

2016

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Recommended Citation

Pawlucki A. Natural law and acts of extreme climbers – agonists of the mountain stadium. *Balt J Health Phys Act.* 2016; 8: 66-79. doi: 10.29359/BJHPA.08.1.08

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Natural law and acts of extreme climbers - agonists of the mountain stadium*

Authors' Contribution:

- A Study Design
- B Data Collection
- C Statistical Analysis
- D Data Interpretation
- E Manuscript Preparation
- F Literature Search
- G Funds Collection

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* The primary version of an essay was published in Polish in the periodical "Rozprawy Naukowe AWF we Wrocławiu" 2015, 48, 4-16, by University School of Physical Education in Wrocław, Poland. The re-print approved by the primary publisher.

abstract

The paper gives moral evaluation of feats done by extreme athletes who participate voluntarily in life-threatening stunts or races. The evaluation of the rightness of such extreme feats was based on the first principles of natural law. The law of nature obliges everybody to preserve their lives and forbids acts against one's own life (do not kill yourself). Extreme athletes differ from others in terms of the attitude to the ontological structure of existence: from negation and mockery of life in the case of nihilists to a praise of life in the case of athletes and goes even further in the case of Olympic athletes who embrace the pro-life civilization through their participation in the peace utopia. In this paper, the author justified the sporting premise for mountaineers to do extreme climbing. In the conclusion, the author admits that extreme feats of mountaineers is justified because these athletes, like Olympic ones, follow sports ethics and at the same time the moral value of existence. Although they consciously risk their lives, when they actually face death they do not give up and fight heroically to survive. This attitude is sufficient to evaluate the mountaineer's performance which is on the verge of death as morally right.

Key words natural law, morality, extreme sport, Himalayan mountaineering

article details

Article statistics

Word count: 7,097; **Tables:** 0; **Figures:** 0; **References:** 0

Received: December 2015; **Accepted:** December 2015; **Published:** March 2016

Full-text PDF:

<http://www.balticsportscience.com>

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Indexation:

AGRO, Celdes, CNKI Scholar (China National Knowledge Infrastructure), CNPIEC, De Gruyter - IBR (International Bibliography of Reviews of Scholarly Literature in the Humanities and Social Sciences), De Gruyter - IBZ (International Bibliography of Periodical Literature in the Humanities and Social Sciences), DOAJ, EBSCO - Central & Eastern European Academic Source, EBSCO - SPORTDiscus, EBSCO Discovery Service, Google Scholar, Index Copernicus, J-Gate, Naviga (Softweco, Primo Central (ExLibris), ProQuest - Family Health, ProQuest - Health & Medical Complete, ProQuest - Illustrata: Health Sciences, ProQuest - Nursing & Allied Health Source, Summon (Serials Solutions/ProQuest, TDOne (TDNet), Ulrich's Periodicals Directory/ulrichsweb, WorldCat (OCLC)

Funding:

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Conflict of interest:

Author has declared that no competing interest exists.

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INTRODUCTION

Every competition is an extreme activity. Whether it is a competition against oneself or others, it always leads to the agonist's self-fulfillment in the aura of victory and usually becomes a reason for all the consecutive competitions until the last one foreboding the agonist's *social death*. A competitor always tries to get ahead of others. To be successful, competitors must not only maximize their efforts but also exploit all of their resources until their near depletion, i.e. they must make their acts *extreme*. Thus all competitions are extreme in an absolute sense. Regardless of who competes and what the competition is about, a *competitor* accepting a challenge will do everything because he has to. A competitor cannot give less, because he will never attain the good he so profoundly covets: victory over other competitors and oneself, or victory over oneself only in a lonely *agon*. In this sense, each kind of competition is an act which externalizes the competitor's substantive (but not only physical) capabilities to the extreme.

All competitions are therefore potentially lethal as they force competitors to maximize their acts unconditionally. There are even competitions during which competitors squander all of their resources with premeditation – or in their extreme self-exploitation – become willingly, entirely committed to victory. To win in such competitions one decides to annihilate oneself, like that swimmer at the Olympic Games in Mexico, who announced he would commit suicide had he lost the race. He had announced it and, indeed, “entered” this “life and death” competition, i.e. became part of the *agon* versus himself. He failed to understand that he acted in an absurd manner. He did not realize that one never competes for fame for the price of life, since it is preposterous. One may lay down one's life for somebody else as a token of love, and this would be right or even righteous, but never for abstract concepts such as fame because it would be wrong or even morally evil. All competitions are extreme, but some – if one may say so – are absurdly extreme. There is no greater idiocy than putting one's life at stake for the sake of victory, for dying for fame. But there is also no greater unfairness than willingly and self-actively exposing oneself to death out of contempt for life (nihilistic), out of the need to experience extreme carnal sensations (hedonistic, e.g. extreme tourists), or out of the need to experience some surreal illusion (narcotic).

Why is it wrong? One may say *I am free, and what is wrong to some may be good to me*. The answer lies in natural law. It originates in natural law but fails to reach all because not everyone is destined to know it. Although every agonist is potentially reasonable, not all agonists can independently assess, using their own cognitive powers, the rightness of their acts. Since ancient times every sage has known that only those who think in philosophical terms are able to get to know the truths of natural law. Natural law includes conclusions of deductive reasoning, whose results are commandments leading to the knowledge of the rightness of acts. Agonists who are unable to use their reason to judge their own acts – who have desired to see those things but have not seen them and to hear those things but have not heard them¹ – must resort only to man-made law.

¹ “For I tell you that many prophets and kings have desired to see those things which ye see, and have not seen them; and to hear those things which ye hear, and have not heard them”; in:// Luke 10:24, New Testament, King James Bible.

The present study attempts to make a moral evaluation of extreme performances of mountain climbers in view of natural law ethics. Natural law is understood here as the reason's capability of distinguishing between good and evil. The name natural law comes from the fact that the human mind proclaiming this law is an essential feature of human nature.

NATURAL LAW AS THE SOURCE OF KNOWLEDGE OF THE RIGHTNESS OF THE ACT

Judgment of an extreme act comes from natural law which requires ethicists, i.e. philosophers of life, to recognize acts that threaten life, devastate or reduce vitality, or "merely" negatively affect physical health, as morally evil.

In syllogistic reasoning acts performed out of contempt for life, derision of death, or the need to experience physical sensations, come within the provision of prohibition of suicide, which derives from the general, universal and right "direction to act freely".

In the context of deduced normative judgments related to the prohibition of life-destructive acts, on the basis of natural law such acts must be considered wrong acts of external freedom.

The natural right of everyone is self-possession and living one's life. This metaphysical truth about *oneself* gives rise to the logical cognition of physical life as a premise explaining the *conditio humana*, i.e. living body as an ontological condition of human life.

The knowledge of this determinant, i.e. living physicality, affecting the life of a person, which is naturally life-giving, is enlightening. A living body allows a person to exist socially by ontically conditioning their acts. It is not, however, the cause of the person's self-determination in humanity. A living body is life-giving because thanks to its habitus of vitality, health, and fitness, it allows a person to act freely and desire good. And when coveting something becomes good for a person, then this desired good triggers the pursuit of its attainment. The desired good becomes then the reason for the act and the source of the act's sense. When one realizes the effectiveness of an act is conditioned by the physical state, and one's social life depends on one's vitality², then one actively enhances one's living body. These are *self-activities*, and the reason for them lies in improvement of the living body. This way a living body – in the most natural way – becomes part of one's cognition, as a desired good. A person realizes that his/her active enhancement of the body is a basic and necessary act, which ontically determines the commencement of higher acts leading to self-fulfillment in humanity. Moreover, a person realizes that self-possession of a living body is the fundamental good. We often say is that *life is the most important*. We must not, however, think that a person intends to live a physical life only, i.e. by living only to maintain its existential structure. By living a physical life only one can never become a person: it is a metaphysical fallacy: a person is never non-relational. Most importantly, a person must try to achieve perfection in humanity. Thus living physicality is the most basic good for a person, which conditions the person's social life, which, in turn, enables the person to actively share this good with others. A

² Paraphrased saying of Jędrzej Śniadecki. See: O fizycznym wychowaniu dzieci (On physical education of children), Gdańsk 1997, AWF.

person comes to realize that the body is a fundamentally important condition of a person's relational life – which for the person constitutes an opportunity for spiritual self-fulfillment in disinterested acts of respect shown to others. The highest good for any person is humanity manifested by its morality, while physical life is the most important physical being conditioning the person's fulfillment of the humanity's ideal. We often say that *health is the most important*. Yes it is, but only as the basic good for the highest good which is not health. A person does not live only to be healthy, but to pursue perfection and attain ideals. Saying that *health is most important* is – on the grounds of personal ethics – false.

The social life of “members of a household” creates numerous opportunities for self-fulfillment in humanity. The “household members” deal with one another in pursuing the same good and remaining in the community of action. They must treat one another with respect for their contribution to the process of attaining goals. Thus they are also somewhat made to judge the morality of one another's acts. They may trust and express gratitude to one another for their commitment to the common good. Then they can express their conviction about reciprocity as a manifestation of respect for the person. The reason for all acts within a community can now become the person's good recognized as the highest good. The life of members of the household can now become a set of social, *interpersonal* relations, independently of any shared values.

Regardless of ideals espoused by society, the condition of durability of co-living of the “household members” is self-awareness of the physical foundation of being: physical life as a condition of social life. This relation involves accepting the commitment to maintain physical life as the fundamentally important, primary good, for the “community members.” The metaphysical truth of natural law gives rise to the self-commitment to: a) maintain self-possession in the living body; b) enhance the habitus of vitality; and c), in the face of inevitable physical death, replicate one's natural physicality by way of parental procreation.

A person's commitments towards owning the body are expressed in the person's normative judgments being conclusions of the conditioning relation. If physical life is the very basic ontic good – the condition of a person's life – than procreation is also a commitment of an adult person – a free, rightful, act of natural law.

The self-possessing person is an ontic good – very much like any other living human being. The person's natural right is possession of ontic goods as fundamental goods, i.e. goods conditioning a person's social life. Like a house built on a foundation, a person's social life is built on the physical body – the material component of being. Although the foundation is not the house, and the physical body is not the person's existence, its destruction always leads to the self-annihilation of one's material and personal life. Thus members of “the household” must ensure the durability of the foundation, and persons must empower the mentioned habitus of vitality, health, and fitness.

Depravation of both goods in the act of self-negation (one may not want to possess oneself or live in oneself) by someone else's negation is wrong: it de-

fies the reason of natural law, being a manifestation of impertinence in the act of defiance, whose consequence is the breaking of inter-personal causality, i.e. life-giving to others. The normative judgment "Thou shalt not kill" is a derivative of knowing the primary principle of natural law, which as the most important premise, is the source of secondary conclusions.

EXTREME SPORTS ACTS

There are competitions in which competitors find themselves on the verge of losing their lives, but death is not punishment for failure. In a competition against oneself, which is not only about gaining fame but also gaining power over the perceptible world, the competitor becomes absurd. Thus a competitor who competes against himself breaks the primary principle of natural law obliging him to maintain life.

An athlete's act, although extreme, is not senseless. It is an exceptional and transgressive act which is sensible as a morally good act. Although, in reality, a sport act is not always performed according to the rules, there are referees who supervise its performance: the moderator of the *agon's* moral purity, and the exposor of neglects of the *agon's* natural purity. Thanks to them, the competition never becomes its antithesis, but in a logical order, it always strives towards becoming a utopia of social justice.

An athlete's act is an *autopoiesis* of athlete's pursuits. By acting extremely, i.e. by nearly exhausting and depleting his personal goods, the athlete becomes close to *sports death*. The athlete's social death is a consequence of terminating his physical vitality. It is not its *cause* but an ontic condition. The cause of athlete's social death is the direct or indirect refusal of reciprocation from his competitor, for whom decisions are made by some higher instance. It may seem that the athlete himself decides about his social death. Although he expects it, he does not want it. When the athlete proclaims to retire from active life, he confirms he has understood the inevitable necessity that *the game is over*. When he decides to stay in the game, he risks his physicality, not to mention his champion's image. If he kept fueling his physical vitality with pharmacological measures, bringing someone else's good into the competition, he would betray the idea of fair athlete, and by "striking at his physical life" he would violate natural law. Like the law of sport that stipulates fairness in physical improvements, natural law considers personal moral dignity as the reason for self-improvement of natural physicality. A fame-driven athlete concurrently destroys both orders: cultural - in which fairness constitutes the agonistic relation; and natural - in which the condition of social continuity is conduciveness to the physicality of the body.

Life ends with death, and so, quite similarly, ends sport life. At the end of a sport life there is social death, but it does not mean that the sports act - even at the expense of losses of natural personal good - becomes senseless. Life ends with death, but no one, with the exception of social nihilists, can say that human existence is senseless. Competitive effort, although so exhaustive to the athlete, is not absurd or morally wrong because of its extremeness. In the same way, a sacrifice of health by mountain, sea, or mine rescuers to save someone's life might have been assessed as even more reprehensible. Paradoxically, when someone uses one's own good to help others or - in some

cases to save others – one gains respect, and his act is not only sensible, but is seen as a truly human act of sacrifice. Occasionally, extreme competitors – those who sacrifice their lives for others – attain sanctity, and their acts are extolled as exemplary.

SPORTISM

The *raison d'être* for an athlete is experiencing primacy over others in conditions of play; the *raison d'être* of a playing athlete is work – a primordial existential experience. An *agon*, in which each competitor wants to be first, demands from all the contestants fulfilling the condition of equality. Failure to meet this condition instills fears of injustice. The demand for primacy makes sense, only if the competition follows the rules of equality. Inequality of contestants renders sport play nonsensical. The fun is spoiled. Fairness in competition based on the rules of equality is the primary and indispensable condition of the ideal fulfillment of *playing sports*. An athlete demands fairness from others and acts in a fair manner: in the *gymnasion* – in which he maximizes his bodily formation, averting any possible temptation of artificial self-improvement, and in the *stadium* – in which he may not improve his chances of victory by diminishing the chances of victory of his opponent. Who becomes the first one, using the rules of equality, is the decision of impartial judges: categorizers, classifiers, moderators, exposers, moralists and ethicists as guardians of the stadium order. Athletes themselves are unable to assess whether a given competition is fair and follows the rules of equality. It is assumed that the athlete will participate in moral good in his life. It is meritorious. Despite the maximization of his physical efforts, the athlete does not enter the competition against death. The man of play does not want death for himself. He plays not to lose his life. Death is not the reason for athlete's acts, not even for the extreme acts of the mountain climber who undoubtedly risks his life. The man of sport play, by being sympathetic toward the physical body, is sympathetic toward life. By becoming the first among fair equals (*primus inter pares*) he gains in humanity. The moral good of fairness, known as fair play, is recognized as the *raison d'être* of the ideal athlete, which justifies the sense of extreme physical effort. In physical exercise one should be faithful to oneself and attest one's participation in moral dignity.

Victory in competition against fair equals is the reason for the athlete's act. The athlete's feat gains recognition of others, who praise the athlete's name. Everyone would seek fame for his name, even for the price of life, like Felipe Munoz, who would not have escaped death, as he had promised, had he not won by half a second. Pride evokes moral inequality. A sports competition in unequal conditions becomes senseless, thus the sports act is fulfilled only seemingly. The justice of pride only pretends to be the justice of fairness. *A true athlete acts truly when he is true to himself, and for that he is rewarded with the wreath of fairness.* Fairness makes the athlete's fully sensible, especially that the training of the athlete's body before the act also contributes to his moral dignity. An athlete is an athlete in all circumstances, or is not an athlete at all. In logical order, an athlete always acts fairly.

Let us assume that in an extreme competition an athlete competes with another athlete "with no morals"; that the athlete is amoral, i.e. neither good or bad. Do such athletes not assess their chances, or do they not postulate a

fair assessment of their chances in their social life in which competitors are made to compare goods they do not own, in their pursuit of primacy? Do they not, willingly or unwillingly, become fair judges of the competition themselves, or – provided they are still morally anomic in their sports infancy – entrust someone impartial with assessment of the chances: a judge-classifier (like in a sport for the disabled), or a judge-moderator (like in any sports)? Is the reference to the norm of fair assessment of goods and procedures of acquisition of these goods in training not a metaphysical moral rule of self-fulfillment in a sport situation? If it is not so, then the amoral sports act is metaphysically false: impossible as a social reality. In other words, there is no sport without morality.

The athlete's fairness is when the athlete willfully decides to make use of only this capability which is his natural, personal property, whose potential depends also on the athlete's natural self-improvement in training, i.e. on athlete's subjectified work. If the athlete does it out of respect to his competitor's dignity, i.e. someone significant who deserves unlimited respect, not only does he act according to the rules of fairness (known to him, but still unaccepted as his own), but also rises to a higher level of victory in humanity. The athlete's sports act ennobles the athlete since the good of moral personal dignity becomes the reason and the sense of sport life – very much like social life in general – in which love becomes the reason for each act and makes each act sensible.

Fairness is assumed by the sports act, but also fairness as a moral good makes the sports act sensible. The athlete in his fair act qualifies himself for victory in humanity. When the athlete's competitor does the same, both win, although only one of them – displaying a higher level of physical capabilities – becomes the first one. But each first one in sport is no morally different from the second one. They are equal to each other in fairness. They are worthy of each other.

The sport situation is morally positively "loaded". If it were not for athlete's willing fairness, there would be no sport situation, because unfairness would be either condemned before competition or disclosed after competition. There is no sport without fairness, because fairness constitutes the sports act. There is no amoral sport, or sport "beyond" moral good or evil. Those who say there is do not know what they say; they do not realize they are logically entrapped at the metaphysical level of knowledge of sport.

The conclusion is that a fair act assumes personal good as its *raison d'être*. A sport act, even when extreme, is a fair act as well.

THE OLYMPIC ATHLETE: A SPORT DOVE OF PEACE

It is not unusual that the sport situation, which so optimistically fulfills the postulate of fairness in a confrontation between agonists of play, could have been ethically thought as a remedy against moral evil inflicted on one another by agonists of real fight. Moreover, it could have been thought as the *raison d'être* of a sport family, whose members – as agonists of stadium – become finally brothers in Olympic peace, being a testimony to the highest level of sport humanity expressed in friendship or, simply, in love of one another. Certainly, the sport situation could not have been thought or creatively redefined this way, i.e. as an act of redemption for the moral evil of war, if there had not been

some premise justifying the humanization of mankind with the incorporation of sport but also art into the ethos of peaceful coexistence. Since humanity has never lacked wars, there have always been premises explaining their causes or postulating their abolishment. A collective sports act called the modern Olympic movement was supposed to redeem the moral evil of war and by using its moral good, symbolically revalorize hostile nations and awake the sense of a community of friendship in the collective awareness. The Olympic athlete was not just an athlete originating from the playing man. The reason for the Olympic athlete's acts were moral goods of higher order. Common decency, as an elementary virtue, was not sufficient to ensure self-fulfillment in a designated ideal. The ethicists postulated a moral transgression of athletes in the Olympic "religion with no God" via sanctification in the good of brotherly friendship. The athlete became an Olympian, not because he was a fair agonist (he must have obviously fulfilled the condition of moral fairness), but because he was seen by the world as a "dove of peace" co-responsible for secure co-existence. Can we, therefore, not say that the highest postulate of natural law, i.e. affirmation of life as the fundamental good, was not the athlete's extreme task? Is the Olympic act (even extreme) not ultimately life-giving? If yes, then the Olympic competition is like any other competition: potentially lethal on the one hand, and, on the other hand, restoring the faith in the meaning of life in extreme efforts, whose highest reason is personal moral dignity.

CIRCUS PERFORMER: A GENERIC BRAGGART

The necessary condition to distinguish oneself in sport as the first among equals is the relation to others. An athlete must establish a relation with another if they want to elevate themselves. This established relation makes the athlete a generic perfectionist: a circus performer. One may say his performances do not contribute to social morality, but one must not say that his acts (also extreme) are not subject to moral evaluation. Especially significant is the performance of a conventional act that conveys a certain semiotic message. Whoever can interpret the message accurately, will draw an important moral from this circus tale of universal significance, in the way one learns in primary school about choosing the natural good as the only good justifying life in humanity. This moral stipulates that greatness in humanity is not only conditioned by physical powers, no matter how extraordinary. However, as long as the circus performer is satisfied with the physical life he draws his generic perfection from, he can "appeal" to natural law. It is natural law, after all, that obliges everyone to unconditionally affirm physical life for personal life. In what way is the circus performer perceived by natural law as a life risk-taker? The circus performer is a eulogist as well as a potential devastator of life: he praises himself and can annihilate the good he draws his greatness from. Like a spider-man scaling skyscrapers, or a braggart tightrope walker, he uses his body to affirm the natural ontic perfection, but despite all of it he says – *that life according to the body is beautiful*. This exposes his being to annihilation because of his body. Is it really prudent to act for the show's sake, just to enrapture the crowds? Perhaps not all of the audience. A small, crooked, clown may want to speak for the audience and ridicule the circus performer's usurpations. The great circus performer becomes ridiculous. But the small clown can also reveal his wisdom, like an ethicist of natural law, who may not change anything (the circus performer is after all internally free in his acts of self-determination) but arouse suspicion. There is something

wrong, because we do not know why the circus performer's act is some kind of pretense of greatness.

The circus performer stops halfway, and because he does not seek any other reason for being a simple self-affirmation of his own physicality, the assessment of his transgressive acts (undoubtedly arousing respect and admiration) will be pretty meager. How would an ethicist assess acts of the Olympic athlete, who is called upon to take part in the moral dignity of humanity, if this dove of peace adhering to the ideal of physical perfection in speed – *citius*, height – *altius* and strength – *fortius* would be perfectly happy with these three attainments and would neglect Olympic sacredness? Certainly, an Olympic athlete who would return to his pre-modern role of Olympic circus performer, i.e. in ethicists' opinion a much worse, tragicomic version of himself. In the light of natural law, the circus performers' acts are not fair, since their only *raison d'être* is victory in attainment of the habitus of the external body, i.e. just to put up a show. Physical life may not be exploited for its own sake, and people must make use of their bodies' capabilities for higher acts in life, in which the physical good is the condition of personal self-development.

Certainly, the circus performer – the semiotic elder brother of the athlete – draws inspiration for his theatrical role from real life in which generic braggarts abound, e.g. *gigarectics*, who assume the role of body builders in their own theatrical performances.

THE MOUNTAIN CLIMBER – THE STADIUM ATHLETE OF THE MOUNTAIN

What are the relations between the mountain and the athlete? Is the climber of the mountain an athlete in the first place? In fact, the so-called “mountain motor activist”³, i.e. a competitor seeking good for themselves – not necessarily true good – establishes two types of relations with the mountain: object-relation and subject-relation.

Object-relation with the mountain. One may use the mountain as a toy for climbing, hiking, sliding, jumping, or caving. These activities are not really useful in practice, but it is not practice in which they are sensible. They are pastimes, i.e. leisure activities. A mountain *motor activist* is a worker who climbs the mountain for fun after work to recover from work-related stress. This is the worker's moral law derived from natural law. Those who work should play, because play – as a necessary break in work – allows workers to resume their professional activities.

However, playing with the “mountain” toy is like playing with matches: it is hazardous. It is morally evil when it becomes the dice; when it becomes gambling for fun – “casting the dice” during white water rafting – an activity with unknown consequences. At the end of the mountain gamble there is always a wild card drawn, and the “playful” activity of the mountain climber may lead to his death. Those “motor activists” that make fun of the mountain should be reasonable enough to anticipate it. Before they start playing with the mo-

³ A reference to a scholarly conference entitled (quite amusingly) “Aktywność ruchowa na obszarach górskich Polski i świata” (Motor activity in the mountainous areas of Poland and the world) organized in Szklarska Poręba, Poland, on November 27-28, 2014 by the University School of Physical Education in Wrocław.

untain, they surely realize the danger. During playing there may be no time for this reflection. Playing the senses switches off cognition, or even the self-preservation instinct. When the fun is over and one loses one's self-possession, playing becomes a morally evil act. The idea is not to *play to the death*, and natural law forbids dicing with death.

Natural law has a regulatory power over the "mountain motor activists". It tells them which of their acts are morally good and morally evil. When an act of a mountain climber turns against the structure of his being, and the reason for this act is not personal good (it may not be, in general, because the mountain climber does not fulfill the criterion of contribution to social life – as a loner he is outside the social life), all he does is an extreme endurance test – and this is wrong. Any threat to life is morally evil. Natural law obliges every competitor to care for his life, and forbids being careless about it (*Thou shalt not kill thyself*). When a lone mountain climber does not follow his personal good in his free acts, for example, when he does not consider his mountain act as a form of health and fitness self-improvement, and thus improvement in the quality of life (like a person regarding the mountain trail as an outdoor *gymnasion*), he becomes – in the ethical perspective – an opportunist killer.

Opportunist killer is a *competitor* who does not seek death but, being fully aware of the danger, comes near death. The opportunist killer can be a:

1. HEDONIST – a collector of bodily sensations from abusing his physical capabilities in extreme (until losing consciousness) physical transgressions; a post-modern extreme tourist-adventurer sliding, or falling from the mountain cliff;
2. ICARUS – LIBERATOR – a postmodern, irrational, braggart who chooses a path to individual happiness only, living a lonely life – a liberal without borders, an extreme test pilot or a stratospheric jumper;
3. NIHILIST – a rebel with contempt for life, powerless to recognize the sense in life. From his contempt for life the social nihilist derives the wrath of irony. He knows he must live, but he does not know why. Thus, he lives an easy life in which his body is a vehicle on the road to the border between life and death. Contempt for life is impertinence toward death. The nihilist does not desire death, but comes near it. He dies like Icarus, but his self-destruction is for a completely different reason.

SUBJECT-RELATION WITH THE MOUNTAIN – A SELF-CHANGING MOUNTAIN CLIMBER

The mountain can be personified by establishing an agonist and antagonist relation with it. This is what the extreme climber does. The moral assessment of his acts is complex and difficult but not impossible. The limit of this personification is metaphysically easily recognizable; in the psychological sense it is almost imperceptible. Even the climber himself fails to take notice of the changes of his own self. He does not know that at the limit of physical endurance he is different from him from the beginning of the climb.

The mountain climber consists of two personages in one: **athlete-agonist** and then changing into **hero-agonist**. In the former the climber competes, in the latter the climber fights. The reason for the athlete's act is victory; the reason for the hero's act is his fight against the mountain, i.e. survival.

Extreme mountain climbers are not aware of their participation in two axio-normative orders:

1. sport-symbolic – which with all the significance of the ethos – is only a “quasi-life” (like in a theatrical play, in which the life of characters is not real and characters do not die literally) and remains such despite experiencing real dramas by athletes;
2. existential-essential – in which nothing is pretended, and the climber is abruptly reminded of his human condition, with all emotional tension resulting from the fear of losing one’s life in the face of hopeless, lonely death.

When the mountain ceases to be a stadium track and becomes a natural force destroying the agonistic plan, the athlete unknowingly changes into a defender of his own life, into *his own hero*, and recognizes the mountain as a hostile force against him. The antagonist mountain must be defeated in the battle of life. The climber might later recall that *the mountain had wanted to defeat me*. He fails to notice that the stadium track is no longer of interest to him, and that sports victory is no longer the reason for his act. What was important in the beginning is now ontically sidelined. There is no track, no stadium, and no athlete in the self of the extreme climber. Even the extreme climber is not there. On the track, which is not there, in some *non-place* of “unfriendly” nature, is a nameless natural character: a generic climber left to natural forces, against his own will.

The mountain climber does not think about himself. And although he took the oath that he would never abandon his competitor in danger, he uttered the words of the oath more as an athlete than as a hero. He could not have thought otherwise in a situation in which experiencing death was still ahead of him (in the ontic sense). He could not have anticipated whether he would remain faithful to the pledge of heroism, when he had never experienced an extreme situation of anaerobic oblivion. The ethics of sport climbers does not oblige them to perform heroic acts. Thus choosing not to save someone else’s life for the price of one’s own life is not morally evil. What is morally evil, however, is passing over one’s co-agonist whose life is in danger, while attempting to save one’s own life. Descending the mountain without looking back on the co-competitor – after having lost the sport sense up in the mountain – who was out of his depth and began his struggle for survival violates the natural law and is punishable under man-made law. Those who pass next to and refuse to help a dying man are penalized. Sport mountain climbers know it, but there have been cases related to some Polish mountain climbing teams whose members saved their own lives and ignored others. They are never forgiven under natural law; and under man-made law, due to lack of evidence of wrongdoing, the sword of justice is suspended. The surviving climbers know who had betrayed them. They excluded the traitor from the personal life and refused to participate in competitions⁴ to which this distrusted climber wanted to re-commit. A mountain climber “carries” humanity on his ascent; the higher he ascends, the more dangerous his ascent becomes, the more important humanity is.

Maybe, it is so difficult to assess an extreme climber’s acts because they are justified by two reasons that are consecutive to and substituting each other.

⁴ For obvious reason I cannot provide the climbers’ names here. This is a moral assessment of the Polish Broad Peak climbing expedition and its tragic end. The elder climber survived but had experienced a disillusion because of the refusal of brotherly help.

When the reason becomes different, it is too late for the mountain climber to “retreat” safely from the mountain to self-possession. This was the case of the descent of two Polish climbers from Broad Peak, which resulted in the death of both of them.

What do I mean and who do I want to “probe” with the prudence of natural law? I intend to assess the rightness of the extreme athlete’s acts with my syllogistic reasoning, not with some hardly justified biases which may bring criticism and injustice. I do not intend to be anyone’s judge or prosecutor equipped with critical and penal sanctions granted by man-made law. An ethicist, who appeals to natural law, passes only normative judgments and postulates the direction of free and right action. Ethicists assess the morality of acts, i.e. they decide about their rightness in relation to the idea of good as the highest reason for all acts. Ethicists only adjudicate whether an act conforms with this idea or abolishes it in the logical sense. Using this normative measure an ethicist can assess the moral value of acts of *mountain motor activists* that he at least knows (and this is a premise for deductive thinking) they are aware of serious risks, but despite life hazards, commence to ascend. An outsider may say: So be it, let it be some faithful fan of the climbing club, or the climber’s relative, friend or – most certainly – competitor. The extreme mountain climber is like an athlete. The difference is that he competes at an outdoor stadium. The climber’s route is like the long-distance or marathon runner’s track; the climber’s potential opponent is an agonist who has covered the same trail earlier (in summer or in winter), or who has reached the same summit before using a different route.

An ethicist will join the sports fans and declare that the reason for a sports act is victory over the opponent, and that awareness of the risks to one’s life is not a certain premise of negative assessment of a mountain climber’s act. The ethicist will add that any act, even a basic locomotive movement, is equally risky, but must not be assessed as morally evil. Unless the ethicist would refer in his evaluation to the “fast and the furious” who play a game with death – to social nihilists who act against natural law. Their acts can be assessed differently by man-made law, depending on particular legislation and jurisdiction. In a permissive and liberal community, the acts can be assessed with no guilt and punishment. In a conservative community respecting the natural order of life, i.e. a community responsible for the common good of a person, these acts will be deemed reprehensible and utterly punishable.

CONCLUSION

One who is no more an athlete to himself, who sacrifices his life during a mountain climbing expedition, or survives after descent, will be surrounded by the aura of a hero. As long as the mountain climber struggles for survival, he does not realize whether he is a hero or an athlete, because this is not important. And because a mountain climber, who faces death, might not be an athlete, his act – regardless of its final outcome – may not be considered morally reprehensible in the light of natural law. On the contrary, as long as the extreme mountain climber, beset with the image of sudden death, desires life, i.e. safe return to his self-possession, it is praiseworthy. His active pursuit to be alive is commendable, and this is sufficient to assess his act on the verge of death as morally good.

It is quite different when the reason for the mountain climber's act is derision of death and contempt for life. If this is the case, such an act is wrong according to natural law. Extreme mountain climbers participate in social morality as fair agonists equal to one another. Although they risk their life more than anyone else, balancing on the edge, they do not differ in their reasons from athletes-runners. Mountain climbers also want victory, i.e. elevation above anyone else. When they complete their ascent, they are like marathon runners who complete the route. The mountain climber knows the marathon runner's experience. When he hits the head wind, he turns into his antithesis. The difference is the marathon runner does not have to change. If the wind blows him off the track, he will never think *he has lost his life*. The runner finds safe refuge in the stadium. The climber is never sure he will return to the living ones. The runner accepts a medal as a symbol of recognition for his fulfillment in sport humanity and in the Olympic ideal of defense of life for peace and friendship. The climber will refuse to accept the medal, if he wrongly considers the Olympic laudation for his victory a commonplace mark of victory in a fun game. This is erroneous thinking. A mountain climber who does not find any other sign in the Olympic medal than a simple award for winning a competition fails to recognize that the Olympic athlete, who stands on the side of defenders of peace, joins the civilization of life. He does not understand that despite aspiring to philosophical reasoning, usually reflected in some literary self-portrait, natural law expects him to symbolically affiliate with the family of peace to live in friendship. He is awarded with the Olympic medal for his heroic act in defense of life. It is not some plain badge for winning a sport contest. A common athlete is not equal to an Olympic athlete, but an Olympic athlete can be equal to a mountain climber as the latter finds a similarity in the Olympic ideal.

Refusal to accept the Olympic medal by the mountain climber is incomprehensible. It shows that the mountain climber does not fully realize the sense of his acts and Olympic ethics. When the climber refuses to accept the Olympic distinction, he gives others to understand that he expects something more, not something different. It is as if he intended to state that the Olympic medal does not reflect the truth of the sense of his act; or that it was all about a different act related to some different, superhuman, supernatural or almost divine good. It is as if the mountain climber wanted to attribute a different sense to his act - different than acknowledged by the Olympic medal - and expected that his contribution to the common good of humanity deserves a special distinction which has not been designed yet. Any other distinction, for example, of a "sport champion", would not only be insufficient but also inadequate. And one can somehow understand it, because without a doubt, Olympic champions are incomparably the most important in the hierarchy of agonists of all competitions.

The Olympic family may not sanctify the mountain climber, even if the latter has expected it, since in the supernatural order of being the rightness of the climber's act is considered and assessed by impartial judges. Neither Olympic athletes nor mountain climbers originate from Mount Olympus, despite their seemingly supernatural powers in their struggle for survival. The mountain climbing agonists have not been endowed with some superhuman powers by an immortal deity. They cross the mountain like the runners cross the stadium, being mortal humans. If they accept the Olympic distinction - and some

do not refuse – they will find affirmation of the rightness of their superhuman act in natural law.

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Cite this article as:

Pawłucki A. Natural law and acts of extreme climbers – agonists of the mountain stadium. Balt J Health Phys Act. 2016;8(1):66-79.