

## **Greatness in Athletes: A Philosophic Inquiry**

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### **Abstract**

*This study advances a philosophical inquiry into the question of applying the value of greatness to athletes. The construct of greatness is delineated and compared to theories of “goodness” proposed by Bentham, Mill, and Hartman. Issues of comparability and commensurability related to the Trichotomy Thesis are explicated. Additionally, the ancient Greek construct of arête as referenced by Socrates, Aristotle and Plato is investigated in relation to athletes. The study concludes that despite mass media hyperbole, only a very few athletes throughout history could be considered “great.”*

**Keywords:** athletes, greatness, cross comparison, arête.

### **1. Introduction**

With the recent passing of boxing legend, Muhammad Ali, the question of greatness in athletes may be raised. Ali was famous for proclaiming, “I am the greatest,” but what does greatness in athletes really mean? Etymological study reveals the word “great” has roots in Middle and Old English and is ultimately traceable to the High German “grOz” or large. Modern lexical descriptors for the adjective “great” include extremely large or huge. Various usages of the word include remarkable or outstanding in magnitude, degree or extent. The word has also been associated with aristocracy, as in the title Lord Great Chamberlain. Things may be great in number or duration. An archaic use of great described a woman who was pregnant. The modern informal sense of great is “skillful,” as in the case of “she is a great dentist.” The purpose of this report is to address the question, how is the term “greatness” accurately applied to athletes?

In this study, great will be considered to be an enhancement of good, something that is larger than good; it is of a higher quality than good and includes a greater social dimension. A distinction between good and great may be made using the comparative forms. Consider the terms “more good” or “better” and “greater good.” “More good” or “better” may be understood as increasing the amount of good whereas “greater good” implies increasing the dimension of good, an enlargement or enhancement of good. There is a qualitative difference that extends great into the social domain. Good also has a social dimension but this becomes enhanced with great. I think the utilitarians’ use of “greater good” captures the spirit of this qualitative difference. Great is viewed as an enhancement of good, but what is good? The following discussion presents relevant views on the nature of good.

### **2. Teleological Theories**

From *The Principles of Morals and Legislation*, Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) wrote that people are motivated by pain or pleasure. The *principle of utility* defines utility as “That property in any object, whereby it tends to produce benefit, advantage, pleasure, good, or happiness...” Actions, along with objects, are included in the utility principle that promotes a practical, useful good (Bentham, 1948, pp. 1-4). Bentham also reasons that a numerical value may be assigned to the elements (circumstances), positive in the case of pleasure and negative in the case of pain, and that a final tally may be derived which would determine the overall value of the object or act (Bentham, 1948, pp. 29-32). Bentham asserts the theory applies on an individual level and to governments.

Each individual's source of pleasure, whether it is hitting golf balls at a driving range or working for a charitable organization to provide relief to children who were victims of a great earthquake, would be equivalent. When he wrote, "Pain and pleasure are produced in men's minds by the action of certain causes," (p. 43) he established a fundamental basis for consequentialism. His natural reduction follows that the greatest good for the greatest number of people would be the optimal state of affairs and thus utilitarianism was born, yet still un-named. The system is thus entirely democratic and has become a philosophical underpinning of liberal democracy.

At first glance, the numerification of value appears to be naive. Quantification of the subjective requires a more convincing algorithm than the so-called "felicific calculus" Bentham proposes. Any list of what is good is bound to come up short. It seems the longer the list, the more questions that are raised and the less that is shown. Even Bentham tried to cast aside the central question of "what is good?" and focuses on "what does good look like and what do we name it?" Although the central question is left unanswered by Bentham, something about good is learned. Good has utility, it pertains to certain things and actions and it does so in degree. Usefulness offers an attractive alternative in obtaining good for the common person, rescuing it from its platitudes.

Bothersome for Bentham might be the case of explaining when pain is pleasurable, given the fact that he has posited them as opposites. Athletes frequently experience pain in training and this state of affairs may be considered good. "No pain, no gain," is more than a slogan. The onset of pain in training caused by stretching or exerting may signal a level of conditioning that is very desirable and the attainment of the accompanying pain is viewed as good. Football players want to take some "good hits" in practice so that they may condition themselves to tolerate pain. The level of pain may be directly related to how good the "good hit" is. If a "good hit" is very painful, it may be referred to as a "really good hit" and apparently generates even more pleasure.

John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) thought the work of his mentor to be true, but only half true, and sought to remedy the situation. He admired Bentham for taking the study of value from the "absurdity" of traditional philosophy into the realm of "things practiced." The utility perspective would be further developed by Mill. He expressed his gratitude to Bentham and noted some of his limitations, "...we have tolerance for one-eyed men, provided their one eye is a penetrating one..." (Mill, 1962, p. 5).

Mill thought Bentham's all-encompassing pleasure actually referred to lower pleasures. Higher pleasures, the activities of "high culture," art, science, philosophy were more useful than lower pleasures, those activities of popular culture, like going to a hockey game. The quality of the pleasure should figure into the accounting (Mill, 1962, p. 6). By assigning higher value to the more refined sensibilities, i.e., high culture, although appealing to a minority, would be preserved in a utilitarian democracy. Mill's concurrence of a greater good did continue the quantitative strain of measuring value.

More art, science, and philosophy in society could arguably lead, depending on the manner of implementation, to more pleasure and a better world. However, this type of utilitarianism has rightfully been accused of elitism. Suppose a basketball player has an important practice scheduled the day before the championship game. The player is the star of the team and not replaceable. However, the player is invited to attend a symphony concert featuring the world's most highly acclaimed violinist, scheduled at the same time of the practice. Following Mill's analysis, attending the concert would amount to a higher pleasure, presumably leading to greater good. However, the player's teammates and coaches have a right to expect the player to fulfill commitments for the good of the team. The rights of the player's teammates and coaches (a number of people) are violated when the player neglects his or her responsibility to attend practice. Ironically, the principle of the greatest good to the greatest number, suffers following Mill's revisions.

Robert S. Hartman extended empiricism into the study of values and formulated his Science of Values. He drew upon the work on G. E. Moore and attempted to address not what is good but goodness itself. Hartman formulated two principles of goodness:

1. Goodness is not a natural property (color, weight);
2. Goodness depends on natural properties (a good chair).

This led to his axiom or fundamental principle of axiology:

A thing is good when it fulfills the definition of its concept (has all its descriptive properties) (Hartman, 1969, p. 7).

Hartman states his axiom is objective and valid for every rational person, but the application of the value is subjective. What one calls well, another may call bad. Values have three dimensions or modes that are compared to measurements of physical dimensions--centimeter, gram, second. The value dimensions, systemic, extrinsic and intrinsic, interplay constantly. He proposes that a "calculus of value" or an "axiological calculus" may be constructed to account for the various types of interactions of the modes of value. Value Science sought to apply logic to values and posited axiology as parallel to mathematics with good as a variable. Value is rational and axiologists study the value of value (Hartman, 1959, p. 2). Hartman continues the application of quantification in the study of value as did the utilitarians. However, his theory says nothing of utility, leaving us in a largely motive-less world. He states something is good to the extent that it fulfills the definition of its concept but perhaps what Hartman is discussing isn't what is good but what is "perfectly fine."

In the Hartman Value Profile, Hartman asks individuals to rank two sets of eighteen different statements with value implications on two scales, good and bad, and agree or disagree. A specific ordering of these statements would always be obtained from a person of the highest character. He claims the results of an individual's ordering are indications of a person's character and a deviation from highest character may be calculated. The test has been used in a variety of applications including screening of prospective employees. (Hartman, 1959) Correctly (as determined by Hartman) rank ordering eighteen statements in an evaluative test seems arduous to say the least. As with any standardized test, cultural values of minorities tend to be lost in the standardization process. These arguments contraindicate the internal validity of Hartman's test of character.

Hartman does designate axiology outside the realm of moral theory. To make the point, he provides an example of a "good murderer." Axiologically speaking, Hartman argues the case for the existence of a good murderer as much as the definition of the concept of murderer has been fulfilled. However, he asserts that the murderer would be bad from a moral point of view. Thus, a distinction is drawn between the study of moral theory and that of value, which he deems axiology. This is a tidy solution that economically eliminates all those questions that pertain to moral theory. However, the Science of Value is dissatisfying in that it refuses to address the issue of why goodness is good and is content to focus on how good is goodness. Nonetheless, with all the questions raised in regard to Science of Value, Hartman continues to develop the quantitative strain in the study of value.

While there may never be a consensus on a detailed account of the nature of good, with Bentham, Mill, and Hartman, we can see the development of theories that in some way attempt to quantify value. The success of an approach that objectively measures value will depend on its ability to correctly identify bearers of constitutive values, to explain their dynamics, and to develop an appropriate scale of measurement that is consistent across unbiased observers. However, for the purposes of this study, general definitions of terms will be offered:

Good is something of value;

Great is an enhancement of good.

### **3. Incommensurability and Incomparability**

Two of the strongest arguments against the validity of the current study are:

- 1) There is no scale of measurement of athletic greatness, thus athletes are incommensurable with respect to greatness; and
- 2) Qualitative differences between the various sports make them incomparable.

Let me address the second question on incomparability first and then turn attention to the first question regarding incommensurability. Those who believe cross comparisons, comparisons of values across categories that contain differing bearers of value, typically subscribe to the theory of value pluralism. This theory essentially holds "that there are many values that cannot be 'reduced' to a single super value" (Chang, 1977, p. 2). This view contradicts monist theories of value, some of which are characteristic of utilitarian's who ultimately reduce value to a single super value (SV) like pleasure or happiness. The pluralist argument against this grand reduction is held strongly on three grounds:

- 1) Intuitive implausibility of monism given the diversity of values we commonly experience;
- 2) Akrasia or acting against one's best interests;
- 3) Some choices involve unavoidable loss so plural values must be at stake (Chang, 1977 p. 2; Chang, 2001, pp. 16141-16142).

However, these arguments may be countered by reconsideration of the super value (SV). Let's assume the pluralists are correct, there are diverse values. These values may be said to exist as a value set residing in a value field. A value field is the propensity of an individual to have values. From this perspective, values are not viewed as static properties but as acts of reasoning. The presumption that decisions involving conflicting values--should a player go back into the game or take care of the injury--are somehow reduced to a single value misconstrues the role of the SV. Action A, going back into the game, and Action B, seeing the trainer to determine if the finger is actually broken, are not reduced to a SV but are assessed by it. In this sense, SV is akin to conscience and the player forecasts Scenario A, Action A and its presumed consequences, and Scenario B, Action B and its presumed consequences. Since both actions involve core values, commitment to competing or "being a gamer" in the case of A, and personal health in the case of B, conflicting obligations are weighed by the SV and the greater good is chosen. So the first argument, intuitive implausibility of monism given the diversity of values we commonly experience, is countered by reconsideration of the nature of the SV not from a reductionist point of view but to an assessment role using moral and practical reasoning.

In the second case, *akrasia*, let's say the player forecasts Scenarios A and B, realizes the serious injury potential of Action A, but decides to pursue Action A nonetheless. The player is not weak of will as some might conclude; indeed too much will could fairly be judged in this case. Why would the player, knowing the consequence of possible serious harm, ask the coach to send her or him back into the game? Here, the SV assesses on more or less utilitarian grounds, a greater good of team victory outweighs the player's personal concerns, and/or perhaps on egoist grounds, the player doesn't want to appear to be a quitter. Despite the dubious conclusion drawn by the SV in choosing Action A, it may still be seen to assess perceived consequences of actions. We might also interpret this as a simple mistake, a botched assessment. After all, the SV is not perfect, it's only human. It may also be true that the player in the midst of a game does not make a rational choice, having psychologically assumed the role of an athlete in the world of play, which does not always share the values of ordinary life. Here the SV has been controlled by an instinct, an even more interior "I" capable of overruling the normally good judgment of the SV. This interior "I" wants to compete to the very end despite one's better judgment. Later, the SV may regain control and produce the assessment, "it seemed like a good idea at the time." In either explanation of *akrasia*, an assessing SV, not a reductive one, appears to offer greater understanding of plural values.

The third case, some choices involve unavoidable loss so plural values must be at stake, argues against reductibility but the construct of the SV does as well. The SV asks the question, "How good am I?" In this role of inquiry, it becomes our ultimate judgment and determines self-image. By way of forecast scenarios, it assesses our obligatory actions and compares them to idealized actions that represent us at our best. The nature of the comparison involves forecasting scenarios and their consequences, "if I do this, this and such will happen," and its competitor, "if I do that, that such and such will happen." Corresponding to the "higherness" and "lowness" inherent in the sense and study of value, the "good news" and the "bad news" of each scenario is assessed, a look at the pros and cons.

Scenario A's good news is that the player is back in the game and has an opportunity to fulfill an obligation to help the team win, but the bad news is that the finger may be permanently damaged in the process. Scenario B's good news is that medical attention will improve his injury condition and contribute to overall good health to which the player feels obligated and the bad news is that the player will have failed to play the whole game and could have her or his dedication questioned by others. If the SV is unable to decide, another request for information is processed. What's the score? A lop-sided contest reduces the necessity of Action A. Is the current injury to the finger the latest of several? A higher probability of serious injury increases the necessity of B. The more deliberate this process is, the more requests that are made for additional information. If the choice is still unclear, deeper questions directed to core values will be asked. How much does the player owe the team? Will others be harmed by a serious injury to the finger? In each assessment phase, forecast scenarios of actions will be compared to a scenario of ideal actions, when the player is at her or his best. Based on the merits of the perceived outcomes, the SV will select the better choice under normal circumstances, i.e. not pathological or in error.

After the Action is performed, a post-assessment is undertaken by the SV. Performed Actions are assessed again by comparing them with an idealized version of what the best actions would be. In general, particular actions performed on the basis of a choice will be evaluated in relation to the idealized best actions. If they performed actions reasonably conform to the idealized ones, we are satisfied. Satisfaction becomes an enhancement of pleasure.

If the performed actions do not reasonably conform to the idealized ones, we feel guilt, the corollary of pain. Obligations and obligation fulfillment are key features of the post-assessment by the SV. It may be true that sociopaths either have a deficit in super value, not much of a conscience, or are unable to adequately generate the high level of cognitive processing in forecasting scenarios.

An assessing SV satisfies some pluralist concerns but not all. Questions persist on the nature of the comparisons of qualitative differences between the various sports. How is such a cross comparison to be rationally made?

In hard cases of cross comparisons--who are the better athlete, a football player or a baseball player?--some theorists have concluded that the respective qualities of each sport are immiscible, and cannot be rationally compared. These incomparability theorists point to the qualitative differences in diverse values and reject the Trichotomy Thesis: "if two items A and B are evaluative comparable, then A must be better or worse than B, or A and B must be equally good" (Chang, 1977, p. 3). Incomparability theorists claim no rational choice may be made to A and B of differing values, A is neither better nor worse than B nor are A and B equally good. A football player per se is not a better or worse athlete than a baseball player per se, nor are they equally good. They have differing value sets that cannot be compared.

A proponent of comparability may counter that although it may be difficult to determine the better athlete given the choice of the MVP of the National Football League and the MVP of the American or National League, a notable-nominal case may be easier to decide (Chang, 1977, p. 1). Suppose you are asked, who is not the better athlete, the MVP of the NFL or Johnny Pathetic, a baseball player in a community league who cannot hit or catch the ball, nor can he run well? We can make a justified choice on the basis of practical reasoning that the MVP is a better athlete than Johnny, try as he will (Chang, 2001, p. 665).

The notable-nominal case lends support to the comparabilist argument but what of a close case, who is the better of the MVP's? The incomparability theorists point out the difficulty in saying one is better or worse or that they are equal. However, Chang has proposed a fourth relational space in addition to those of the Trichotomy Thesis--on a par.

"...if A is neither better nor worse than B, and A and B are not equally good A and B may be comparable--they may be "on a par" (Chang, 2001, p. 661). It seems intuitively plausible that although the NFL MVP may not be a better or worse athlete than the AL MVP, nor they considered equally good, that the two may be compared on the basis of a fourth relation--on a par. They could be considered on a par only on the basis of a comparison, which further dims the incomparabilists' argument.

Nonetheless, incomparability does appear to hold in some cases. What is better, an ocean or a mountain range? What is better, a piano or a porcupine? Although some may argue the questions need a "better for" analysis, what is better for sailing, an ocean or a mountain?, it is clear that practical reasoning is unable to resolve the dilemma as originally stated. However, an additional argument in favor of comparability may be seen in the comparativity of values. There is a unique quality to bearers of value in that they vary among themselves in capacity to bear a comparative degree. Comparativity is a property of comparability in that there is an inherent comparativeness unique to each value. Values may bear comparativity easily, with difficulty, or have no comparative degree. Free throw shooting ability, for example, may be easily compared between Abbey and Bea. Percentage of free throws made provides an accurate indicator of free throw shooting ability and since Abbey made 85% of hers and Bea made only 75%, we can say Abbey is better than Bea in free throw shooting ability.

Some values may bear the comparatively degree with difficulty and demand deliberative comparisons. Overall, who is the better basketball player, Abbey or Bea? Another close case as they are fairly equal when contributory values of basketball playing, shooting, passing, rebounding, etc. are compared. Still, a justified choice using practical reasoning, award it to the one who has the most points scored, makes comparison possible.

However, incomparabilist theorists would cite as support the fact that some values like uniqueness have no comparative degree. Something may not be more unique, it is either unique or it isn't. Other values like omnipresence, infinity, and absolute perfection have no comparative degree. These all-or-nothing values seem to have a "oneness" that is all-encompassing in their very nature and cannot logically bear the comparative degree. Although these values display incomparability in some respect, the construct of comparativity shows a unique quality of bearers of value. That degrees of comparativity may also be demonstrated strengthens the comparabilist's position.

The argument that qualitative differences between the various sports make them incomparable, fails as evidence for comparability was demonstrated in a variety of ways. A supervalue was interpreted as performing an assessment role, which addressed reductionist objections. Concerns regarding incongruence with the Trichotomy Thesis were addressed with addition of the fourth relational space, “on a par.” Notable-nominal cross comparisons are explained only by incomparabilism as special cases. Additionally, the demonstration of degrees of comparativity inherent in bearers of value further elucidates the nature of comparability.

However, the strongest counter-argument is to demonstrate that common qualities do exist for any athlete, regardless of sport, that lead to greatness, and that they are evaluatively comparable. By identifying a set of values shared by all athletes, the Trichotomy Thesis holds and the cross comparisons may be logically made. This counter-argument, based on *arête*, will be developed in the next section.

In regard to the first argument, there is no scale of measurement of athletic greatness thus athletes are incommensurable with respect to greatness, the current study will not attempt to counter that argument. Therefore, the current study seeks to determine greatness in athletes from any sport but measuring degrees of greatness, thereby determining who was the greatest, is beyond the scope of the study at hand.

#### 4. Greatness in Athletes

The construct of *arete*, which can be translated from the ancient Greek as “striving for excellence,” is arguably the best choice in developing a model of athletic greatness that applies across the various sports. In addition to the semantic congruence between excellence and greatness, arete is a quality of champion athletes, exactly what the study attempts to assess. Frequent writings in ancient Greek literature and philosophy offer insight into the many facets of athletic greatness. Arete shows promise as a window into the room of athletic greatness.

An athlete competes in a sport for a prize, but what are the underlying meanings here? Linguistic origins are of interest. The classical Greek verb stem *athlete* (*ein*) means to compete for a prize. While the noun *athletos* is defined as the contest, the noun *athleton* is the prize or award. The noun *athlete* is someone who competes in a contest for a prize. However, contests, as used here, include other phenomena, like court cases and war, and there was not an overall term for sport in ancient Greece. The Modern English (since the early 16th century) usage of *athlete* comes from the Middle English (12th –15th century) word and that from the Latin *athleta*. Modern English use of the word *sport* began in the 18th century. It comes from the Middle English *disport* and that from the Old French *desport* which literally means “to carry away” and has usages as nouns meaning diversion, recreation, pastime or amusement. The Latin root stems are *dis*, or apart and *porter*, to carry. Therefore, we see that the notion of recreation is inherent in the use of the word “sport.” Athletes compete for a prize in the recreation of sport (Guthrie, 1969, pp. 69-70).

Sport is viewed as a competitive form of play and its rules of engagement are different from ordinary life. Imagine tackling your boss in the office as a good linebacker tackles a running back in a football game. This different set of rules of engagement generates something of a fantasy world for players and observers. The fact that the playing becomes increasingly competitive makes sport even that much more paradoxical, adding to its fantasy potential. The skill of the media in enhancing this fantasy world of sport, with multi-camera views, update scrolls, and storytelling, has been a large part of the success of the media and sport. As one of the oldest and most prominent threads in the fabric of human culture, sport, with its heroes and villains, affects virtually every part of modern life--economic, educational, and political.

Arete assumed various shades of meaning in its usage over hundreds of years. For Homer the term primarily referred to dexterity, strength, and courage of heroes and nobles. Arete could also apply to women, Penelope was said to have shown arete in skill in putting off her suitors. Homer’s arete involved using all faculties in the attainment of excellence (Hooker, n.d., p. 17). For Socrates, arete was moral excellence of the soul, virtue. His famous paradox states “Virtue is knowledge, arete is knowledge.” Whereas the Sophists used arete more in the practical sense of efficiency at a particular task (Guthrie, 2008), Socrates thought arete more a matter of the soul. As athletes could improve athletic performance by intelligent training, one’s own arete could be enhanced with knowledge of justice, fairness and ultimate good (Last Days of Socrates, n.d.). Socrates did acknowledge arete with common jobs like the arete of a shoemaker. W. K. C. Guthrie states Socrates and Plato ascribed arete with moral values that were long-nurtured and achieved by protracted effort. Using all one’s gifts in the interest of law and justice benefited the largest number of people.

The principle was considered more important than life itself. If one gave up one's life for arete, the person would be rewarded with "an unfailing good name" (Guthrie, 1969, pp. 71-72). For Plato, arete was a quest, an intellectual struggle for truth and wisdom, a moral ideal whose philosophical orientation better suited education than the traditional poetic approach (Vascallo, n.d.). In his Socratic dialogues, Plato identified four virtues associated with arete:

- 1) Piety--self knowledge, know thyself, recognize weaknesses;
- 2) Temperance--sophrosune, nothing in excess, for the athlete, discipline;
- 3) Courage--more than bravery, intellectual endurance, goal orientation;
- 4) Justice--victory is just (Reid, n.d.).

Plato, as did Aristotle, also emphasized social responsibility and service to the community in the pursuit of arete (Holowchak, 2000, pp. 45-46). It pleased the gods and brought good fortune to the community. The soul in Plato's view was divided into three parts, the wisdom loving, the honoring, and the pleasure loving parts. The proper ordering and unification of these parts result in arete (Reid, 2007, pp. 162-163).

Plato wrote on greatness in a dialogue with Parmenides and Socrates in *Parmenides*. In this excerpt, Parmenides begins.

"...You see a number of great objects, and when you look at them there seems to you to be one and the same idea (or nature) in them all; hence you conceive of greatness as one. Very true, said Socrates.

And if you go on and allow your mind in like manner to embrace in one view the idea of greatness and of great things which are not the idea, and to compare them, will not another greatness arise, which will appear to be the source of all these?

It would seem so" (Plato, 1960, p. 375).

The passage points out the difficulty in identifying contributing factors of greatness. Axiologists must hope that refinement of techniques will improve precision and validity.

For Aristotle, arete or excellence resided in proper function. An excellent person has practical wisdom, a fully integrated personality, makes right decisions, works for the common good and reaches full potential. From *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle states that arete in people "is an activity of the soul in conformity with excellence or virtue, and if there are several virtues, in conformity with the best and most complete" (Johnson, n.d.). This view of the best virtue is entirely consistent with the discussion in the preceding section on comparability.

Aristotle's Doctrine of Mean sought to strike a balance between opposing vices, excess and defect. Good behavior meant avoiding extremes. He also thought arete was in all objects, a knife, or a horse. In regard to arete in athletes, Aristotle stated the following in *Rhetoric Book 1*,

"Athletic excellence of the body consists in size, strength, and swiftness, swiftness implying strength. He who can fling forward his legs in a certain way, and move them fast and far, is good at running; he who can grip and hold down is good at wrestling; he who can drive an adversary from his ground with the right blow is a good boxer; he who can do both is a good pancratiast; while he who do all is an "all-around" athlete" (Aristotle, 2008).

Although Aristotle recognizes that differing specific skills are needed in the various athletic events, he notes the common qualities in athletic excellence--size, strength, and swiftness. Aristotle made a distinction between honor and good in *Nicomachean Ethics, Book 1, Chapter Five*: "Honor depends on more those who confer than on him who receives it and we cannot but feel that the good is something personal and almost inseparable from its possessor" (Aristotle, 1953, pp. 30-31).

One contributory value of greatness is fame, which like honor in the preceding passage, depends on external factors beyond the athlete's control. Aristotle seems correct, and since fame as a quality of greatness is not entirely within the athlete's control and fame, itself may not be a primary determinant of greatness. The social dimension of arete is of a deeper quality than mere fame. For example, fame could arise from over-commercialization or shallow attention-getting antics. But great athletes are famous for the "right reasons," i.e. making a significant contribution to society. Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* contain accounts of heroes participating in athletic events. From *Book XIII* of the *Iliad* Homer described a funeral ritual to honor the dead soldier, Patroclus, a friend and comrade of Achilles. After the cremation, the army began to head back to Troy to resume the war. But Achilles stopped the troops and announced that games would be played in honor of Patroclus, in the tradition of those played at the funeral of King Amarynceus (Baker, 1982, pp. 10-11).

Achilles presided as the judge of the first event, a chariot race, the premier sport of ancient Greece, and offered five prizes:

1st Prize "a woman faultless in her work and a tripod with ears holding twenty-two measures;"

2nd Prize "a six-year-old unbroken mare carrying an unborn mule foal;"

3rd Prize "a beautiful unfired cauldron holding four measures, still new and shiny;"

4th Prize "two gold talents;"

5th Prize "a two-handed unfired bowl" (Miller, 2004, p. 28).

From the modern perspective, offering a slave, a captured Trojan woman, as a prize shocks the sensibilities in that a human life could be so callously traded. *Agon*, or struggle, signified the struggle to survive and was perhaps used as a rationale for allowing slavery. But from a moral standpoint, slavery is always wrong and its widespread practice discredits ancient Greek civilization.

Despite modern objections, these prizes had economic value in the ancient world. A definite sense of value is attached to each prize. The highest valued prize goes to the winner, the next valued prize to second place, and so on. Winning the race is highly desirable and a prize corresponding in high value is awarded. The measured, stepwise progression of less and less valuable prizes is remarkable in its precision. Stephen G. Miller states, "Whatever the value, real or relative, the prizes are most important as a reflection of the skill and arete (virtue or excellence) of the athlete" (Miller, 2004, p. 28).

Of additional interest is that prizes were awarded for all the various athletic events. The boxing champion is awarded a six-year-old unbroken mule and second place a goblet. In wrestling, first place is awarded a tripod worth 12 oxen and second place prize is a woman (not as fair as the first) worth four oxen. For the footrace, first place won a silver urn holding six measures, second place an oxen and third one half talent. The archery contest rewarded the winner with ten double bladed axes for shooting a bird but only ten single bladed axes for shooting the cord (Homer, n.d.). In each, an objective value is assigned the degree of excellence obtained.

Isokrates writes in his *Team of Horses*, Alkibiades of Athens entered seven teams of horses at Olympia. "He entered a number of teams, something that not even the biggest city-states, as public entities had done in the competitions, and their arete was such that he came in first, second and third" (Miller, 2004, p. 77). Arete was the mark of a champion for the Greeks.

When the Olympian, Nemean, Pythian and Isthmian athletic festivals were established, a similar prize, a wreath, was awarded each winner of the various contests which even more supports the argument that a common virtue, athletic excellence, unites all the athletes. Arete was the highest state of excellence and striving for it was virtuous but attaining it was glorious. This same quest for excellence resides in the heart of every athlete. Arete, natural talent, and a commitment to the community are the key factors in the attainment of athletic greatness. Great, when applied to athletes, refers to athletic skill and championship at the highest level, making significant contributions to society, and fame.

## ***V. Summary and Conclusion***

This study sought to determine how the quality of greatness might be applied to athletes. Etymological analysis revealed the roots of the word "great." The study discussed teleological theories of "goodness" advanced by Bentham, Mill, and Hartman. Issues of comparability and commensurability were related to the Trichotomy Thesis and advanced on the basis of the introduction of a fourth relational space—"on a par." The ancient Greek construct of *arête* as referenced by Socrates, Aristotle, and Plato was investigated in relation to athletes and chosen as a model upon which base this analysis. The scope of the study was limited to determining the existence of the quality of greatness in athletes but did not attempt measure the amount of greatness or suggest which athlete was the greatest.

The purpose of this report was to determine how the term "greatness" could be accurately applied to athletes. The study concludes that despite mass media hyperbole, only a very few athletes throughout history could be considered "great," because so few have made significant contributions to society. Eighteenth century English boxing champion, Jack Broughton killed a man in a match and vowed to never fight again until rules that are more humane were put into place. "Broughton's Rules" were revolutionary and earned him the title of the "father of scientific boxing." Mildred "Babe" Didrickson was a multi-sport champion who could run, throw, and hit with the ease and power of a man.

With Olympic Gold and Silver medals in several sports and becoming a dominant champion in the Ladies Professional Golf Association (LPGA), she broke down barriers in the social acceptance of women athletes. Jackie Robinson also broke down barriers. With his skill and courage, the entire world began to re-envision race relationships. Jim Thorpe was another multi-sport champion acclaimed by the King of Sweden as the “most wonderful athlete in the world.” His heroic athletic feats contributed to a new level of acceptance and respect for American Indians. Muhammad Ali used his platform as champion boxer to speak out against war and advance civil rights. As a worldwide icon, his image still inspires those of today. Others could be listed but these five have not only won the athletic contests, but have changed the world along the way.

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