has more facets and open questions, let us conclude in general level: purification of conscience is the optimal result of ethical catharsis.

Catharsis has potential to influence wider communities as well – we can even speak about catharsis of mankind, or of nations. Catharsis is usually a consequence of some disasters (catharsis of almost global population after world wars, or of national population after some big natural calamities etc.). Sometimes catharsis isn't fully put into practice – the area of sports still waits for catharsis after doping scandals; IOC didn't use the potential of Kumaritašvili's death just before the Winter Olympic Games in Vancouver 2010 etc.

A bit different type of catharsis emerges in situations when *enthusiasm* is *katharmos*: good example can be a collective sharing of sports spectators, leading through catharsis even to "ritual happiness" in some rare situations (see parallel with dance at Crease, 2002, 119).

Bio-medical manifestation of catharsis

Psychosomatic healing effect of catharsis is generally accepted.

Its somatic mechanism can be described in brief like this:

first of all homeostasis is disturbed → tears, sweat, increased pulse, pilomotoric reaction etc → "drainage" for toxins → relief through somatic cleansing → re-integration.

Speaking about psychic point of view, we have underlined the role of emotions (see above). In the case of deeper intervention and optimal conditions *catharsis* can proceed as follows: excitement of fixed mental templates → "rejuvenation" of our ability to react to new situations → impulse for creativity of different type.

Catharsis and its natural bodily anchoring is the opportunity to look for relevant physical forms. Proper exercise using cathartic elements (unwittingly or wittingly) shows power to harmonize

the whole of human being. Steiner's eurythmy can be named as example of the former one, therapy „Kinesiology - One Brain“, or special cathartic exercise represents the latter one. Authors of the monograph "Hledání katarze" [Searching for Catharsis] put together simple exercise of 12 steps, where struggle with a gravity is in the beginning, following with a central cathartic figure, its opposite figure in the form of shrinking to vanishing point and finishing with balanced quiet position (Bednář, & Bednářová, 2013, 90-92). The cathartic figure is near the position of the "Vitruvian Man" – only a head is bending back.

Results, or philosophical synthesis

What is common denominator for all analysed forms of catharsis? A specific movement and its emotional influencing.

Catharsis can be seen as the life countermotion (*enantiodromia*) acting against the prevailing forward trajectory of life. Similarity to the basic existential movements according to Patočka suggests itself here. The Czech philosopher determined them as 1. SELF-ANCHORING; 2. SELF-PROLONGATION; 3. SELF-ACHIEVEMENT

(Patočka, 1998) . Interpretations in English e.g. Crowell (2011) and Bednář (2006) & Martínková (2006) within sports practise.

We think his triangle of movements could and ought to be enriched with phases of

4. SELF-PURIFICATION.

Phases (plural!) of self-purification are helpful before new anchoring/rooting, especially in critical points of our life, when a ground for different life period has to be prepared; they are necessary within the second movement (named also movement of work from Patočka), where play the role of relief from the burden of everyday existence and centre stage can take in the third movement, when everydayness is transcended.

Patočka wakes us up to possible misunderstanding: these three movements cannot be seen in some time succession – they are "polyphony of three voices" (Patočka, 1998). Our cathartic movement fits fully to this intention and adds another "voice".

Yet catharsis has potential to catapult the cleansed persons to meaningful aims. It plays the role of emotional transformer (*metapatheia*) – in cooperation with *metanoia*, the transformer of our knowledge and meaning (see *noein!*) – both together can lead to personal transformation and form the specific "art of self-turning". We are also persuaded that catharsis is the important part of all stages of

Maslow's pyramid of needs including self-actualization.

We mean that the main - cleansing - effect represents only one face of catharsis and ought to be completed with filling stage. The cleansed scope "calls" for positive repletion. We arrived at the conclusion that catharsis must be seen in its complexity.

OPEN DISCUSSION IN CONCLUSION

• "With age we accumulate an increasing number of cognitive templates. Consequently, a growing number of future cognitive challenges is ... covered by a pre-existing template, or will require only a slight modification of a previously formed mental template (Goldberg, 2005, 20). We can see that these fixed templates play an important role especially during old age; catharsis can be questionable in this period of life when creative power is lower and purification can lead to disorientation.

• The model of radical catharsis could be discussed as well, where the purification aims for "emptying" (*kenosis*). It can be the opportunity for decisions or even life restart leading to perfection/excellence (*arete*) or even up to "fullness" (*pleroma*). In more concrete form we can speak about axe between "emptiness of life" and "meaning of life". Daniel Campos tries to solve this topic even in the field of football (Campos, 2010).

• We wrote that reduction of both physical and psychic tension (cathartic effect) in the case of athletes

as a result of physical activities is generally accepted within sports. Yet maybe it is too optimistic?! Wider society voices speak about higher within athletes and the media often present negative acts of athletes. Is the arena of sports source of aggression, or a school how to subdue it? Are athletes more aggressive than majority of population? Research at the Canadian universities comparing level of hostile aggressiveness of athletes and non-athletes ended in a "draw": no difference was proved (Lemieux, McKelvie & Stout, 2002). Yet is not university environment a special one? Question, if sport is accelerator or inhibitor of aggressiveness, is still opened.

• The old "biodromal project" *care of soul* can be and ought to be completed with *care of memory*: hint comes from a "work" of the body rebuilding itself in sleep and especially from the healing and cleansing function of brain during sleep with a positive effect on memory (see Xie et al., 2013). Our task is to purify memory intentionally and continuously with target to reach negentropy when things become more in order. We mean it is just necessity in the age of information explosion with attack of both useful and weedy information.

• Our lives can be seen as a pendulum between catharsis and anxiety. Process of getting to fill up with undesirable contents ought to be replaced with process of getting to remove from them. A proper timing of catharsis is the part of *Ars Vitae* and just the bio-hygienic necessity.

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