

FOOTBALL AS A PHILOSOPHICAL PHENOMENON: MEANING, PLAY, AND HUMANITY PUT TO THE TEST AT THE AFRICA CUP OF NATIONS

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Abstract: Often relegated to the status of mere popular entertainment, football is nevertheless a philosophical subject in its own right, as a social practice, a physical experience, a symbolic phenomenon, and a space for the production of meaning. Using an approach based on the philosophy of sport, this article analyzes soccer as a total philosophical phenomenon, drawing on classical and contemporary references (Plato, Aristotle, Nietzsche, Camus, Bourdieu, Mbembe). The Africa Cup of Nations (CAN) will serve as an empirical and symbolic framework for examining the ethical, aesthetic, political, and identity dimensions of contemporary African soccer. The hypothesis put forward is that the CAN constitutes a privileged philosophical laboratory where the fundamental tensions of the human condition are revealed: freedom and rules, chance and merit, body and recognition, play and power.

Keywords: philosophy of sport, soccer, African Cup of Nations, ethics, identity, politics, aesthetics.

Introduction

For a long time, sport—and football in particular—was considered a trivial activity by philosophy, often dismissed as mere leisure or popular culture. This marginalization stems from an implicit hierarchy of human activities, in which intellectual examination is judged superior to physical action, a direct legacy of Platonic dualism. However, as Aristotle already emphasized, humans are political and practical beings, whose tangible actions are themselves expressions of meaning (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*). Football, as a regulated sport, an official competition, and a global phenomenon, represents a total social fact according to Mauss (1925): it involves the body, emotion, economy, politics, aesthetics, and ethics. To deny the possibility of a philosophical perspective on it would be to overlook one of the main arenas where collective imagination is currently being constructed. In the African context, the significance of the Africa Cup of Nations (AFCON) is particularly pronounced. AFCON goes far beyond a simple sporting tournament; it serves as a space for identity affirmation, international recognition, and symbolic reclamation in societies deeply shaped by colonial and postcolonial histories (Mbembe, 2000). How can football, and more specifically AFCON, be perceived as a philosophical experience that reveals essential tensions of human and social existence?

1. Football as a Game: Rules, Freedom, and Meaning

1.1. The Game as a Fundamental Structure of Human Experience

In *Homo Ludens* (1938), Johan Huizinga makes a decisive shift in the understanding of play. Far from being a mere accessory entertainment or a marginal activity reserved for childhood, play constitutes, he argues, a fundamental dimension of human experience and a structuring principle of culture. Huizinga

maintains that play precedes culture and is even one of its conditions of possibility. Major human institutions—law, war, religion, art—carry within them an original ludic structure.

Play is defined by several essential characteristics. First, it is distinguished from ordinary life: it establishes a separate, bounded space-time in which everyday rules are suspended. Second, it relies on the voluntary acceptance of specific rules, freely consented to by participants. Finally, it has an intrinsic purpose: one plays for the sake of playing, not for an immediate external benefit. These elements give play a symbolic and existential value that goes far beyond mere enjoyment. Applied to football, this analysis reveals the practice's profound philosophical depth. The football field constitutes a distinct space, clearly delimited, functioning as a symbolic stage. Upon entering the field, players and referees accept a specific normative order: the rules of the game, the time limit, and the sanctions in place. This acceptance is neither imposed externally nor coerced; it is voluntary and makes the very possibility of play feasible. Without rules, there is no football, only a chaotic clash of bodies.

The seemingly paradoxical nature of this situation deserves special attention. The player accepts strict constraints—no hands, respect the boundaries, submit to refereeing—and it is precisely this limitation that makes the expression of freedom possible. The player's creativity is exercised not despite the rules, but within them. The rule does not suppress freedom; it makes it intelligible and meaningful. A technical move, a feint, a decisive pass, or a daring shot only have value because they respect a shared framework. This conception of play aligns with a broader philosophical understanding of freedom, particularly in Kant. Contrary to a spontaneous, naïve idea of freedom as the absence of constraints, Kant defines freedom as autonomy: to be free is not to act without law, but to give oneself one's own law. Authentic freedom lies not in arbitrariness but in the conscious adherence to a

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norm recognized by reason as legitimate. The footballer concretely embodies this Kantian idea: he is free not because he can do anything, but because he chooses to enter a normative framework that gives meaning to his action. Thus, football appears as a practical school of freedom. The player learns that every meaningful action presupposes limits, and that the total absence of rules leads not to emancipation but to the dissolution of meaning. This lesson extends far beyond the sporting domain, applying to social and political life: a society without rules is not freer, but rather delivered to violence or arbitrariness.

Football is also meaningful because it tensions individual freedom and collective order. Each player has a margin of personal initiative, but that initiative only matters if it fits within a shared project. Football reminds us that human freedom is always relational: it is exercised with and against others, within a common framework. The rule, far from being a constraint, becomes the common language that makes the communication of actions possible. Finally, football as a game implicitly answers a fundamental existential question: how do we produce meaning in a world marked by contingency? Play neither abolishes chance nor uncertainty, but frames them. The unpredictable bounce of the ball, human error, or a contested refereeing decision reminds us of the fragility of all human endeavors. Yet the game continues. This perseverance amid uncertainty gives football symbolic weight far beyond sport, turning it into a metaphor for the human condition: acting freely in a world of rules, limits, and hazards, while continuing to create meaning.

1.2. Plato and Aristotle: Diverse Attitudes Toward Play

The role of play and physical practices in Western philosophy is largely inherited from the foundational debate between Plato and Aristotle. Their divergent conceptions of the body, action, and meaning help illuminate the philosophical tensions that still surround football's legitimacy as an object of reflection.

For Plato, the relationship to the body and play is deeply ambivalent. In *The Republic*, the body is often presented as a potential obstacle to the soul's elevation toward truth. Physical practices, when not strictly subordinated to the moral and rational formation of the citizen, risk fueling passions and diverting the soul from its pursuit of the Good. Sport, like poetry or theater, evokes powerful emotions—excitement, anger, desire to win—that can destabilize the soul and weaken rational control. This Platonic caution relies on an ontological hierarchy: the intelligible prevails over the sensible, contemplation over action, the stability of the Idea over bodily movement. This view has long influenced Western philosophy, contributing to the relegation of sporting practices to secondary activities, unworthy of serious philosophical scrutiny. Play, as an unproductive and emotional activity, appears as potentially dangerous amusement, tolerated for educational purposes but suspect when central to social life. Yet modern football invites a reconsideration of this hierarchy. Far from being a mere irrational emotional release, it mobilizes complex forms of practical rationality. The moving body does not oppose thought; it becomes its vector. Anticipating movements, reading the game, adjusting decisions in real time require embodied intelligence—a situated judgment not reducible to the abstract rationality Plato valorizes. The field thus becomes a space where thought expresses itself through gesture.

Aristotle precisely rehabilitates action in this way. Against the exclusive primacy of contemplation, Aristotle recognizes action (*praxis*) as intrinsically valuable. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, he distinguishes *praxis* from *poiesis*: the former ends in itself, while the latter is directed toward an external product. Football clearly falls under *praxis*. Its purpose is not only the final result—victory or trophy—but the activity itself: playing, cooperating, and competing within shared rules. This distinction explains why football's meaning is not reducible to the score. A team can lose while being praised for the quality of its play, its collective spirit, and adherence to sporting values. Conversely, a win achieved through cheating or violence loses symbolic value. Judging football is therefore fundamentally ethical, in the Aristotelian sense: it assesses the manner of acting rather than merely the outcome. Football emerges as a school of virtue. It mobilizes moral dispositions such as courage, temperance, justice, and practical wisdom (*phronesis*). *Phronesis*, in particular, plays a central role: the player must constantly adjust actions to unique situations without relying on mechanical rules. This practical intelligence, combining reason, experience, and the sense of the opportune moment (*kairos*), perfectly illustrates Aristotle's conception of human action.

The Africa Cup of Nations provides a particularly revealing example. Beyond sport, it stages forms of symbolic recognition surpassing the final ranking. Collective engagement, solidarity among players, respect for opponents, and adherence to rules become implicit criteria of evaluation. AFCON thus demonstrates that football is not merely a spectacle or a score but a meaningful practice embodying shared values. In sum, while Plato reminds us of the risks of surrendering to passion and irrationality, Aristotle provides conceptual tools for thinking about football as a fully human activity, where body, rule, and action converge to produce meaning. Contemporary football, as a social and symbolic practice, seems closer to the Aristotelian horizon: a collective *praxis* where, in a strong sense, a certain idea of the good life is enacted.

1.3. Tragedy, Chance, and Will to Power: Camus and Nietzsche

Reflection on football as meaningful play finds a fertile extension in the philosophies of the absurd and life affirmation, as expressed by Albert Camus and Friedrich Nietzsche. Both allow us to see football not just as a regulated practice but as an existential experience where contingency, conflict, and meaning-making unfold amid uncertainty.

Albert Camus, who was himself a goalkeeper in his youth, stated that "everything I know about morality I owe to football" (Camus, 1951). This often-cited remark is not merely anecdotal but expresses a deep philosophical intuition. The goalkeeper's position embodies a tragic condition: mistakes are visible, often decisive, and rarely repairable. Effort, preparation, and vigilance never guarantee a favorable outcome. This concrete experience aligns with Camus's core thought: the irreducible gap between human desire for justice and the world's contingency. Like Greek tragedy, football dramatizes a constant tension among three dimensions: the inevitable, the unpredictable, and individual responsibility. The inevitable manifests in the rules of the game, which apply impersonally to all. The unpredictable arises from the bounce of the ball, fortuitous deflections, contested refereeing, or human error. Individual responsibility remains central: each player is accountable for choices, even when outcomes are beyond control. AFCON, with its knockout rounds and dramatic reversals, exemplifies this tragic dramaturgy. For Camus, human greatness

lies not in the promise of a just ending but in fidelity to action despite the absurd. Football becomes a parable of human existence: we play without certainty of victory, commit without guarantee of reward, yet persist. The moral value of action depends not on the final result but on how one plays, struggles, and remains faithful to certain rules, even when injustice seems to prevail. Continuing to play amid defeat or arbitrary circumstances becomes a silent revolt in the Camusian sense.

Nietzsche's perspective complements this reading by emphasizing life affirmation. For him, practice is judged not by transcendent criteria but by its capacity to intensify life, to enhance the power to act. Football, through its total bodily engagement, energy expenditure, and emotional intensity, can be interpreted as an expression of the will to power—not as domination over others but as self-overcoming and affirmation in the face of resistance. On the field, the will to power manifests in effort, perseverance, and the ability to turn constraint into opportunity. Each dribble, run, or duel is an attempt to overcome a limit—physical, tactical, or psychological. This dynamic aligns with Nietzsche's notion of a tragic existence embraced, where suffering and failure are integrated rather than denied. Each edition of AFCON reenacts a dramatic narrative of overcoming. Favorites fall, underdogs prevail, unexpected heroes emerge. The instability of sporting fate nourishes collective imagination grounded in hope, despite repeated disappointments. Football thus becomes a living narrative, collectively enacting Nietzsche's *amor fati*: loving what happens, including failure, and transforming it into material for renewed affirmation.

In this convergence of Camus and Nietzsche, football emerges as a privileged space for meaning-making in a world without ultimate guarantees. It promises neither perfect justice nor definitive reward but offers a domain where humans affirm dignity through action. Playing, struggling, and starting anew, despite uncertain outcomes, becomes a way of saying yes to life. Football, far from mere spectacle, reveals itself as an existential experience where the major tensions of the human condition unfold concretely and collectively.

1.4. The Sporting Body as a Philosophical Object: Foucault and Bourdieu

Football engages not only rules, affects, and symbolic narratives but above all bodies. Far from being a mere biological support, the body is central to contemporary philosophy. Through Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu, the sporting body emerges as a site of power, discipline, social production, and resistance. Football thus becomes a privileged space for reflecting on how societies shape, control, and value bodies. Foucault demonstrated, notably in *Discipline and Punish*, that modern societies produce "docile bodies" through disciplinary mechanisms based on training, surveillance, normalization, and constant evaluation. High-level sport fully participates in this logic. Professional football relies on extreme body rationalization: meticulous training programs, constant medical monitoring, performance statistics, strict diets, and management of time and gestures. The player's body becomes an object of optimization, subjected to demands of efficiency and productivity.

Yet reducing football to mere disciplinary mechanisms is insufficient. The sporting body is never fully subordinated. It retains unpredictability and excess beyond control. Fatigue, injury, error, or sudden inspiration continually remind us of the player's

irreducibly human dimension. Even in a highly regulated framework, the athletic gesture can exceed technical rationality and become a singular expression. Football thus highlights the Foucauldian tension between subjugation and subjectivation: the player is both produced by sports institutions and capable of constituting himself as a subject through action. This tension is especially visible in international competitions like AFCON. African players often operate within globalized sporting structures demanding discipline, conformity, and performance. Yet AFCON provides a space where the sporting body can regain collective meaning beyond purely commercial or disciplinary logic. Football gestures acquire symbolic and identity value, becoming a shared language.

Bourdieu's sociology deepens this analysis by situating football in a field structured by specific power relations. Football is an autonomous social space governed by its own rules, yet traversed by economic, political, and symbolic dynamics. In this field, the player's body constitutes a form of capital—physical, symbolic, and economic. It is evaluated, ranked, and traded on a global market where sporting value can be dissociated from social or financial recognition. The African player exemplifies this dynamic. His body is often seen as a raw resource, valued for strength, endurance, or speed, yet undervalued symbolically or in decision-making. This asymmetry reflects domination inherited from colonial history and perpetuated in contemporary global football structures. Talent is exploited but rarely accompanied by equivalent recognition in status, power, or representation. In this perspective, AFCON can be seen as a moment of symbolic reclamation of the African body. It temporarily reverses hierarchies imposed by the global football market. The player is no longer merely an exported labor force but represents a community, a history, and collective dignity. The body becomes a vector of recognition and pride, embedded in a collective narrative surpassing the individual. This reclamation also has ethical and existential dimensions. The often-difficult material conditions in which many African players evolve—limited infrastructure, economic precarity, institutional instability—give special significance to their performances. They concretely illustrate a dynamic akin to Nietzsche's: the capacity to generate greatness from constraint. The sporting body becomes a site of self-affirmation in the face of adversity, transforming limitation into expressive power.

Ultimately, through Foucault and Bourdieu, football appears as a privileged laboratory for thinking about the contemporary body. It reveals mechanisms of control and domination as well as possibilities of resistance, subjectivation, and symbolic reclamation. The footballer's body, far from a mere instrument, becomes a space where major philosophical issues—power, identity, freedom, and dignity—are played out. Understood this way, football fully asserts itself as a legitimate philosophical object, at the intersection of politics, ethics, and lived experience.

2. Ethics and Aesthetics of Football

2.1. Football as an Ethical Space of Justice, Merit, and Transgression

Football is not merely a playful activity or an athletic performance; it also constitutes a normative space in which fundamental moral values are expressed, tested, and challenged. Through its system of rules, refereeing mechanisms, sanctions, and rituals, football enacts a certain conception of justice, merit, and

responsibility. It functions as an ethical microcosm, where actors—players, referees, coaches, supporters, and institutions—participate in a symbolic order founded on fairness and recognition. The rule forms the foundation of this ethical dimension. In principle, it ensures equality of conditions and makes fair competition possible. Respect for opponents, acceptance of referees' decisions, and acknowledgment of the final result are all part of this implicit moral pact that underpins the legitimacy of the game. In this sense, football offers a concrete representation of procedural justice: it is not the outcome that matters first, but the conformity of the process to shared rules. However, this justice remains fundamentally fragile. It is exposed to human error, the limits of refereeing perception, institutional pressures, and economic interests that permeate contemporary football.

From an Aristotelian perspective, football can be interpreted as a genuine school of virtue. Aristotle reminds us that virtue (*areté*) is measured not only by the results achieved but by the manner of acting in accordance with the excellence proper to a given practice (*Nicomachean Ethics*). Applied to football, this approach leads us to evaluate a player not only by statistical performance but also through behavior on the field. Courage in the face of adversity, self-control during confrontations, a sense of collective responsibility, and the ability to act with moderation are all moral dispositions called upon by the game. Football thus puts sometimes contradictory virtues into tension. It demands both combativeness and restraint, individual ambition and collective solidarity, the desire to win and respect for rules. This tension is precisely its ethical richness. It compels players to exercise *phronesis*, practical wisdom, adjusting their actions to ever-singular situations. The Africa Cup of Nations (AFCON), as a continent-wide competition charged with symbolic weight, provides a privileged ground for observing this dynamic. Teams embody national aspirations and popular expectations that go far beyond the sporting sphere. Every refereeing decision, every unpunished foul, and every controversial expulsion takes on an amplified moral significance.

Recurring debates about refereeing during AFCON illustrate this quasi-moral expectation toward sporting justice. The referee is seen not only as a technician applying the rules but as the guarantor of symbolic fairness between nations. When this fairness is questioned, the very legitimacy of the competition is undermined. These tensions cannot be understood merely as technical failures; they reveal the deep ethical investment football commands, especially in contexts marked by historical experiences of injustice and domination. Any ethical reflection on football must also confront the question of transgression. Cheating—whether in the form of simulation, doping, corruption, or intentional violence—tests the moral limits of the game. From a Kantian perspective, cheating is utterly condemnable because it instrumentalizes the rule instead of respecting it as an end in itself. By cheating, the player places themselves in a moral contradiction: they wish to benefit from the normative order of the game while undermining it from within. Cheating thus destroys the very possibility of fair competition.

However, a philosophy of sport attentive to the complexity of human experience calls for a more nuanced analysis. Faults are an integral part of the game, as they represent the ever-present possibility of transgression. They reveal the vulnerability and fallibility inherent in human action. The problem, therefore, is not the existence of mistakes but their normalization or

institutionalization. When cheating becomes systematic, tolerated, or even valorized in the name of performance, football loses its ethical dimension and turns into mere strategic calculation. In the African context, certain controversies surrounding AFCON—suspicions of favoritism, accusations of corruption, violent disputes over refereeing decisions—take on particular significance. They express a deep moral expectation: football is invested with a symbolic mission of justice and recognition. It represents one of the rare spaces where African nations can compete on equal footing internationally and assert their collective dignity. Any perceived breach of sporting fairness is thus experienced as a symbolic, even political, negation.

Understood this way, football emerges as a site where the tension between the ideal of justice and imperfect reality is constantly tested. It does not present abstract morality but an embodied ethics, traversed by conflict, error, and contestation. In this sense, it reflects with particular acuity the moral dilemmas of contemporary societies: how to uphold just rules in a world marked by unequal forces, competing interests, and fragile institutions? Football, far from being mere entertainment, becomes a privileged space for ethical reflection, where fundamental questions about human justice are enacted through the body and the game.

2.2. The Aesthetics of Football: Beauty, Style, and Creativity

Beyond the pursuit of results and victory, football carries a fundamental aesthetic dimension that contributes significantly to its social and symbolic meaning. The notion of the "beautiful game" occupies a central place in football imagination: it is valued by players, championed by some coaches, and celebrated by spectators as an end in itself. This appreciation demonstrates that football is not reducible to an instrumental logic of efficiency but engages a sensory experience where the beauty of action and collective harmony acquire intrinsic value. This conception aligns with the philosophical tradition recognizing beauty's autonomy from utility. For Kant, aesthetic judgment relies on disinterested pleasure—pleasure that depends neither on personal interest nor on fulfilling a need. Admiration for a technical gesture—a blind pass, a bold dribble, a curling shot, or a fluid collective combination—fits precisely this kind of pleasure. The spectator experiences satisfaction that transcends the immediate stakes of the score and may persist even when the action does not result in a goal. Football thus becomes a form of ephemeral art, situated in time, movement, and contingency, where beauty emerges unpredictably and cannot be fully reproduced. This aesthetic dimension is inseparable from player creativity. Unlike classical artistic disciplines, football allows neither exact repetition nor total control over outcomes. Creation unfolds under constraint: from opponents, time, space, and the rules themselves. It is precisely this tension that gives football its aesthetic value. Beauty is not pre-given; it arises from a unique situation, an instant decision, a subtle interplay between imagination and effectiveness.

African football is often associated—sometimes reductively or stereotypically—with qualities such as creativity, improvisation, and spontaneity. While such descriptors can fuel an exoticized vision, they nevertheless point to a specific aesthetic reality: a singular relationship to the body, rhythm, and playing space. This manifests in pronounced bodily expressiveness, the ability to invent unexpected solutions, and a certain freedom of movement that resists excessive standardization. This aesthetic can be interpreted through Nietzsche's philosophy. For Nietzsche, artistic creation affirms life against rigid norms and the domination of

abstract rationality. Dionysian art, in particular, celebrates excess, movement, and the body's vital force. The African player, in their capacity to transform constraint into invention, embodies this Dionysian dynamic: the body becomes not only an instrument of performance but a source of meaning and expression. The football gesture becomes language, capable of conveying what words cannot.

AFCON provides a privileged stage for this aesthetic. It showcases playing styles that sometimes clash with more rationalized or tactically constrained approaches. This contrast highlights a fundamental philosophical debate running through football history: the tension between efficiency and beauty. Should the result be prioritized at the expense of style, or beauty pursued even at the risk of failure? There is no definitive answer, as this involves two distinct conceptions of the meaning of sport itself. Ultimately, the aesthetics of football are not mere decoration but an essential dimension of its humanity. They remind us that the game is not solely a means to win but a space of creation, where freedom, imagination, and a sensuous relationship to the world are expressed. In this sense, football—particularly in the stylistic diversity revealed by AFCON—asserts itself as a form of collective art, where beauty arises from shared action and continually renewed invention.

2.3. Football, Nation, and Collective Identity in Africa

A nation is not simply a legal or territorial entity; it is primarily a shared narrative, a symbolic construction that confers meaning and legitimacy on collective belonging. Benedict Anderson demonstrated that nations are “imagined communities,” produced and sustained through cultural practices, media, and collective rituals. Football, and especially AFCON, constitutes one of these major rituals, capable of producing and reinforcing national sentiment, often in historical and political contexts marked by fragmentation and colonial legacies. In many African states, ethnic, linguistic, religious, or regional divisions have weakened the sense of national unity. Yet during AFCON, these differences tend to fade in favor of a provisional but intensely felt collective identity. Players wearing the national jersey embody the entire population, while the anthem and colors become symbols of mutual recognition. Each goal, save, or victory carries significance far beyond the sporting sphere. Philosophically, this dynamic can be illuminated through Hegel's thought: mutual recognition is a fundamental condition for social existence and self-constitution. A sporting victory, particularly on a continental or international stage, becomes a moment when the nation affirms its symbolic existence and collective prestige.

National identity, however, is not built solely through victory. Fan culture, often superficially portrayed as irrational passion, constitutes a profoundly collective experience. Émile Durkheim spoke of “collective effervescence” to describe moments when individuals simultaneously and intensely feel the emotions of a group, carried by shared energy. Shared emotions—excitement, disappointment, tension, or pride—produce a sense of belonging that transcends the individual. In this context, football resembles a form of secular religion: it has its rites, heroes, symbols, founding narratives, and collective celebrations. The celebration of a goal or the disappointment of elimination becomes a moment in which the community experiences and celebrates itself, creating an immediate, tangible social bond. The affective dimension of African football cannot be overlooked. Spinoza reminded us that affects—joy, fear, desire, sadness—are not secondary elements of

social life but constitutive forces of human action. In the AFCON context, understanding the passions that football evokes is to understand an essential aspect of African social life. A player's gesture, a team's strategy, and supporters' engagement are not merely sporting events—they are vectors of identity, recognition, and symbolic communication. Finally, football in Africa also reveals an implicit political dimension. National teams and continental competitions become instruments of symbolic diplomacy and international projection. Victory against another nation is not just a score; it represents an assertion of sovereignty, dignity, and presence on the global stage. Media, social networks, and television amplify this symbolic weight, turning each match into an event that engages the collective imagination and strengthens national narrative.

In sum, African football, and AFCON in particular, are not mere sporting spectacles: they are complex mechanisms for constructing collective identity. They simultaneously produce ethical, aesthetic, and symbolic effects, linking body, emotion, and reason. To fully grasp their significance, one must take seriously the affective and collective symbolic dimensions they embody and recognize that the football experience can be a genuine mode of social knowledge and recognition.

3. The Africa Cup of Nations as a Political and Postcolonial Space

3.1. The African Player as a Political Subject

Football, far from being mere entertainment or a neutral spectacle, is deeply political. It is often mobilized by states as an instrument of legitimacy and authority consolidation. The Africa Cup of Nations provides African governments with a privileged international stage to assert their modernity, organizational capacity, and institutional stability. Hosting a successful tournament, achieving strong national team performance, or celebrating a continental victory becomes a visible sign of political competence and national cohesion. This instrumentalization is not necessarily cynical; it primarily reflects the symbolic power of sport in constructing authority and producing political imagination.

However, this political dimension carries risks and ambiguities. When football is over-invested as a substitute for real political action, it can serve to mask social or economic dysfunctions and distract citizens from structural issues. Football is not an isolated sphere; it is traversed by power relations, social tensions, and contradictions inherited from colonial and postcolonial history. Achille Mbembe, in *On the Postcolony* (2000), analyzes specific forms of power and subjectivity in postcolonial Africa, highlighting the ambivalences of the political: domination and control coexist with spaces of resistance and creativity. AFCON can be one of these spaces: it embodies both the logic of state visibility and the opportunity for a temporary inversion of global hierarchies.

Through continental competition, nations historically marginalized or confronted with dominant narratives of underdevelopment can assert their excellence, creativity, and symbolic autonomy. Every match, goal, and trophy becomes a stage where cultural sovereignty and collective dignity are publicly performed. The African player, as a central actor in this dramaturgy, is not reducible to a sporting figure. Their body, gestures, decisions, and even public statements are imbued with social and political meanings that extend far beyond the game.

When a player scores a decisive goal or wins a continental trophy, they become the symbolic vector of a collective promise of recognition and dignity. Their success is interpreted as that of an entire community, and the sporting gesture acquires a universally intelligible political significance. Frantz Fanon emphasized the importance of heroic figures in symbolic decolonization: the emergence of heroes embodying freedom, competence, and national pride contributes to rewriting dominant imaginaries. The contemporary African footballer can be read as a similar figure, where sporting performance becomes a political language capable of transcending national borders and subtly challenging reductive postcolonial representations.

The player, in short, is both subject and object of the political. They are subject because their action on the field transforms collective perceptions of their nation and influences the symbolic dynamics of the continent. They are object because they are instrumentalized by media, states, and sporting institutions to serve broader narratives of legitimacy or prestige. This dual condition highlights the ambivalence of the African footballer's position: both actor of individual destiny and mirror of collective aspirations, yet also subject to the projections and expectations of a complex political and social environment.

Finally, this political dimension is not limited to victories or trophies. It also manifests in gestures of solidarity, positions on social issues, and the ways in which players represent the diversity and creativity of their continent. African football, and AFCON in particular, thus become spaces where play, ethics, aesthetics, and politics intersect, revealing how sport can serve as an instrument of symbolic recognition and a lever of social transformation.

3.2. Football, Memory, and Temporality

The Africa Cup of Nations is not only an event that occurs in the present; it is also a site of living memory. Each edition of AFCON fits within a historical continuum, where past victories, painful defeats, and legendary figures—players, coaches, or iconic teams—constitute a collective heritage transmitted across generations. This sporting memory becomes a vector of socialization and identity, connecting young spectators to the exploits of their predecessors and creating a sense of national lineage. This temporal dimension of football resonates with Paul Ricœur's reflections on memory and narrative. For Ricœur, memory is not a mere storage of events but a narrative construction that organizes time and gives meaning to human experience. Similarly, football structures social time into significant episodes: a match, a decisive goal, or a surprising elimination become symbolic markers that contribute to the continuity of collective identity and nourish the national imagination. AFCON, in particular, functions as a commemorative calendar, where each tournament renews the nation's narrative, recalling past triumphs and trials while opening the promise of a future yet to be written.

Can football be considered a humanism? The answer seems affirmative if we accept it as a symbolic expression of the human condition. Sport enacts fundamental dimensions of our existence: finitude, through fatigue, injury, or defeat; freedom under constraint, through rules and refereeing; the absurd, through chance, injustice, or controversy; and the quest for meaning, through victory, recognition, or collective memory. In this sense, football aligns with existentialist reflection: like Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, it offers no definitive redemption or absolute justice, but a lucid affirmation of existence. Playing, supporting,

and creating meaning amid uncertainty becomes a profoundly human act. This humanist dimension is particularly evident in the African context. AFCON is not limited to performance or competition; it also reaffirms collective creativity and dignity. The African player, through gestures, strategy, and improvisation, contributes to a narrative in which recognition exceeds mere sporting results. Supporters, in turn, become actors in this living memory, celebrating the past, engaging in the present, and projecting hopes into the future. Every goal scored, every trophy won or lost, becomes an episode in a collective story, strengthening the sense of belonging and the nation's symbolic continuity.

Finally, this African sporting humanism does not deny the contradictions of contemporary football—economic inequality, violence, corruption, or media pressures—but embraces them as intrinsic conditions of human action. The beauty and tragedy of the game coexist, as do victory and defeat, revealing the complexity and richness of human experience. In this perspective, AFCON opens the possibility of a specific humanism, grounded not in domination or pure performance, but in mutual recognition, creativity, memory, and collective dignity. Football thus becomes a symbolic laboratory where time, memory, and ethics converge, offering a holistic human experience that surpasses mere spectacle.

3.3. African Football and Globalization: Between Recognition and Alienation

The globalization of football has profoundly transformed the African sporting landscape, economically, culturally, and symbolically. It offers African players unprecedented international visibility, substantial financial opportunities, and symbolic recognition far beyond the continental stage. Talented players, often trained in modest infrastructures, become major actors on European, Asian, or American stages, allowing some individuals and families to escape difficult social conditions. Paradoxically, this globalization also produces forms of alienation and structural dependency. From a critical perspective, this dynamic can be seen as a form of contemporary symbolic neocolonialism. The economic centers of global football—European clubs, international media, global sponsors—extract considerable value from the creativity, training, and labor produced in African peripheries. African players are often “exported” at a young age, confronted with complex contracts and foreign cultural and economic environments. They become commodities circulating on a global market, while African clubs, deprived of their best talent, struggle to achieve sustainable autonomy. This unequal circulation of human and symbolic capital reproduces, in sporting form, domination patterns inherited from colonial history.

Peter Bourdieu provides a particularly useful analytical framework for understanding this logic. African football exists within a global field where rules, norms, and hierarchies are defined by actors endowed with the most economic, symbolic, and media capital. African players, despite their talent, often occupy subordinate positions within this field: their recognition depends on their incorporation into dominant structures and their ability to perform according to criteria set by central actors. The structural imbalance between African clubs and global football powers illustrates the persistence of systemic domination. In response to these tensions, the Africa Cup of Nations emerges as a space of symbolic and cultural resistance. AFCON temporarily recenters African football on the continent, highlights national teams, and reaffirms collective sporting sovereignty. It allows African players to reconnect with their identity, perform for their country, and

produce a narrative of collective pride independently of international mercantile logic. This competition situates football within a particular temporality: unlike globalization, which imposes immediate output, rapid transfers, and continuous spectacle, AFCON follows a ritual, cyclical, and commemorative rhythm, reminding us that football is also a culture, a symbolic language, and a vector of collective memory.

This symbolic resistance is, however, neither total nor permanent. Economic, media, and political stakes also permeate AFCON, and African football remains in constant tension between autonomy and dependence, creativity and instrumentalization. It is precisely this ambivalence that makes football a philosophically fertile subject: it allows us to think simultaneously about individual freedom, collective construction, structural domination, and symbolic resistance. African football thus appears as a mirror of the globalized world, where power, recognition, and social justice are contested, while also serving as a laboratory of creativity, identity, and humanism. Ultimately, globalization does not entirely destroy African football; it transforms it and challenges it. AFCON, with its cyclical and symbolically strong existence, provides a necessary counterweight, a moment where football regains its sense of play, memory, aesthetics, and collective sovereignty. It is in this tension between alienation and recognition that the full philosophical richness of African football is revealed.

4. The Morocco–Senegal Final: Ethical Assessment and Philosophical Perspectives

4.1. Ethical Dimension: Justice, Fair Play, and Responsibility

The final between Morocco and Senegal was not limited to on-field competition; it also encompassed moments of extreme tension and moral confrontation that went far beyond the sporting dimension. The interruption of play, followed by the Senegalese players leaving the field and then returning after negotiations, constitutes an episode rich in ethical lessons and reflections on the human condition. From an Aristotelian perspective, these actions engage both individual and collective responsibility, practical wisdom (*phronesis*), and the capacity for judgment in uncertain situations. The players, aware of the moral significance of their conduct, chose to express their disagreement while ultimately respecting the rules of the game. Their decision to return to the field illustrates the exercise of *phronesis*—the practical wisdom that allows one to assess context, weigh the consequences of one's actions, and choose a course aligned with moral excellence.

This situation also highlights the tension between legitimate protest and loyalty to collective rules. By temporarily leaving the field, the players voiced a form of objection to perceived injustice. Yet their voluntary return transformed this act of rebellion into an act of responsibility, demonstrating that sports ethics is not merely passive obedience: it entails the capacity to engage with norms, critique them, and reintegrate them consciously. From this perspective, the moral life of football is profoundly dynamic, constructed through the interaction of individual freedom, collective expectation, and regulatory constraint.

Kantian philosophy further illuminates this episode. The initial departure could be interpreted as instrumentalizing rules for personal or national interest. The return, however, demonstrates the recognition of the law as an end in itself, rather than as a mere means to an outcome. It is a moment of active morality, where the player acts not merely to win but in accordance with the implicit

moral order of the game—upholding justice, integrity, and fair play. This tension between protest and respect for rules reveals the ethical complexity of football: the player is not only a technical performer but also a moral agent whose every decision on the field can be read as a commitment to collective values.

In this context, the final victory transcends technical or strategic success. It also represents an ethical acknowledgment of effort, perseverance, and the ability to reintegrate into a shared framework after conflict. It symbolizes how football can function as a moral laboratory, where justice, responsibility, and solidarity are tested and enacted. This victory shows that the game is not merely a competition of performance but a space for constructing collective meaning, where ethical values are embodied in action, intensely experienced, and transmitted to spectators as exemplars of just and responsible conduct.

Finally, this episode demonstrates that the ethical dimension of African football extends far beyond the pitch. Players' actions are scrutinized, debated, and valorized by the national and continental community, creating a space where morality and responsibility become constitutive elements of collective identity. The Morocco–Senegal final, through the interruption, the players' departure, and their return, vividly illustrates that football can serve as a genuine laboratory of justice and humanity, capable of imparting lessons about conduct in social and political life.

4.2. Aesthetic Dimension: Style, Creativity, and Drama

The interruption of play and the departure of the Senegalese players introduced a novel dramatic dimension to the match. The field became a theater where suspense, tension, and uncertainty were performed simultaneously. The suspension of the game created a symbolic void, a moment of charged anticipation, in which spectators, officials, and players themselves became acutely aware of the fragility and complexity of human action. This dramaturgy echoes the tragic and unpredictable nature of football, reminiscent of Greek tragedy: effort and preparation never guarantee victory, and fate, refereeing decisions, or unforeseen circumstances can completely alter the course of the game.

From a Camusian perspective, this suspension illustrates the absurd—the constant tension between the desire for control and the reality of chance. Confronted with events beyond their control, the players were challenged to find meaning in their actions. Their voluntary return to the field became an affirmation of human freedom in the face of the absurd: despite constraints, chance, and apparent injustice, they chose to act, continue playing, and create meaning. This capacity to fully re-engage embodies a form of aesthetic courage and resistance, where technical gestures carry both moral and symbolic significance. Each action on the field becomes simultaneously an artistic and ethical expression.

The aesthetic dimension of football is also evident in the way players translate emotion, tension, and uncertainty into creativity and personal style. AFCON provides a stage where bodily expressiveness, improvisation, and spontaneity combine with tactical discipline to produce a living spectacle, rich in beauty and narrative intensity. In this sense, the player becomes both actor and author, inventing unforeseen solutions and technical gestures that surpass mere utilitarian function. Nietzsche might interpret this as an expression of the will to power—not domination over an opponent but the capacity to transcend obstacles, reaffirm vital strength, and create meaning and beauty through action.

The collective reaction of the crowd intensifies this aesthetic dimension. Shared emotion—shouts, applause, anxiety, or relief—transforms the match into a participatory performance, where the beauty of the game is embedded in a broader social and emotional fabric. The final victory, following the interruption and players' return, assumes a particular aesthetic significance: it is no longer simply the result of strategic calculation but the climax of a collective narrative, a moment of catharsis in which spectators and players alike experience the beauty of skill, creativity, and overcoming adversity. Thus, the episode demonstrates that football is not merely a sport but also an aesthetic performance, a living theater, and a symbolic laboratory of the human condition, where style, creativity, and drama converge to produce meaning, emotion, and beauty.

4.3. Symbolic and Collective Dimension: Identity, Memory, and Humanism

The Senegalese players' departure and return constitute a foundational moment of collective memory, extending far beyond a simple sporting contest. This hiatus, experienced by participants and spectators as exceptional, symbolizes humanity's capacity to negotiate, dialogue, and reintegrate into a collective framework, even under extreme tension or protest. The players' decision to return reflects a subtle balance between legitimate revolt and respect for collective norms, becoming a tangible example of shared responsibility and moral awareness.

From Émile Durkheim's perspective, this experience contributes to collective effervescence—a moment in which individuals feel connected through a shared emotion, and the community is redefined and strengthened. Supporters, whether in the stadium or watching remotely, share the emotional intensity, experience uncertainty and relief, and thereby participate in the creation of durable symbolic memory. Every discussion, narrative, or media account of this match becomes a vehicle for transmitting this experience, embedding it within the country's social and cultural history.

The final victory, achieved after this period of crisis and tension, carries profound symbolic value: it is not merely a technical or tactical triumph but a victory of moral perseverance, dialogue, and cooperation. It illustrates how football can generate contemporary heroic figures, where success simultaneously expresses dignity, recognition, and collective humanism. According to Frantz Fanon, such figures are essential for constructing a positive postcolonial identity: they embody the ability of Africans to create their own narratives of power, creativity, and symbolic legitimacy.

The match thus becomes an initiatory narrative, staging absurdity, conflict, tension, and resolution. It provides a symbolic model of human action: despite contingency, unpredictability, and fragility, it is possible to find meaning, reaffirm freedom, and produce collective outcomes. The interruption and return episode also strengthens the notion of mnemonic continuity. Victories, obstacles overcome, and moments of tension become reference points for future generations, inscribing football into a ritual and educational temporality.

This final thus fully illustrates the philosophical and humanist dimension of AFCON. Football emerges as a space of moral learning, an aesthetic theater, and a vector of memory and collective identity. The ultimate victory is not merely a technical triumph; it is the result of a collective practice of freedom,

responsibility, creativity, and mutual recognition, transforming the sport into a lived philosophical experience. In this sense, African football, through moments like this, becomes a concrete manifestation of humanism, where competition and performance intersect with ethics, emotion, and shared memory.

Conclusion

Long marginalized by academic philosophy, football emerges, in light of this analysis, as a major philosophical object. As a regulated game, bodily practice, aesthetic phenomenon, ethical space, and political stage, it concentrates the fundamental tensions of human existence. The Africa Cup of Nations, in particular, reveals the symbolic power of African football. It serves as a laboratory where questions of identity, recognition, power, and memory are replayed within postcolonial and globalized contexts. To philosophically reflect on football is not to succumb to the spectacle but to acknowledge that the truth of the human condition is also revealed through play, the body, and collective emotion. In this respect, AFCON is more than a sporting event: it is a shared philosophical experience. The Morocco–Senegal final demonstrates that football transcends mere competition to become an ethical, aesthetic, and symbolic laboratory. Through tension, dialogue, and victory, it exposes the dynamics of freedom, responsibility, and collective memory that shape human experience. AFCON thus stands as a living philosophical space, where action, emotion, and creativity converge to produce meaning and humanism.

In a world marked by global inequalities, African football reminds us that meaning can emerge from popular, bodily, and collective practices. It invites philosophy to move beyond abstraction and confront lived experience.

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