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April 12, 2022

THE MAMBA MENTALITY: How Bryant's Basketball Philosophy on the Pursuit of  
Excellence can Inspire the Next Generation toward Virtuous Action

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## Abstract

### THE MAMBA MENTALITY: How Bryant's Basketball Philosophy on the Pursuit of Excellence can Inspire the Next Generation toward Virtuous Action

By Henry C. Yeary

The Mamba Mentality was developed by the late, great basketball legend Kobe Bryant during his 20-year career with the Los Angeles Lakers. His way of life, work ethic, and frame of mind is evidently expressed through his pursuit of excellence in basketball. By exploring ancient Greek philosophy relating to virtue ethics, I argue for an understanding of Aristotle's work that pertains to the significance of athletic training insofar as it is an activity of practicing practical elements of virtue as a vital counterpart to the theoretical aspects of philosophical virtues. Following my interpretation of Aristotle's work, I dissect the Mamba Mentality, starting with the five pillars that Bryant articulated himself (Fearlessness, Relentlessness, Passion, Obsessiveness, and Resilience), into 24 different accessible attributes. I discern these specific attributes from Bryant's words and actions, on and off the basketball court. Of course, the Mamba Mentality represents Bryant's approach to life as much as it does his approach to basketball. His philosophy on the pursuit of excellence centers upon enjoying the arduous process of continuous self-improvement and helping inspire others to pursue excellence. The focus of his philosophy is intellectually profound and leads one, through proper embodiment, to engender excellent performance in one's own life. In many ways, this work establishes the philosophical relevance of Bryant's Mamba Mentality and then demonstrates what exactly it is, in the fullest sense. Ultimately, the story of Kobe Bryant and his way of life is about the transformation of self and of others. Perhaps the contemporary models of education in the west fail to incorporate athletic training and, in doing so, restrict the youth's development to a purely theoretical realm. This thesis argues that the next generation would benefit greatly from employing tactics to further enhance the practical application of such knowledge and instilling aspects of the Mamba Mentality in the youth.

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I am especially indebted to Dr. Kevin Corrigan: there is simply no way to overstate the influence that his teaching, indeed his character, has had not only in the creation and development of this thesis, but also to my entire career at Emory University. Through all of the moments that Dr. Corrigan lent me his perceptive ear and encouraged me to contemplate the role of education, philosophy, happiness, family, and friends in my life, he showed me what a true mentor is. His wisdom, composure, generosity, kindness, openness, and more will not be forgotten in my lifetime.

I must also thank my brother, Malcolm, for his indispensable counsel. He has always been the most positive light an older brother could possibly be. He introduced me to meditation and, in many ways, to philosophy itself. As he recently remarked, this thesis has come a long way from its chaotic inception in a dusty room in New York, and it was not without his help. Of course, none of this would have been possible without my parents, Frank and Lesley Yeary, who have inspired me to travel, think creatively, and follow rational passion.

This thesis would have not grown into its current form if it were not for the help of my great friend Neha Gundavarapu, who has always been a great listener, editor, and intellectual partner. She helped me focus my work and implement the Mamba Mentality on a daily basis.

In addition, this thesis naturally was influenced by another great friend of mine, GianMarco Douglas. After meeting him in a poetry class and then on the Emory basketball courts in my freshman year (2018), he has provided me with invaluable friendship. On many occasions he has kept me sane; I have been able to confide in him; and, perhaps most notably, he has been a source of inspiration when it comes to learning about the game of basketball and improving.

Certainly, I appreciate the feedback I received from Dr. Peter Wakefield and Dr. Mark Risjord throughout this project, which helped me develop and organize critical aspects of the thesis. Though he had many doubts, Dr. Wakefield's questioning and criticism gave me new avenues to explore and objections to defend. His contributions indirectly helped me realize that everything, positive or negative, is just an opportunity to improve and elevate.

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*This project is dedicated to the next generation of athletes, artists, scholars, and masters; and, to the process of education. In the words of Kobe Bryant:*

***“May you find the power in understanding the journey of others to help you create your own.”***

***WARNING:***

**You Are About to Embark on a  
Philosophical Adventure,  
Exploring High-Level Basketball.**

**Enjoy.**

## INTRODUCTION

# MEET KOBE BRYANT

*Once upon a time, there was a young [kid] who had dreams of becoming one of the greatest basketball players of all time. He worked day and night, every day, for years and years and years and years and years. And as time went on, twenty years had passed—and he felt he had accomplished all that he set out to accomplish. But what he had come to realize is that the goal he set out initially, to become the greatest of all time, was a very fickle one. And he realized that the most important thing in life is how [his] career moves and touches those around [him], and how it carries forward to the next generation. He realized, that is what makes **true greatness**. So, the story would be about transformation—of a kid looking inwardly to then growing up and understanding the importance and power of looking outwardly.<sup>1</sup>*

If there were one statement to succinctly epitomize the story of Kobe Bryant’s basketball career and the life wisdom he accumulated therein, I would have to choose the preceding one. The late great NBA legend charted a burdensome and inspirational course throughout his life—one that has left its mark on the world in a way that only few can. For those who may not be so familiar with the sport of basketball, and the elite athletes who compete in the NBA, Kobe Bryant is on the shortlist of greatest American athletes of all time.<sup>2</sup> The accolades he amassed

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<sup>1</sup> “Kobe Bryant’s Last Game Movie.” *YouTube*, uploaded by Poitrekz Productions, 14 Apr. 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Bill Robbins, “The Best Ever: The 50 Greatest Male Athletes of All-Time.” *Bleacher Report*, Oct. 2017.

throughout his basketball career and the brief career he enjoyed thereafter speak volumes about his intellectual, mental, and physical capacities for excellence. However, the story of Kobe Bryant and his powerful qualities of mind cannot be told without acknowledging his work ethic—the intrinsic, positive force of his being. There is good reason to believe the perspective that Bryant applied to the activities he conducted day-in and day-out allowed him to make the most of his potential. The primary topic explored in this work are such reasons.

In 2017, on the night of his basketball jersey retirement ceremony, not even a full season after his personal retirement from the league, Bryant displayed this perspective while addressing his four daughters; he said that if there were one truth, ultimately, that they learn from his career, he hopes it is this: “Those times when you get up early and you work hard. Those times you stay up late and you work hard. Those times when you don’t feel like working—you’re too tired, you don’t want to push yourself, but you do it anyway: *That is actually the dream.*”<sup>3</sup>

After playing for the Los Angeles Lakers for two decades, over half his life at that point, both his jersey numbers—8 and 24—were lifted to display from the rafters of the Lakers arena, where they will remain for the eternity of the franchise.

### *A Noble End*

As if five championships, 18 All-Star nominations, 11 All NBA First Team selections, an MVP award and more, were not enough to solidify the profound legacy of Kobe Bryant, his final NBA game is one of the greatest ultimate performances by an athlete of all-time. On April 13th, 2016 the Utah Jazz played the Los Angeles Lakers. Closing an unprecedented twenty-year basketball career with one organization, Kobe Bryant retired from the league in the same

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<sup>3</sup> “Kobe Bryant No.8 & No.24 Jersey Retirement In Los Angeles.” *YouTube*, uploaded by NBA, 19 December 2017.

legendary fashion with which he entered it. At age 38, despite suffering several serious injuries over the years, Bryant led the LA Lakers to victory *one last time*, scoring 60 of his team's 101 points. As sensational as his total scoring output was, it was far from the whole story.

Of course, you should know that with over 125,000 games played in NBA history,<sup>4</sup> there have been less than 100 performances when a player scored 60+ points in a single game; Kobe Bryant did it six times (most in the modern era). On this night, the Lakers were trailing for virtually the entire game. With three minutes left to go in the contest, LA was still down by ten points, and it appeared as though Kobe Bryant's last game would be a loss—that is, unless he had anything to say about it.

Well, he did. In the final three minutes of his final NBA game, Kobe Bryant single-handedly outscored the *entire* Utah Jazz team 15-2. His ultimate display of athletic excellence—at age 38—led the Lakers to a wildly improbable comeback; and it was, by all accounts, nothing short of extraordinary. Then again, this was Kobe Bryant: a true master of the game and one of the greatest players of all time. He had sustained numerous extraordinary performances throughout his career, from an 81-point game (highest in the modern era) to swishing two free throws with a ruptured Achilles tendon. Suffice to say, Kobe Bryant was not the typical athlete—he was a noble athlete.

### *The Philosophy of an Athlete*

Certainly, Kobe Bryant's physical capacity for excellent performance was not at all divorced from the qualities of his mind. In fact, he cultivated a specific frame of mind during his athletic career, known as the Mamba Mentality: the mindset of an individual toiling toward

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<sup>4</sup> See *StatMuse*, under "How Many NBA Games Have Been Played in NBA History."

excellence via the habitual conditioning of body and mind to perform with extraordinary expertise. While the Mamba Mentality represents the philosophy of an athlete pursuing excellence, it is, more broadly, as Bryant himself describes it, a way of life, or a work ethic. The defining characteristic, if any, of the Mamba Mentality is that at its core it is *a mode of activity or being*—not merely an attitude—rooted in self-discipline and enjoying the continuous process of self-improvement.

Surely, athletic training is a prime example of how one actualizes a higher state or activity of potential being—that is, existing with a more consistent, beautiful, and profound capacity for excellent performance, insofar as the activity is in the aim of the training. However, whether or not the process of training the body and the mind for athletically excellent performance is at all comparable to the kind of training necessary for morally excellent performance is still heavily debated—that is, if it is even considered in the first place.

In reference to ancient Greek philosophers, namely Aristotle, one sees the role of athletic training in the *gymnasium* as a valuable constituent of moral education. Indeed, the Greeks, specifically Aristotle and many of his contemporaries, believed that moral characters are largely a product of training and instruction.<sup>5</sup> It is of no surprise, then, that the system of education in ancient Greece intentionally concerned physical activity and the practical embodiment of virtues via athletic training.

In light of this, there are many relevant comparisons and connections to unveil between the philosophy from antiquity and Kobe Bryant's practical philosophy for the cultivation of excellent athletic performance, as the Mamba Mentality represents. Within many intellectual and

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<sup>5</sup> Aristotle, *EN*, 2.1 (1103a).

academic circles, it seems that the Mamba Mentality is largely unknown and unexplored as a philosophy of pursuing habitual excellence—be it toward an athletic, aesthetic, or ethical aim. In this work, I argue for an understanding of Bryant’s Mamba Mentality that pertains to the cultivation of one’s capacity for excellent performance, not exclusively in athletic activity, but ethically as well, which has profound implications for the modern institution of education.

### *Affinity with Virtue Ethics*

In approaching this project, I first establish virtue ethics as my means of understanding ‘the good,’ in lieu of other prevalent approaches in normative ethics like deontology or utilitarianism.<sup>6</sup> Founded in antiquity, virtue ethics is primarily concerned with virtues, practical wisdom, and the disposition of one’s moral character. While there are many defensible theories of moral judgment, virtue ethics has long been respected and supported as an approach to understanding ‘the good’ and to determining how one ought to be or act; and, as such, it is the foundation upon which I evaluate the Mamba Mentality and its potential merits. Furthermore, virtue ethics is a particularly relevant philosophical lens through which to examine the Mamba Mentality, since athletic training is a habitual process that inherently regards one’s cultivation and capacity to think and act at the same time. Therefore, it is significantly interconnected with the primary concern of virtue ethics: the nature of one’s dispositions.

The Mamba Mentality itself makes no normative ethical claims about the world. It doesn’t specifically side with utilitarianism or deontology, though it may entail traces of such thoughts. It is a way of interacting with experience and participating in life that cultivates excellence within oneself. This is why it aligns so well with virtue ethics. One can extrapolate

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<sup>6</sup> See *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, under “Virtue Ethics.”



qualities of patience or generosity from Kobe Bryant's career, but he might not so explicitly state the importance of such.

### *Thesis Roadmap*

In order to appropriately address my claim, it is imperative to understand the relationship between athletics, aesthetics, and ethics in as much as the ancient Greeks—the founders of virtue ethics in the west—considered such domains to be interwoven. Accordingly, in Chapter One, I examine specific works of Aristotle to better understand the conceptions of *kalokagathia* (beautiful goodness) and *aretē* (virtue or excellence). After establishing the interplay between athletics, aesthetics, and ethics in ancient Greek society, I then argue that athletic training is more than a merely relevant domain for philosophical investigation: it is a vital institution that orients a character toward the active embodiment of virtue. Indeed, athletic training demonstrates its value insofar as it not only cultivates the practical disposition of virtues in an actor, but also conditions one's motivation of body and mind for pursuing the habitual performance of excellence. For this reason, I will also investigate the ancient Greek *gymnasia* (e.g., Aristotle's Lyceum, which was established just outside of the city-state of Athens). By better understanding the role of the *gymnasium* (the term from which English derives the word 'gym') in Greek society, we can see how the inception of western education valued physical and athletic training far more than we do today; thus, further supporting the connection between ethical and athletic development.

In the subsequent chapter, I examine the Mamba Mentality and its five pillars exemplified by the athlete Kobe Bryant. In Chapter Two, the Mamba Mentality is recognized as a quality of mind in regard to activity—or, more plainly, a work ethic—that Bryant developed

throughout his professional career as an elite athlete. I demonstrate how the five pillars of the Mamba Mentality (Fearlessness, Resilience, Obsessiveness, Relentlessness, and Passion) are all embodied by Bryant in very practical ways, which detail the actions that coincide with the full actualization of his philosophy. As will become clear, the Mamba Mentality elevated Bryant's capacity for habitually excellent athletic performance and, moreover, is worthy of praise, investigation, and adoption precisely because it can assist *anyone's* pursuit of excellence or mastery.

Ultimately, I contend that the Mamba Mentality is not exclusively pertinent to athletic mastery and excellence. Bryant's philosophy comprises qualities of mind that naturally lead to the habituation of excellent performance; and, on this basis, the Mamba Mentality can be aimed at the pursuit of moral excellence—not simply by contrast with athletic excellence, but in concert with it. The pursuit of athletic excellence, via the Mamba Mentality, is a mode of activity centered upon the understanding of and training in a specific sport—this is, of course, the major aim; however, the pursuit of *moral* excellence, via the Mamba Mentality, fundamentally differs in aim and, thus, must instead concern itself with the contemplation, practice, and understanding of intellectual and moral virtues. To be sure, the Mamba Mentality does not solely involve athletic training—it entails attributes that inherently relate to the creation and cultivation of genuine wisdom, not just athleticism. In this section (the conclusion), I address how Bryant exemplifies the intellectual and philosophical growth congruent with athletic pursuits, and, more broadly, the implications of my research on the Mamba Mentality for the institution of education. Finally, I propose that properly embodying the Mamba Mentality in its fullest sense, in consultation with reason and in pursuit of wisdom, inspires truly virtuous agents—and for that

precise reason, it warrants a more substantial role in our modern models of education.

Following the conclusion, I provide an Appendix of images. Some of which architecturally detail the ancient *gymnasia*, other of which are images pertaining to basketball. As such, these images, referenced at different instances within this work, attempt to vivify particular elements of Kobe Bryant's career.

### *My Museum of Sources*

In researching the contents of this project, I have created a distinct archive of sources. My personal history with both basketball and ancient Greek culture date back to the days of my youth. I have watched Bryant play basketball since I was 8 years old. The first full NBA Finals series I ever watched was a few years later, in 2010, when Bryant's Lakers fought the Boston Celtics for an NBA Title. Kobe Bryant was instrumental in my deeper immersion into the sport of basketball; I followed him through his retirement and into his next career until his tragic, sudden death in January of 2020, which heavily impacted me.

As for ancient Greece, I have been intrigued and fascinated with Greek mythology since shortly after I could read. Granted, it was not until high school that I dove deeper into the philosophy of antiquity—which eventually inspired me to live in Athens, Greece, during my semester abroad as an undergraduate. For both academic and personal reasons, I have read Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and *De Anima* completely, as well as parts of his *Metaphysics*, *Politics*, and *Rhetoric*. My philosophical background also includes the works of other prominent figures from ancient Greece and ancient Rome, such as Plato's *Apology*, *Phaedrus*, and *Symposium*, Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations*, and many more. These Platonic and Stoic texts are supplementally useful in this work as we understand the broader philosophical connections of the

Mamba Mentality with different thinkers from Antiquity, around the time of Aristotle. Analogies with esteemed thinkers across time, specifically those concerned with virtue ethics, can help support the philosophical and psychological merit of Bryant's way of life. From this base of knowledge and these texts, I embarked on this philosophical journey of understanding Kobe Bryant's Mamba Mentality and its purest implications on thought and action.

In an effort to yet better understand Kobe Bryant and his mind, I watched hours and hours of game footage, interviews, documentaries, highlights, and news clips. In addition, I read game summaries, news stories, and sports articles on both the history of basketball and official NBA records. I consulted books on leadership qualities, on habitual systems, and—most notably, a book written by Kobe Bryant himself—on the Mamba Mentality. Published in 2018, *The Mamba Mentality: How I Play* is a book of in-depth self analysis on Bryant's own game and career; the book is accompanied with behind-the-scenes pictures by the LA Lakers photographer Andrew Bernstein, who worked with Bryant for all twenty years he spent with the franchise.

Occasionally, throughout this work, I support certain claims with scientific research, often in the footnotes. I reference studies on the brain processes of courage, self-discipline, long-term planning, resilience and more—all of which suggest that individuals can train their capacity for such behaviors. I reference the overwhelming evidence of meditation's positive effects on the brain—such as reducing anxiety and improving executive control—which indicate that a practical manifestation of the Mamba Mentality (e.g., mindfulness, meditation) can increase one's capacity for excellent performance. Ultimately, these studies aim to scientifically support certain connections between the performance of excellence and the qualities or behaviors rooted in the Mamba Mentality. I fully encourage a further investigation of these connections.

Ultimately, this project should present itself as inherently interdisciplinary, as I approach topics of philosophy, sport, anthropology, art history, psychology and education. It is vital to understand that Aristotle's philosophy, among other schools of thought in antiquity, is effectively serving as a lens through which we will look upon and analyze the Mamba Mentality. This, in turn, I believe, allows us to understand Kobe Bryant's philosophy in a more profound fashion—in that, we are more capable of interpreting his intellectually grounded ideas with a genuine philosophical integrity and accuracy.

## CHAPTER ONE

# ATHLETICS IN ANCIENT GREECE

*Greek philosophers considered sport a religious and civic—in a word, moral—undertaking. Sport, they said, is morally serious because mankind's noblest aim is the loving contemplation of worthy things, such as beauty and courage.<sup>7</sup>*

### *The Gymnasium*

The *gymnasium* in Ancient Greece functioned as a social, intellectual, and athletic institution. Most commonly understood as the place where athletes and competitors trained, the *gymnasium* was also a significant component of the youth's educational development. It had inherent ties to athletics and aesthetics, and, as we will see, a profound connection to philosophy as well.

Upon investigating the origins of the *gymnasium*, one cannot help but notice that it has etymological roots in the Greek word 'nude (*gymnos*),' precisely because all the athletes trained with little or no clothing.<sup>8</sup> This was, effectively, "to encourage aesthetic appreciation of the male body, and to be a tribute to the gods."<sup>9</sup> So, athletic training derived part of its philosophical value in the appreciation of the divine through the pursuit of beauty.

As a structure, the *gymnasium* (see appendix A.1) typically had separate sections related to different kinds of practice—often *gymnasia* consisted of bathing facilities, sanctuaries,

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<sup>7</sup> George F. Will, *Men at Work: The Craft of Baseball* (Harper Collins, 2010) 2.

<sup>8</sup> See *Dictionary.com*, under "Gymno- Definition & Meaning."

<sup>9</sup> See *Wikipedia*, under "Gymnasium (ancient Greece)."

stadiums, and a *peristylon*<sup>10</sup> (“courtyard enclosed by colonnades”).<sup>11</sup> While the presence of a peristyle with the addition of a *propylon*<sup>12</sup> (monumental gateway)—which *gymnasia* had—typically signified a structure of exclusivity, the nature of *gymnasia* in the social landscape of Ancient Greece began to change around the start of the 4th century BCE, and the *gymnasium* evolved into a public institution.

Organizationally, *gymnasia* were commonly constructed in the more suburban areas of the city because they required a large, flat space to accommodate the different kinds of training, which included structures like a *palaestra* (wrestling school) and *dromos* (practice track).<sup>13</sup> Eventually, the role of the *gymnasium* grew from being exclusively involved with athletics, to become interconnected with both education and medicine.<sup>14</sup> Naturally, this led to a concern that the isolated quality of its urban design was doing the newly-public institution a disservice. Aristotle was one of the prominent figures to suggest that *gymnasia* “should be situated near the agora, i.e., within the city.”<sup>15</sup> In fact, some scholars suggest that this relocation prospect was not radical enough. “As Aristotle imagined the topography of his ideal city,” Reid argues, “the highest and most important place ‘adequate for the display of virtue’ is dedicated to the gods.”<sup>16</sup> Aristotle thought the *gymnasium* (representing education, athletics, and medicine) should be beside the temples and most honorable institutions of the society; and so, perhaps, he did not perceive the construction of it in the “next level down,” beside the commerce-free marketplace—*agora* (see appendix A.4)—was not the most suitable placement<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Appendix Image A.2

<sup>11</sup> Frederick E. Winter, “Gymnasia, Palaistra, and Baths.” *Studies in Hellenistic Architecture*, (University of Toronto Press, 2006) 117.

<sup>12</sup> Appendix Image A.3

<sup>13</sup> Frederick E. Winter, “Gymnasia, Palaistra, and Baths.” *Studies in Hellenistic Architecture*, (University of Toronto Press, 2006) 116.

<sup>14</sup> Burkhard Emme, “The Emergence and Significance of the Palaestra Type in Greek Architecture” *Development of Gymnasia and Graeco-Roman Cityscapes* (Berlin: Edition Topoi, 2018) 144.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 146

<sup>16</sup> Heather Reid, “Aristotle's Pentathlete.” *Sport, Ethics, and Philosophy*, 2010, pp. 183–194.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

Aristotle, like his predecessors Plato and Socrates, believed the *gymnasion* to be an important place for education. Accordingly, Aristotle established his school, the Lyceum, in a *gymnasium* itself (see appendix A.5). “By locating his school [there], Aristotle found room for his philosophical strolls and large public lectures. All of this was surely more than a matter of convenience; Aristotle seems to have envisioned the *gymnasium*... as a public space dedicated to the cultivation of virtue.”<sup>18</sup> While philosophy and athletics became commonplace in *gymnasia* around the time of Aristotle, the education model of the Lyceum was rather unique—in that, it separated the sciences into three distinct kinds: productive, practical, and theoretical.<sup>19</sup> “The productive sciences, naturally enough, are those that have a product,” which includes engineering, architecture, strategy, and rhetoric.<sup>20</sup> “The practical sciences, most notably ethics and politics,” but also including economics, “are those that guide behaviour,” in relation to the self, *oikos* (house), and *polis* (city).<sup>21</sup> “The theoretical sciences—physics, mathematics, and theology—are those that have no product and no practical goal but in which information and understanding are sought for their own sake.”<sup>22</sup> These were the three disciplines of science in the initial western conception of education.

Though all of these disciplines were emphasized in the Lyceum, the role of athletic training was not diminished. In fact, athletics had clear connections both to formal instruction and to the sciences Aristotle demarcated. Consider the following passage from Reid’s “Aristotle’s Pentathlete”:

“Finding the golden mean in athletics depends partly on a coach, at least in the early stages, but as Aristotle notes, the mean is also ‘relative to us’ and therefore

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<sup>18</sup> Heather Reid, “Aristotle’s Pentathlete.” *Sport, Ethics, and Philosophy*, 2010, pp. 183–194.

<sup>19</sup> See *Britannica Encyclopedia*, under “Aristotle.”

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*



demands self-knowledge with respect to our capacities and tendencies. Discovering that I lack leg speed and therefore training for it specifically may correspond with knowing that I lack courage and training to compensate for that weakness. In order for the development of intellectual virtues to occur, the athlete must take an active role in her training. She must also cultivate her theoretical understanding of what is noble and good (*kalon*) and apply it to particular situations, such as enduring physical pain for the higher good of merited honour. Indeed the ability to derive pleasure from worthy things is itself a sign of virtue for Aristotle.<sup>23</sup>

Students of the Aristotelian moral education system began by “performing moral actions and developed [sic.], through this performance, an understanding of the good and beautiful.”<sup>24</sup> As Aristotle articulates it in *Nicomachean Ethics* (II.I), “moral virtue comes about as a result of habit, whence also its name *ēthikē* is one that is formed by slight variation from the word *ethos*,” which can be understood as a word for practice.<sup>25</sup> Therefore, it was through education in the *gymnasium* that the youth in ancient Greece realized a higher potential for their beings and became more actively and intellectually attuned to virtue.

Ultimately, it is imperative to understand Ancient athletics in a social context “aimed at noble action and virtue. Athletics existed not just for the good of individuals, or even individual city states, but for the collective good of the greater community.”<sup>26</sup> In this way, it is quite easy to see the *gymnasium* as a place where the youth became healthy, cultivated beauty, “learned justice through competition, built lasting bonds of friendship and sacrificed [their] sweat in service of the larger community.”<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Heather Reid, “Aristotle's Pentathlete.” *Sport, Ethics, and Philosophy*, 2010, pp. 183–194.

<sup>24</sup> Heather Reid, “Athletic Virtue and Aesthetic Values in Aristotle's Ethics.” *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*, 2019, pp. 67.

<sup>25</sup> Aristotle, *EN*, 2.1 (1103a).

<sup>26</sup> Heather Reid, “Aristotle's Pentathlete.” *Sport, Ethics, and Philosophy*, 2010, pp. 183–194.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

### *The Relevance of Athletics in Aristotle's Ethics*

In modern times, formal education consists of rigidly defined disciplines that often do not interact with one another in any meaningful fashion. From primary school onwards, the material one learns in social studies is usually kept isolated from art or music class. As we move into higher education, especially universities, the boundaries of different disciplines are even more evident and isolating. All the while, there is a general disdain for athletic and artistic education, in contrast to the theoretical knowledge valued in the current system: one only needs to consider how little time he or she spent in classes like gym and art in comparison to the other 'core' classes. A hyper focus on theoretical knowledge is not inherently misguided, but it is rather incomplete.

The ancient Greeks, on the one hand, integrated sport, art, philosophy, and the sciences, acknowledging that their unity allowed for the practical and theoretical—that is, holistic—development of one's character. Today, on the other hand, it is customary to separate these domains in education. As a result, the connection between athletics, aesthetics, and ethics may seem more difficult to discern.

One can see the relationship between athletics, aesthetics, and ethics more clearly in the educational model implemented by the ancient Greeks. For them, the *gymnasium* represented the educational use of sport, and it also functioned as moral education. Indeed, the Greeks understood that sport—more specifically, athletic training—can serve the practical development of virtue. Through better understanding the ancient Greek term *kalokagathia*, commonly translated 'beautiful goodness,' we can more readily discern the interconnection of the aforementioned three qualities (athletics, aesthetics, and ethics).

Aristotle reasons in *Eudemian Ethics* (VIII.III) that, since *kalokagathia* is a combination of all the virtues, it is “perfect goodness.”<sup>28</sup> An agent capable of practicing this superlative virtue is known as a *kalos kagathos*. Through the analysis of *Eudemian Ethics* (*EE*) and *Nicomachean Ethics* (*EN*), Aristotle acknowledges that activity in accordance with perfect virtue is pleasurable, beautiful, practically wise, and morally excellent—such are natural symptoms of virtuous action. Since the ultimate embodiment of *kalokagathia* “depends on a combination of deliberate character training (*ethos*) complemented by an intellectual understanding of the beautiful (*kalon*),” perfect goodness must have a significant connection to both aesthetics and ethics.<sup>29</sup>

Through an analysis of his *Nicomachean Ethics*, we can see that the good life—which Aristotle essentially defines as human flourishing—is one of repeated actions of moral excellence that can be refined through practical development and wisdom. Aristotle’s work opens with an investigation of the chief good in life, which he claims is “surely that for whose sake everything else is done.”<sup>30</sup> This is to say that while there may be many legitimate reasons for any one human activity, Aristotle believes that everything is done, ultimately, in the hope of achieving a certain, specific end. Put differently, “the good has rightly been declared to be that at which all [art, inquiry, action, and pursuit] aim.”<sup>31</sup> But how can all of human activity be an attempt to achieve this so-called good; and what does Aristotle conceive of as the goal? Well, if it is that at which all things aim, then “...the chief good is evidently something final,” and so it is our purpose, our inevitable pursuit, to reach mightily for this good, although we may never fully be, but *become*, it.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Aristotle, *EE* (1249a).

<sup>29</sup> Heather Reid, “Athletic Virtue and Aesthetic Values in Aristotle’s Ethics.” *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*, 2019, pp. 64.

<sup>30</sup> Aristotle, *EN*, 1.7 (1097a).

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

Aristotle reasons that the only result that we seek, for its own sake and not others, by and by, is happiness—or, as it was written in ancient Greek, *eudaimonia*, which roughly translates as ‘human flourishing and prosperity.’<sup>33</sup> Aristotle argues that *eudaimonia* is the ultimate aim because it is self-sufficient; this is to say that the experience is complete in itself—the behaviors that provide genuine happiness are the most satisfying and rewarding in this life; and we all, perhaps unconsciously, are trying our best to find that happiness. Aristotle illustrates the chief good as a practice of happiness that manifests from interacting with the world in the right manner—this means happiness is inherently embedded in a virtuous disposition. It remains that our habitual actions are those that define us and, therefore, either guide us or misguide us in our pursuit of a virtuous, or morally excellent, life. Perfect happiness, in this sense, is one that seamlessly integrates practical and theoretical wisdom—that is, reason and action, will and intellect.

Now that happiness (*eudaimonia*) and perfect virtue (*kalokagathia*) have both been identified as ethically relevant pursuits—and the latter also linked with aesthetics—I will now demonstrate the relevance of athletics. Surely, the *kalos kagathos* actively participate in *eudaimonia*, given that *kalokagathia* is perfect goodness and a combination of all virtues. It follows, then, that *kalokagathia* is also an activity, since virtues are habits and qualities of one’s character. Aristotle expresses this idea, in *EN* (I.VIII), in terms of athletic performance, writing, “...in the Olympic Games it is not the most beautiful and the strongest that are crowned but those who compete (for it is some of these that are victorious), so those who act win, and rightly win, the noble and good things in life.”<sup>34</sup> Among the fine and good people (*kalōn kagathōn*), only

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<sup>33</sup> See *Oxford Reference*, under “Eudaimonia.”

<sup>34</sup> Aristotle, *EN*, 1.8 (1099a).

those propelled to *act* win the prize of happiness. Aristotle uses athletes in this example in order to emphasize that

Furthermore, in the *EN* (II.V), Aristotle notes that virtue “causes its possessor to be in a good state and to perform their functions well.”<sup>35</sup> Happiness, or flourishing, in this manner, is realized not by merely “being in a particular state, but rather by acting out of that state.”<sup>36</sup> Thus, happiness is an activity that starts in our repeated actions and becomes aware of itself as an activity that makes us flourish. It follows, then, that the individual whose actions are consistently in accordance with *kalokagathia* habitually performs in a virtuous manner, and is thus practicing happiness—the chief good, which is not a permanent state, but rather a momentary state that can be repeatedly experienced by having a virtuous soul: a disposition for virtuous actions.

For Aristotle, *eudaimonia* is the result of fulfilling one's natural function (*ergon*) and one's distinctive function, which he understands as the activity of reason (*logos*) and intellect (*nous*).<sup>37</sup> Moreover, Aristotle explicitly ties happiness to “activity and actions of the soul that involve reason,” specifying that “by human virtue we mean virtue of the soul, not of the body, since we also say that happiness is an activity of the soul.”<sup>38</sup> In this light, it may seem that athletics has no place in Aristotle's conception of *eudaimonia*, the chief good; however, Aristotle also held the view that the *psychē* (mind or soul) is the source of bodily motion.<sup>39</sup> As such, the “rule-governed intentional bodily movement we call sport,” or athletics, can be “interpreted as ‘activity of the soul in accord with virtue (*kat'aretēn*)’—Aristotle's definition of happiness.”<sup>40</sup>

Not only does Aristotle connect qualities of trained athleticism to both the beautiful and

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<sup>35</sup> Heather Reid, “Athletic Virtue and Aesthetic Values in Aristotle's Ethics.” *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*, 2019, pp. 65.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> Aristotle, *EN*, 1.6.

<sup>38</sup> Aristotle, *EN*, 1.7.

<sup>39</sup> Aristotle, *De Anima* (415b22–24).

<sup>40</sup> Heather Reid, “Aristotle's Pentathlete.” *Sport, Ethics, and Philosophy*, 2010, pp. 183–194.

the good, he connects athletics to *kalokagathia* directly. He does not contend, however, that athletic performance is identical to or sufficient as virtuous performance. He is sure to acknowledge they are quite different. Yet, he indicates that the process of athletic training orients a character toward the embodiment of virtue. That is, athletic training not only cultivates the practical embodiment of virtues in an agent, but also conditions one's motivation of body and mind for pursuing the habitual performance of excellence. I contend, excellence, in this sense, can mean virtuous action.

Again, this is not to say that through athletic training one inherently becomes virtuous. It is to say, however, that athletic training can orient an individual to understanding the value of excellent performance; and, moreover, it actually instills qualities of character—that is, habitual tendencies of an individual—which are comparable to the qualities of character in a virtuous agent. Consider courage as a virtue here: an athlete who demonstrates courage during the contest is strengthening his or her disposition for courageous actions. Though athletically courageous actions are not the same as courageous actions in an ethical sense, they arise from a similarly configured disposition of character. For this reason, Aristotle saw the *gymnasium*, the space for education and athletic training, as an integral constituent of moral development.

Indeed, Aristotle valued athletics in that it trained an individual's habits to more frequently and effectively align with the performance of certain fundamental virtues, like courage (*tharros*) and self-control (*sophrosynē*). Further, he understood the process of habitual training, or practice, as the foundation for cultivating a virtuous soul. The virtuous soul is not innate, but can be habitually developed and improved via training and instruction. Therefore, according to Aristotle, athletics has a deep and meaningful connection with cultivation of a

morally excellent individual or agent.

Consider how Aristotle uses the example of a good lyre-player in *EN* (I.VII). He uses lyre-playing to demonstrate that even excellence in the arts (or in sports) requires the proper functioning of the whole human being. The term he introduces here, in this passage, is the *spoudaios*; the serious lyre-player is like the seriously good moral person (*spoudaios* will come to signify the sage in both Plato and Aristotle) in that he takes his art seriously, recognizes the need to direct his life according to a plan, regimen, or rational principle (*logos*), on the one hand, and the need to be directed, to become obedient to this rational plan, on the other.<sup>41</sup> At best, the ethical person and the athlete must be or become self-directed, self-motivated, but in practice we often learn by imitation, by seeing how others do such things successfully. This is to say that we find the need for a coach—who will ultimately, if we are successful, be our external guide to our internal coordinated guide. The goal, in other words, is to be sculpted in part by a coach and in part by our own internal discipline and self-direction so that by habitual activity we can become transformed. Indeed, the goal is *self-transformation* by being actively directed to a higher goal.

Athletics and aesthetics may have a more obvious connection. On a superficial level, there is, of course, the erotic beauty of athletic bodies; whether this is a product of evolutionary factors, or others, is irrelevant here because the connection is apparent. This is not only the case today, but in ancient Greek times as well, as can be discerned in that many of the Greek statues often have refined athletic bodies—often nude and eroticized. The fact that the art, a domain dynamically interwoven with aesthetics, in ancient Greece (and many other cultures) consistently depicts athletic bodies is no mere coincidence—to be sure, they maintain a corporeal aesthetic.

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<sup>41</sup> Aristotle, *EN*, 1.7 (1098a).

However, there is a much deeper connection here, between athletics and aesthetics, as well—which then ultimately relates to ethics.

Let us note here Aristotle's perspective of the athlete. In *Rhetoric* (I.V), Aristotle regards pentathletes, the all-around athletes, as "... the most beautiful people... because they have a natural talent for both strength and swiftness... [Since] the athletic *aretē* of a body lies in size, strength and swiftness... [he] who can do everything, is a pentathlete"<sup>42</sup> Make no mistake—Aristotle did not write this as a casual sports aficionado, and it is not a merely superficial observation about the athletic body either. There remains a quality of beauty in the pentathlete's performance in that he has mastered the excellence (*aretē*) of his body in athletic action—the aim of his training.

"In Aristotelian ethics, beauty emerges as a morally-charged criterion that distinguishes the beautiful-and-good (*kalon kagathon*) from the merely good (*agathon*)."<sup>43</sup> Here, Reid suggests that beauty is not only an important characteristic of truly virtuous action, but it is also a crucial stepping stone on the way to the chief good. This can, in part, be explained by the kinship between beauty and the divine—indeed, this is the predominant reason for why males in ancient Greek art are so often portrayed with athletic bodies: they are being associated with the divine. Beauty, in this view, leads intrinsically to goodness.

I contend that when Aristotle discerns the pentathlete as the most beautiful person, it is not simply an admiration of corporeal erotic beauty, for then all athletes that are physically fit and conditioned would be equal, but rather an observation that the pentathlete's actions accord *integrally* with certain beautiful goods—that is, his soul has a disposition for the performance of

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<sup>42</sup> Aristotle, *Rhetoric* (1361).

<sup>43</sup> Heather Reid, "Athletic Virtue and Aesthetic Values in Aristotle's Ethics." *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*, 2019, pp. 67.



*kalokagathia*. In *EE* (III.II), Aristotle indicates that “beautiful goods are not only praiseworthy in themselves, but are also the *source* of praiseworthy acts.”<sup>44</sup> Similarly, beauty is characterized as a quality which exists for its own sake, not as a means to an alternative end—that is, it is good in and of itself. Virtues like temperance (*sophrosunē*) and justice (*dikē*) are identified as beautiful goods, in that their actions are inherently praiseworthy.<sup>45</sup> Aristotle contrasts the prior virtues with goods like health and strength, since neither healthy nor vigorous actions are inherently praiseworthy. From this distinction, one might assume that the athlete—insofar as he or she *solely* represents health and strength—then, is not a representation of the beautiful good, and merely just the contingently good; and, therefore, the athlete’s body does not represent the virtuous soul or *kalokagathia*. However, this interpretation would be focussing on the wrong aspect of an athletic body.

It is not merely the strength or health of the athlete’s body which represents *kalokagathia*; rather, it is that the athlete’s body represents the *process* of athletic training itself, which entails beautiful goods (as it is, in part, a pursuit to imitate divine qualities and in accordance with rational principle). Conditioning of the body and the mind is central to athletic training: a systematic, concentrated, and demanding activity which is repeated consistently with a view to excellent performance. In turn, the athlete appropriately orients his motivation and habitually practices the embodiment of certain virtues. “Indeed, it is probable that Aristotle connects ethics and athletics because the latter was an important way to cultivate cardinal virtues like *sophrosynē* (self-control), which can then be exercised outside of sport.”<sup>46</sup> The cultivation of other cardinal virtues, like courage and justice, have also been identified as a product of training in athletics.

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<sup>44</sup> Heather Reid, “Athletic Virtue and Aesthetic Values in Aristotle’s Ethics.” *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*, 2019, pp. 67.

<sup>45</sup> Aristotle, *EN*, 2.2.

<sup>46</sup> Heather Reid, “Athletic Virtue and Aesthetic Values in Aristotle’s Ethics.” *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*, 2019, pp. 68.

Ultimately, though we should be careful not to conflate the content, indeed the matter, of athletic training entirely with that of moral training or education, we can still “identify their similarity in form, and even speculate that athletic and moral training prepared youth in the *gymnasium* for the philosophical training that complemented it.”<sup>47</sup> Accordingly, the beauty of Aristotle’s pentathlete rests in its “*mimēsis* (representation) of the balanced athletic and humanistic training characteristic of classical Greek *gymnasia*.”<sup>48</sup> Indeed, the origin of the pentathlete’s beauty is the habitual activity itself, the process of training his or her dispositions of both body and mind. By observing the end—that is, the athletically excellent body and performance of a pentathlete—Aristotle discerned certain values of the means, which is to say: Aristotle understood that “athletic *aretē* depends on ability and action... and the pentathlete’s beauty depends on... the development and exercise of his natural potential to the point of reliable performance.”<sup>49</sup> So, perhaps the beauty is in actual practice itself.

The individual whose actions are habitually in accordance with and guided by *kalokagathia*—that is, the individual who has knowledge of both the virtues in and of themselves and the capacity, from experience, to thereafter embody them in any given situation at hand—has developed a virtuous disposition, a virtuous soul. The constant, in this case, is the inner sphere, the internal guide—or, potentially, a frame of mind that is inspired and directed by both the agency of the self (*logos*) and by that which is good (*agathos*) and beautiful (*kagathos*).

Of course, the ancient Greeks understood the nature of virtues as a package deal, in which a truly virtuous character is one that consistently acts virtuously. In other words, to possess real courage requires the possession of all other virtues, including justice, temperance,

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<sup>47</sup> Heather Reid, “Athletic Virtue and Aesthetic Values in Aristotle’s Ethics.” *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*, 2019, pp. 67.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid*, 64.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid*, 66-7.

and prudence. It is this kind of virtuous action, so consistent and so complete that it is nearly inseparable from the agent, which constitutes a virtuous character. Perhaps, however, it is not ultimately a kind of conceptual knowledge that allows one to act in a virtuous manner; indeed, the repeated actions are a result of deeper habitual complexities than a familiarity with concepts—they are a conditioned part of the mind, through and through: in a word, *ingrained*.

While it certainly stands to reason that we need knowledge, in the intellectual sense, of what virtues are in order to have our actions accord in any meaningful way, it doesn't seem to follow that the purely conceptual knowledge of a virtue's nature alone induces it with consistency or comprehensivity. Perhaps, this is because the knowledge of virtue itself is not a static knowledge, which is to say that it is not purely informational, but rather an active experience. Knowledge, itself as an action, suggests that the knowledge of virtue is a process of training the mind or brain, of conditioning the soul. Indeed, espousing wisdom of the virtues is a process that represents the habitual tendencies of oneself, as to have the disposition of a certain intrinsic good. Virtue, in this sense, is a mode of action, a mode of interacting with experience, that engenders both moral excellency and an individual conditioned for excellence through the embodiment of such virtues.

Through an analysis of Aristotle's ethics, he seems primarily concerned with at least three qualities of knowledge in regard to virtue: that of the beautiful, that of the good, and that of action. This idea implies, what may be the most basic and yet significant understanding of Aristotle's connection between athletics and *kalokagathia*: that is, athletic training is a vital constituent of education by which an athlete learns how to actively perform excellently and in accordance with their aims. This, in turn, sheds light on the process by which one can also

perform excellently in an ethical sense: by embracing qualities of the athletic pursuit of excellent performance. Be that as it may, there is a dynamic connection, in Aristotle's work, between athletics and both the beautiful (*kagathos*) as well as the good (*agathos*).

It remains that an elite athlete's work ethic—that is, his or her frame of mind and philosophy in regard to practicing athletic excellence—can not only serve as a practical guide for the cultivation of excellent performance, but also orient a character's disposition for virtuous actions (i.e., courage, self-restraint, resilience, etc.). The Mamba Mentality, in this way, entails certain qualities of mind that assist in the development of a virtuous agent. Moreover, Bryant's philosophy of practice also implies many modes of action that lend themselves to the performance of beautiful goodness (*kalokagathia*) and, thus, to the habitual achievement of *eudaimonia*.

### *Section Summary*

Beyond a shadow of a doubt, athletic training was highly valued in ancient Greek society. Indeed, their system of education was not purely concerned with the training of the mind, but also of the body and soul. Viewed as a fundamental component of the youth's development process, Aristotle established his school, the Lyceum, in a *gymnasium*. To be sure, athletic training was the practical counterpart intertwined with the cultivation of conceptual knowledge in the Lyceum. Together, the embodiment and actualization of virtues was repeatedly practiced en route to excellence. Ultimately, this form of education inspires a practically and theoretically wise disposition of mind—establishing what I argue should be understood as a habitual frame of mind in accordance with virtuous action.

In regards to his ethics, Aristotle asserts that the ultimate goal in life as human beings is

to flourish, or practice happiness, which is a result of virtuous action and excellent performance. How to actively participate in virtue, then, is a worthwhile question. The perfect virtue, as Aristotle says, is the combination of all virtues, which the Greeks called *kalokagathia*. Aristotle effectively defines ‘perfect virtue’ as an activity, a performance, of the good and the beautiful, thus we can understand *kalokagathia* as ‘beautiful-goodness.’

Not only does Aristotle connect qualities of trained athleticism to both the beautiful and the good, he connects qualities of athleticism to *kalokagathia* directly. He does not contend, however, that athletic performance alone is identical to or sufficient as virtuous performance. However, he indicates that the process of athletic training orients a character toward the embodiment of virtue through action. That is, athletic training not only cultivates the practical embodiment of virtues in an agent, but also conditions one’s motivation of body and mind for pursuing the habitual performance of excellence. I contend excellence, in this sense, can serve as a basis for virtuous action.

## CHAPTER TWO

# WHY THE MAMBA MENTALITY?

*Initially, I thought the phrase ‘Mamba Mentality’ was just a catchy hashtag that I’d start on Twitter. Something witty and memorable. But it took off from there and came to symbolize much more. The mindset isn’t about seeking a result—it’s more about the process of getting to that result. It’s about the journey and the approach. It’s a way of life.<sup>50</sup>*

### *Basketball and Kobe Bryant*

Regarding this work’s philosophical investigation of athletic excellence, it seems not only most pertinent, but indeed most valuable, to examine a modern athlete. One may reasonably ask, given such context, why I have chosen to specifically investigate Kobe Bryant and, accordingly, the sport of basketball itself. In respect to the question of basketball first, excellence and mastery in basketball are most certainly not trivial. Indeed, one could argue that there are no significant existential or ethical implications of sport expertise. However, such a claim is refutable, not only in relation to what I have argued above regarding athleticism and Aristotle’s understanding of ethical development, but also insofar as basketball as an institution provides value both to communities (through connection and unity) and to the individual (through exercise, fulfillment, or the spectacle of excellent performances). Certainly, excellence and mastery in basketball are significant precisely in that they necessitate athletic training—which is inherently physical *and*

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<sup>50</sup> Bryant, Kobe. *Mamba Mentality: How I Play*. (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2020) 93.

mental. Basketball is a domain through which an individual can pursue excellence via continuous improvement, the test of competition, and attaining results.

Sport, in this sense, has a meaningful history with war; in that, athletic training was initially a societal function as a means to prepare the soldiers for battle. Physical training was a process by virtue of which one could mentally and physically prepare citizens to defend their land, their families, their pride—indeed, their story.<sup>51</sup> Under this pretext, we can understand why Aristotle specifically writes with male athletes in mind—though we can plainly see in modern times why he was wrong to do so. The distant kinship between athletic training and war contains another critically relevant quality that demonstrates why basketball is a particularly deserving sport of investigation—namely, that it (like battle) is a high-paced, full-contact sport with high stakes. The intensity and complexity embedded in basketball require that an elite player consistently harness advantageous physical and mental attributes.

In fact, the fight to win the NBA championship is analogous to an organization defending those same things that a people or culture defends in a war—albeit, with much less at stake. As such, in the process of a season, each team shows its true culture and each player shows his or true colors, or dispositions. It mimics a playful kind of war game—back and forth, attacking and defending for a bucket. Accordingly, the nature of one’s true dispositions, absent the ability to critically reason, is unveiled in basketball games when decisions need to be made on the fly, when one must squeeze every ounce of sweat left to defend his or her territory and bring pride to his or her city. Cultivated habitual qualities of the mind comprise the system upon which one acts in such environments, when nothing will suffice but the harmonization of action and thought.

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<sup>51</sup> Cornell, T.J. “On War and Games in the Ancient World.” *Global Nexus Engaged*, 2000.

Furthermore, elite athletes in the NBA refrain from indulging in certain physical substances, such as alcohol, in an effort to keep their mind and body sharp and ready for performance. This specific quality connects the institution of professional basketball to virtues in prominent schools of thought in antiquity—namely, Aristotelianism, Platonism, and Stoicism.<sup>52</sup> By forsaking such physical vices, these NBA athletes are naturally practicing a form of ancient virtue through their exhibition of temperance and sobriety.

As a sport, basketball excellence—or, in a more colloquial sense, greatness—can be quite easily discerned. There are many statistical categories in basketball that render themselves useful in the understanding of a player’s effect on the game’s outcome (e.g., points, rebounds, assists, steals, and blocks). So, one’s proficiency and abilities can be measured objectively. It is true that there are different levels of complexity when it comes to statistical evaluation of players—and they all serve to discern the quality of a player on the court. Additionally, however, an athlete’s habitual embodiment of excellence is not wholly explained in the stat sheet. There are an abundance of other significant variables, other subtleties, that are relevant in examining one’s exhibition of excellent performance. This requires an examination of real-time performances attuned to the variables that statistics do not cover (e.g., battling for rebounds, performing well in decisive momentum-swinging plays, composure and body language, etc.).

Indeed, an aspect of these other qualities can be observed and assessed by the eyes. There is an ease, a grace, a certain astonishment of a player’s abilities and capacities demonstrated in different situations, and these can manifest an athlete’s mastery of the sport and inspire the viewer. These characteristics are a component of that which makes dance (i.e., ballet), for example, beautiful—the dancer makes the difficult and complicated movements look fluid and

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<sup>52</sup> See *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, under “Temperance.”



effortless. It is precisely this kind of expertise that makes Kobe Bryant so fun to watch: his game is essentially a dance. In this way, I consider the sport of basketball poetry in motion.

The main point here is that an athlete's excellence can be discerned with far more clarity than can performances in other domains, since humans' preferences are inherently subjective, and, thus, differ widely. What I might consider an excellent dish prepared by a chef, may disgust you. Who might be, for me, an excellent painter or excellent president, could shock or bewilder you, for such domains of excellence are clearly more subjective, often more complicated, and judged on the basis of personal preference.

In sports, however, taste and preference play a smaller role in the assessment of excellence. While debates exist about who is "the greatest of all time," there is no denying the excellence of an athlete who habitually embodies this—their excellence is as clear as day. Consider another example: if you ask different individuals if Mark Twain was an excellent writer, Donald Trump an excellent president, or even Aristotle an excellent philosopher, people will offer all kinds of responses. Now, consider asking those same individuals whether or not Michael Phelps was an excellent swimmer, or Tom Brady an excellent quarterback. There is only one real answer for these two questions: yes. As such, there is a clear understanding of what excellent performance entails when it is linked to athletes and sport.

As this work's examination of athletic excellence pertains to Aristotle and virtue ethics, consider the following passage and how it elucidates the relevance of investigating sport:

Athletic games would seem to promote the virtue of justice first of all by teaching competitors to treat one another as equals when it is appropriate to do so, as it is, say, on the starting-line of a race (*EN* 1131a). Athletes desiring an inappropriate advantage would be guilty of the vice of overreaching (*pleonexia*), which Aristotle describes as desiring more than one's due share. Sport also demands that competitors subject themselves to the rules, which correspond to a community's

laws... In submitting to the rule of law, we submit to the rule of reason, which, unlike human rulers, adjudicates fairly. It is perhaps more than coincidental that subjectively judged events were not staged at the ancient Olympic Games; we still expect athletic contests' results to transcend human biases and desires.<sup>53</sup>

Now, in response to the former question, about why I have chosen Kobe Bryant (aka the Black Mamba), my answer is rather simple: he was not only an excellent basketball player, statistically and aesthetically, but also a quintessential modern athlete concerned with the performance of excellence and the disciplined process such a pursuit demands. Bryant's long list of impressive accolades speak for themselves; and though he "was named MVP of the league only once, he finished among the top five in the MVP vote 11 times. That's more than a decade in which there was at least an argument to be made that he was the NBA's best player."<sup>54</sup> Kobe Bryant was not merely physically formidable, he was intellectually astute as well.

Furthermore, only a few, if any, other athletes have expressed a comprehensive and cohesive philosophy for the pursuit of excellence in the same manner as did Bryant. His work ethic, which he termed as the Mamba Mentality, is a way of life directed at the aim of excellent performance through the engagement of certain mental qualities or dispositions. These qualities are identified by Kobe Bryant himself as follows: Fearlessness, Relentlessness, Resilience, Obsessiveness, and Passion.<sup>55</sup> These qualities comprise the five pillars of the Mamba Mentality, each of which Bryant embodied in distinct, yet altogether interconnected, ways—much to the likeness of how virtues were understood as only being accessible in holistic unity.<sup>56</sup>

As will become increasingly clear, a consistent characteristic of Kobe Bryant that separated him from the average person was not merely that he articulated a path of practical

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<sup>53</sup> Heather Reid, "Aristotle's Pentathlete." *Sport, Ethics, and Philosophy*, 2010, pp. 183–194.

<sup>54</sup> Miller, Kerry. "Ranking the Greatest NBA Shooting Guards since 2000." *Bleacher Report*, 24 June 2019.

<sup>55</sup> "Power of the Mind." *YouTube*, TEDxShanghaiSalon, 25 July 2016.

<sup>56</sup> Devereux, Daniel T. "The Unity of the Virtues in Plato's Protagoras and Laches." *The Philosophical Review*, 1992, pp. 765–89.

wisdom, but that he actively embodied it in uncompromising ways—which is to say, he was exceptionally disciplined. This was his intelligent mind at work. Through the course of the next five chapters, I will analyze Kobe Bryant’s own actions and verbal articulations expressive of the Mamba Mentality across his 20-year career, by which I will discern a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the practical and theoretical aspects of his philosophy. I believe this deeper examination of Bryant’s expressions in accordance with his Mamba Mentality demonstrates the intellectual, philosophical, and mental prowess of Kobe Bryant himself. I am simply providing a framework to understand what his five pillars genuinely mean in regard to the qualities of mental and physical dispositions.

In order to further defend the claim that Kobe Bryant’s frame of mind indeed enables excellent performance, this investigation will also entail connections to other individuals, some prominent athletes and some prominent thinkers, who embody strikingly similar qualities to those of the Mamba Mentality.<sup>57</sup> Likewise, I must address the problem that excellent performance—which I argue is attainable through proper embodiment of the Mamba Mentality—is not inherently good in a broader ethical sense. This is to acknowledge that the Mamba Mentality can equally be employed in pursuit of the wicked just as much as it could be in the pursuit of the good—although I contend this would be an improper and incomplete espousal of his philosophy. Nevertheless, Kobe Bryant demonstrates how the Mamba Mentality is a valuable set of principles through which one can pursue and ultimately perform excellence, if their aim is intrinsically good.

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<sup>57</sup> Namely: Michael Jordan, Tom Brady, Marcus Aurelius, Seneca, Plato, Socrates, Benjamin Franklin, and Winston Churchill.

### *Methodology of Deconstruction*

By means of analysis of Kobe Bryant's career—that is, by researching Bryant's perspective both verbally and physically (through his actions and repeated performance of excellence in sport)—I identify five key attributes, or takeaways, within every pillar of the Mamba Mentality (save Resilience which was effectively categorized by four essential attributes). This means that there are 24 practical lessons that can be distinguished collectively throughout. I must also note that 24 attributes is an ideal number in this circumstance because it was, of course, one of Bryant's jersey numbers. Since the value of each pillar is ultimately equal, I distributed the attributes as evenly as possible into their relevant pillars. This is not to say that these combined 24 attributes are an exhaustive account of the Mamba Mentality. Certainly, there are several additional attributes that Kobe Bryant actualized, but, for reasons that will be obvious by the end of this thesis, I think we will agree 24 attributes is sufficient for this project.

On what basis do I identify the 24 distinct attributes? A process of studying interviews, reading *The Mamba Mentality: How I Play* by Kobe Bryant, dissecting game footage, consulting literature on the exhibition of certain qualities (e.g., courage, resilience, etc.), sifting through multiplicity of NBA statistical data, and watching documentaries on Bryant and his career have led me to articulate these 24 attributes of the Mamba Mentality as they are implicitly taught by Bryant himself. An ardent and sincere understanding of Bryant's character naturally engenders inspiration. Though there are several attributes, this format allows for a more comprehensive account and interpretation of the Mamba Mentality. Kobe Bryant demarcated the Mamba Mentality in five pillars, and, from that foundation, I identified specific actualizations of each quality throughout Bryant's career. In this way, each attribute serves to impart a practically

accessible constituent of the relevant quality.

### *Attributes Symbolize Realizations of the Mamba Mentality*

These takeaways symbolize the specific qualities of the Mamba Mentality embodied by Kobe Bryant and, more generally, the wisdom accumulated and expressed by an elite athlete in modern times. As such, the lessons embedded in these attributes take time and energy to habitualize. These attributes are not merely contemplations or theoretical formulations on how to perform with excellence; they are explicit expressions of an individual who had to toil, actively, to perform in an excellent way. They are qualities of action that Kobe Bryant actualized; from this perspective, they are implications of the Mamba Mentality and pieces of practical wisdom that can alter one's perspective and course of action—in a word: disposition. Surely, the Mamba Mentality represented Bryant's approach to life as much as it did his approach to basketball.

Be that as it may, not all of these attributes must be habitually realized in their full capacity in order to appreciate the Mamba Mentality. They are simply some of the different ways that Bryant expressed the five pillars of his philosophy. Of course, not all of us can become Kobe Bryant—for many reasons—but the Mamba Mentality is not about becoming Bryant; it is about becoming the best version of *yourself*. Bryant explains this best in the following way:

Everybody has their own [box]... My box was to be extremely ambitious within the sport of basketball. Your box is different than mine... It's your job to try to perfect it and make it as beautiful of a [piece] as you can make it. And if you have done that, then you have lived a successful life. You have lived with Mamba Mentality.<sup>58</sup>

A successful life, as Bryant is describing here, entails not only finding one's own purpose, but

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<sup>58</sup> "Power of the Mind." *YouTube*, TEDxShanghaiSalon, 25 July 2016.

striving to make it as perfect and beautiful as possible. In this way, Bryant himself makes the connection between the excellence of sport and the ultimate quality of the good life. His perspective on the matter has relevant connections to the ancient Greek philosopher, Socrates, as the “Socratic style of life... was an exercise which [brings one] to put himself in question, to take care of himself, and to make his soul as beautiful and wise as possible.”<sup>59</sup> If we are to understand Bryant’s use of the word ‘box’ as entailing not only one’s craft, but one’s soul as well—which is defensible in that the active process of training for performance inherently entails the training of one’s disposition of character, indeed, one’s soul—then, it can be stated that the Mamba Mentality directly incorporates certain fundamental ideas found in the ancient philosophy of antiquity; certainly, the focus of both is on consistent improvement.

In addition, Kobe Bryant also acknowledged how his dedication to and immersion in the game of basketball has provided larger lessons outside of sport, stating, “The game of basketball has really been a great teacher of life.” In this interview, he noted that it has taught him how to deal with “unending challenges,” the fact that nothing is perfect, the value of “teamwork, doing things together, getting along, and enjoying the journey of the season.”<sup>60</sup> In this way, Kobe Bryant demonstrates an understanding of the deeper connection between the wisdom accumulated via athletic training and performance and the valuable wisdom for excelling in life outside of the sport.

Before articulating Bryant’s five pillars—of which I delineate in a transposable order—I should make it clear that the Mamba Mentality is a quality of mind in regard to activity. Perhaps, it can be more readily understood as a work ethic, a perspective, or a kind of code of conduct. As

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<sup>59</sup> Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault* (Blackwell Publishing, 2017) 269.

<sup>60</sup> “The Mind of Kobe Bryant - Learning” *YouTube*, uploaded by Poitrekz Productions, Oct. 2018.

Bryant himself describes it: “a way of life.”<sup>61</sup> This interpretation of the Mamba Mentality is of great consequence—it effectively ties Bryant’s philosophy to the schools of ancient thought found in antiquity. They understood philosophy as an art of living, an active practice of wisdom—unequivocally, a way of life.<sup>62</sup>

In light of this, ancient philosophers highly valued and were often concerned with “having an effect on their cities, transforming society, and serving their citizens, who frequently accorded them praise.”<sup>63</sup> Such qualities of ancient philosophers are noticeably present in the life of Kobe Bryant. Through injuries and illness, Bryant often made the extra effort to suit up and perform in games, precisely because fans from all walks of life came to watch him play and he did not want to let them down. Bryant undeniably changed the city of Los Angeles too, which can be plainly seen through the murals, memorials, and gatherings across the city following his sudden death.<sup>64</sup> His Mamba Mentality has impacted many, and it may only be a matter of time before it more evidently transforms society outside of sport.

As has already been articulated, “the philosophical life normally entails a communitary engagement. This last is probably the hardest part to carry out,” Pierre Hadot writes in his book, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*.<sup>65</sup> Oftentimes, we assume the philosophical life might be reserved, introverted, or solitudinous; however, this is simply not the case. Philosophical life is inherently involved with the functioning of a society, although, it seems that, insofar as it relates to the philosophers of antiquity, it may not manifest in the typical modern fashion—of political activism, philanthropy, etc. Surely, such avenues of communitary engagement are pivotal, and

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<sup>61</sup> “Power of the Mind.” *YouTube*, TEDxShanghaiSalon, 25 Jul. 2016.

<sup>62</sup> Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault* (Blackwell Publishing, 2017) 268.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 274.

<sup>64</sup> Weber, Christopher, et al. “Los Angeles Unites in Grief for Adopted Son Kobe Bryant.” *ESPN*, ESPN Internet Ventures, 2020.

<sup>65</sup> Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault* (Blackwell Publishing, 2017) 274.

philosophical influence may ultimately have implications for ideal political functioning; however, such are not the *marks* of philosophical merit or of a philosophically significant life.

Hadot clarifies his perspective in the following passage:

The trick is to maintain oneself on the level of reason, and not allow oneself to be blinded by political passions, anger, resentments, and prejudices. To be sure, there is an equilibrium—almost impossible to achieve—between the inner peace brought out by wisdom, the passions to which the sight of injustices, sufferings, and misery of mankind cannot help but give rise. Wisdom, however, consists in precisely such an equilibrium, and inner peace is indispensable for efficacious action.<sup>66</sup>

As such, the absence of blatant political activism in the following attributes, which I articulate as actualizations of the Mamba Mentality, should come at no surprise. Moreover, the content being primarily concerned with the intellectually relevant thoughts and action (specifically through basketball, since he was a professional athlete of the sport) of Kobe Bryant, should not diminish the philosophical qualifications of his Mamba Mentality in the slightest. He strove to embody wisdom by existing in such an equilibrium by trying to not immerse himself too deeply into the sphere of political controversies, and by trying to not let his inner peace be disturbed by the outside world.

Of course, Bryant *was* concerned with the state of political functions. In 2014, when Eric Garner died after being aggressively wrestled to the ground and locked in a chokehold by a New York City police officer,<sup>67</sup> Kobe Bryant and his Lakers teammates wore black warm-up shirts that read, “I Can’t Breathe” during their pregame routine. In reference to the politically and socially pertinent event, Bryant commented, “I think it would be a serious disservice to limit this

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<sup>66</sup> Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault* (Blackwell Publishing, 2017) 274.

<sup>67</sup> Lowery, Wesley. “‘I Can’t Breathe’: Five Years after Eric Garner Died in Struggle with New York Police, Resolution Still Elusive.” *The Washington Post*, WP Company, 14 June 2019.



to a race issue. It's a justice issue."<sup>68</sup> Thus, Bryant, as a black man, held the perspective that justice was justice plain and simple—it was not a matter of race. Certainly, he acknowledged the existence of racism, as he likely experienced it on a personal basis throughout his life, but he was more concerned with the society's functioning as a fully just state.

Similarly, in 2016, around the time of the political elections in the United States, Bryant encouraged young voters to participate. "It's extremely important," Bryant remarked. "The discussion that [I] always have centers around, 'How do you educate the youth about the issues so that they have a clear perspective of what they're voting on?'"<sup>69</sup> And so Bryant's philosophy is less about political activism, *per se*, and more about improving one's (in this case, the youth's) mental capacities to, in turn, more effectively understand the political landscape and engender positive democratic change. The Mamba Mentality is as much, if not more, about the training of mind as it is the training of the body. "Such is the lesson of ancient philosophy: an invitation to each human being to transform himself. Philosophy is a conversation, the transformation of one's way of being and living, the quest for wisdom. This is not an easy matter... 'But all excellent things are as difficult as they are rare.'"<sup>70</sup>

While some of the some of the following attributes are more direct and accessible than others, they are all ways through which Bryant realized the five pillars of his philosophy; and, similarly, they all provide guidance toward living with the Mamba Mentality. We will come to see in the following chapters how Bryant's philosophy epitomizes a habitual frame of mind in accordance with virtuous action. My goal here is simply to dissect the Mamba Mentality to see

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<sup>68</sup> Pincus, Eric. "Kobe Bryant on Upcoming Election: 'You Know What Candidate I'm Supporting.'" *Bleacher Report*, Turner Broadcasting System Inc., 3 Oct. 2017.

<sup>69</sup> Pincus, Eric. "Kobe Bryant on Upcoming Election: 'You Know What Candidate I'm Supporting.'" *Bleacher Report*, Turner Broadcasting System Inc., 3 Oct. 2017.

<sup>70</sup> Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault* (Blackwell Publishing, 2017) 275.

what the late NBA legend, Kobe Bryant, can teach us about the pursuit of mastery and the qualities that helped him achieve habitually excellent performances.

### CHAPTER THREE

## THE QUALITY OF FEARLESSNESS

*Let me assert my belief that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself—nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance.<sup>71</sup>*

Fear is cunning, incessant, and contagious in many ways. Indeed, fear is potent—with great potential to ceaselessly hinder action. But time waits for no one and the journey to become excellent starts *today*. Kobe Bryant implicitly knew, as we all do, that the dreams of cowards do not manifest; and for his dreams to become real, he would need to face fear, in its multifarious forms, head on. Certainly, the more ambitious and difficult the form of excellence one pursues, the more fear will pervade one's path. In this section, I argue that Bryant's 'fearlessness' should not be understood as a reckless or impulsive attitude towards *every* aspect of life—for fear can serve a purpose—but rather it should be understood as an acknowledgement and acceptance of fear in a manner that allows one to no longer to be controlled or compelled by its ignorant compulsions, and to rise above it. Fearlessness, in this sense, *consults reason*—as all of Bryant's five pillars do. This quality, in its full sense, allows one to recognize the object of fear and then act separate from its conspicuous influence: this demands true courage. Fearlessness is about rising to the occasion, trusting oneself, and remaining composed with the knowledge that everything passes. As such, Bryant leaned into fear, astutely utilizing it to develop his

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<sup>71</sup> Ryan Holiday and Stephen Hanselman, *Daily Stoic: 366 Meditations on Self-Mastery, Perseverance and Wisdom* (Penguin Publishing Group, 2016) 271.

dispositions and elevate his game to the next level.

## *I. CHASE AMBITIOUS GOALS WITH COURAGE*

In 1996, at just 17 years old, having only recently graduated from Lower Merion High School in Philadelphia, Bryant launched his professional career through a bold and courageous decision. To the anticipation of viewers eager to find out whether Bryant would attend university or head straight to the league, he announced, “I have decided to skip college and take my talents to the NBA,” in a now-famous interview.<sup>72</sup> Bryant’s intention was to be the best basketball player he could be; and, since the NBA held the toughest competition in the world, it was the only space he saw fit to elevate his skills to reach this ‘highest potential’ (see appendix B.1). He did not let the fear of failure or the fear that he wasn’t good enough stop him from trying. “I know I’ll have to work extra hard and I know this is a big step, but I can do it,” Bryant continued, tacitly acknowledging those doubting his readiness. Though he averaged just over 15 minutes per game (out of 48) in his rookie campaign,<sup>73</sup> even at age 17, Bryant’s courage and drive was self-evident.

In regard to the fact that Bryant deliberately does not pursue a university degree and the resulting perception this may have on his intellectual capacities, Kobe Bryant powerfully demonstrates how one can strengthen his or her mind—indeed, philosophical and intellectual prowess—through a different commitment to activity in lieu of academia (i.e., higher education in the west). What follows in this work is a testament to Kobe Bryant’s remarkable and praiseworthy intelligence. Fully understanding the philosophical merit of the Mamba Mentality suggests that the ancient Greeks may have had it right to highly value and prioritize athletics as a

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<sup>72</sup> “Watch Kobe Bryant’s 1996 announcement to skip college - enter NBA.” *YouTube*, uploaded by 6abc Philadelphia, Oct. 2018.

<sup>73</sup> See *Basketball-Reference*, under “Kobe Bryant.”

form of education. Indeed, there are many forms, or systems, of education that serve as routes to improve one's mental capacities—and, in the case of athletic training, physical capacities as well. Some suggest it plausible that a trained body is necessary to maximize the potential of one's mind,<sup>74</sup> and so athletic training cultivates the unity of a trained mind *and* a trained body in an individual, which is a form of education in itself.

Reflecting on his decision in an interview, Bryant demonstrates how his fearlessness consulted reason, and plainly addresses the concept of education in the following way:

It was a tough decision... The key factor for me wasn't whether or not I was ready [for the league], it was the fact that if I *wasn't ready* I was determined to figure out how *to get* ready. Ultimately, even if I was ready, *I still need to improve anyway*. So the work's not going to stop. It was just a matter of 'do you want to come to the league and learn from the best?' And the best way to learn from them is to have [the material] jump off of the film, jump off of the page, and see it *face-to-face*. That's the best way to learn. I had, like, a database... in my mind [of other players]: I had everything in my mind of what they could do, what they didn't like to do, where they did it, when they did it. Now, if I could see that up close, that is the *greatest form of education* I could possibly receive. So, that's when I was like, 'nah, I'm gonna go pro.'<sup>75</sup>

Since academia—specifically higher education in the west—can be quite restrictive in its recognition and scope of intellectual capacity, it may be easy to conflate intelligence with academic achievements, or presume that athletic abilities are unrelated to intellectually applicable qualities. However, academia does not define intellectual capacities; it simply provides a path to refining them—and there are other meaningful paths. Athletic achievements

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<sup>74</sup> According to the analysis of Brisswalter, et al., "Effects of Acute Physical Exercise Characteristics on Cognitive Performance." *Sports Medicine* 32, 2002: 555–566 there is a connection between cognitive performance and exercise. The study found evidence to support the "relationship between exercise-induced arousal and cognitive performance improvement" specifically in regard to "the neural activity underlying basic aspects of cognition."

See Douw, et al., "A Healthy Brain in a Healthy Body: Brain Network Correlates of Physical and Mental Fitness." *Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, Public Library of Science*, 25 Apr. 2018, since it is an article that mainly focuses on the change in productivity in certain brain network correlates using the 'network theory' to determine exactly how physical fitness improves cognitive performance.

<sup>75</sup> "Kobe Bryant Film | The Love of The Game (END OF AN ERA)" *YouTube*, uploaded by Basketball Forever, 24 Oct. 2020.

can indicate valuable qualities of one's mind, which are practically and philosophically relevant, and represent the commitment to an education process. In fact, long-term rigorous athletic training, often within the scope of a sport, is a mode of interdisciplinary education that entails disciplines outside the purview of traditional colleges and universities in the west. What may be more important than the institution of theoretical and practical development, is one's consistent engagement in and focus on learning, improving, and enjoying the process.

This is the mentality with which Kobe Bryant approached basketball and the early-start of his professional career—with rational fearlessness. Despite his lack of experience and the elite skills of his competitors, Bryant's courageous commitment to his lofty ambition helped him train his mind and his body toward habitual excellence. Certainly, Bryant's dream was to be the best basketball player he could be; he knew such a pursuit was a race against time and it would require his undivided commitment and attention.

## II. *DO NOT LET FEAR INHIBIT ACTION*

Fear is foreign to no one, and a friend to only a few. Perhaps the most illuminating of Kobe Bryant's statements on his perspective of fear is the following:

I have self-doubt. I have insecurity. I have fear of failure. I have nights when I show up at the arena and I'm like, 'My back hurts, my feet hurt, my knees hurt. I don't have it. I just want to chill.' We all have self-doubt. You don't deny it, but you also don't *capitulate* to it. You *embrace* it.<sup>76</sup>

As one might expect, the courageous spirit of Kobe Bryant was fostered and established in his youth—he was fortunate for this, yet, as we will see, he still continued to cultivate a

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<sup>76</sup> "Remembering Kobe Bryant." *Shondaland*, 2 Nov. 2021.

courageous disposition in the face of fear throughout the entirety of his career. Before his family moved to Italy for nearly a decade, Bryant recalls the last time he felt intimidation in the following passage:

I was 6 years old in karate class. I was an orange belt and the instructor ordered me to fight a black belt who was a couple years older and a lot bigger... I was terrified, and he kicked my ass. But then I realized he didn't kick my ass *as bad* as I thought he was going to and that there was nothing really to be afraid of—that was around the time I realized that intimidation didn't *really* exist if you're in the *right frame of mind*.<sup>77</sup>

Of course, no one is skilled at everything; since there will always remain something in which one is deficient, a form of defeat or failure is inevitable. When one faces the prospect of ensuing failure, it is easy to be intimidated—easy, but counterproductive to performing at one's full potential. Not only was there no reason for Bryant to *really* be afraid of the intense competition in the NBA, most of whom were fully grown men, there was actually good reason *not* to be afraid.

Intimidation is the progeny of fear and a cousin of anxiety. In 2016, a compelling study investigated the psychological relationship between pressure and elite sport performance—specifically tennis, in this case—and the results demonstrated “the power of pressure and prior errors” in establishing a feedback loop, which was indicative of success or failure under pressure.<sup>78</sup> Intimidation in this sense can be understood as a kind of pressure on the mind. “The findings further clarify the likely momentary conditions where performance might be disrupted, in even the most skilled of athletes, although it is possible the few top players in the world do not show these effects.”<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> “Kobe Bryant EXPLAINS The MINDSET Of A WINNER & How To SUCCEED.” *YouTube*, uploaded by Lewis Howes, 10 Sep. 2018.

<sup>78</sup> David J. Harris, et al., “Psychological Pressure and Compounded Errors during Elite-Level Tennis.” *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 2021.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*

One might infer from this that the most elite athletes do not show the negative effects of pressure in such an obvious manner, for the precise reason that Bryant discerned: ‘the right frame of mind.’ Perhaps, this state of consciousness is one that embraces pressure, intimidation, and anxiety, thus limiting the effects of external affairs to cloud the fearless mind. Embracing in this sense is comparable to the process of transformation through acceptance, which is to say that one transforms the nature of one’s fears into motivation or into stimuli that does not necessitate a negative psychological or physiological reaction. This means that elite athletes are *not the only ones* who can remain relatively unaffected by pressure or intimidation: with the “right frame of mind” the benefits are available to all of us.

The study’s findings go on to state that “the weight of evidence is strongly in favour of an overall performance degradation under pressure.”<sup>80</sup> However, the most insightful discovery of the study is reported as follows:

The cognitive appraisal of an error determines the subsequent effect on anxiety and performance, via its influence on the perceptions of the probability of failure. Therefore, developing the ability to respond more positively to errors may be crucial in *breaking the feedback loop* between attentional bias to threat cues, state anxiety, and cognitive appraisals of threat... The ability to simply forget these errors might be a highly valuable mental skill.<sup>81</sup>

The ability to respond positively to errors or just simply forget them altogether may have been a highly valuable mental skill that Kobe Bryant developed himself. The combination of his ability to forget previous mistakes and his resolute self-confidence made it so that errors rarely disturbed him—in fact, they drove him.

As a result of his karate experience, Bryant seems to have realized fear was mostly in his

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<sup>80</sup> David J. Harris, et al., “Psychological Pressure and Compounded Errors during Elite-Level Tennis.” *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 2021.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.



head. Or, in the words of the ancient Roman Stoic, Seneca, “there is nothing so certain in our fears that is not yet more certain in the fact that most of what we dread comes to nothing.”<sup>82</sup>

Bryant put himself in a position, early in his life, that required he harness certain mental capacities (e.g., that fears are external and inner composure can remain) in a way that transformed his perception of reality. This is to say that he developed a courageous disposition, which allowed him to lean into fear rather than back away—or yet worse, run—from it. Bryant was far from the first to consider this revolutionary facet of the human mind.

Nearly two millennia earlier, the ancient Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius (121-180 AD), a different Stoic philosopher, wrote himself notes in his *Meditations*, which has set much of the foundation for Stoic philosophy today. Stoicism chronologically grew out of ancient Greek philosophy, largely shaped by the writings of Plato and Aristotle and then the subsequent early Greek Sotics (i.e., Xeno, Diogenes, Posidonius, etc.).<sup>83</sup> Though both Aristotle and Marcus Aurelius are philosophers from antiquity, there are several differences in their philosophical attitudes; moreover, since Aurelius was an Emperor of Rome, his philosophical musings primarily regard the struggle to become a more virtuous soul—that is, living and acting excellently. Although ancient Roman virtues vary from the preceding Greek ones (much in the form of evolution and adaptation), both Aristotle and Aurelius thought of virtues as trainable and in need of constant improvement.<sup>84</sup>

Indeed, in his *Meditations*, Marcus Aurelius—also known as the Philosopher-King and Good Emperor—writes, “They cannot admire you for the sharpness of your mind, so be it, but

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<sup>82</sup> Ryan Holiday and Stephen Hanselman, *Daily Stoic: 366 Meditations on Self-Mastery, Perseverance and Wisdom* (Penguin Publishing Group, 2016) 55.

<sup>83</sup> See my other paper, “The Evolution of Virtue through antiquity: Practical Development in Plato, Aristotle, and Stoicism.”

<sup>84</sup> Aristotle, *EN*, 2.1 (1103a).

there is much else of which you cannot say, 'I have no gift for that.' So display the qualities that are wholly within your power... And even in that regard you should exercise yourself instead of neglecting your faults and taking comfort in your dullness."<sup>85</sup> Amongst others, Aurelius references "endurance" and "elevation of mind," as qualities that are wholly within one's power. Bryant emulates this exact train of thought when recalling how he did not decide how much playing time he got as a rookie: "If I'm not playing, I can get better at this, I can better at that. There are things I can control."<sup>86</sup> For Marcus Aurelius, the right frame of mind is the one that has control of the thoughts that enter and consume it.

As young Kobe Bryant had discovered, it must be through harnessing the power of one's mind that one is able to elevate his mind above intimidation and fear, thus breaching the gates to success and eventual excellence. In the reservoir of Marcus Aurelius' honest reflections, we see contemplations on the best way to achieve inner peace and to preserve in the face of fear or challenge. Fortunately, his private notes have been published for the world to harvest his personal insights. Consider how Marcus Aurelius harnesses the power of perspective and interacts with disturbances in his following self-dialogue:

External things are not the problem. It's your assessment of them. Which you can erase right now. If the problem is something in your own character, who's stopping you from setting your mind straight? And if it's that you're not doing something you think you should be, why not just do it? – But there are insuperable obstacles. Then it's not a problem. The cause of your inaction lies outside you.<sup>87</sup>

The Philosopher-King is highly attentive to his mind, and clearly understands that the source of most of his suffering and hardship stems from the mind's perception of the outside world—noot

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<sup>85</sup> Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, 5.5 (Oxford University Press, 2011) 36.

<sup>86</sup> "Kobe Talks to Alabama Football Team" *YouTube*, uploaded by CRC Sports, 9 Aug, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AmmIrjDEanw>.

<sup>87</sup> Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, 8.47 (Oxford University Press, 2011) 78.

the object itself. Moreover, the mind need not perceive in a manner that induces negative experience. Certainly, the mind is well equipped to adapt; by changing the mind's perspective regarding a certain object, or espousing a sense of inner peace, the nature of experience itself transforms.<sup>88</sup> If there is nothing to change internally about a given circumstance—because the problem lies outside of the mind, as Aurelius writes—then there is nothing more to do than *embrace* the obstacles and move on. Life is simply too short to let fear, anxiety, or anger get in the way of one's pursuits. Whether or not Bryant was a student of Marcus Aurelius' work directly, his cultivated wisdom of mind certainly has part of its roots in the long tradition of Stoicism and the philosophy of virtue ethics.

### III. "FAILURE" IS AN ILLUSION

Reconfiguring intimidation and harnessing the courage to chase his dreams were not the only facets of Kobe Bryant's fearless spirit. His acceptance of failure, which began when he was just a kid, was another fundamental component of Bryant's mind. In a 2019 interview dedicated to his mindset and excellence, Bryant thinks back on his childhood and tells the host, Lewis Howes, the following story:

My father was really influential at a critical time, where I played basketball when I was like 10 or 11 years old, in a very prominent summer league in Philadelphia... And I didn't score one point the entire summer. Not one... I was terrible... I scored not a free throw, nothing; not a lucky shot, not a breakaway layup—zero points. I remember crying and being upset about it; and my father just gave me a hug and said, 'Listen, whether you score zero or you score 60, I'm going to love you no matter what.' Now, that is the most important thing that you can say to a child because, from there, I was like, 'Okay that gives me all the confidence in the world to fail. I have the security there, but the hell with that, I'm

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<sup>88</sup> Bilican, F. Isil. "The Relationship Between Focused Attention Meditation Practice Habits, Psychological Symptoms, and Quality of Life." (*Journal of Religion and Health*, 2016) 1980–95.

scoring 60!’<sup>89</sup>

His father helped him realize that failure is not the ultimate end—it was okay, and more importantly, inescapable. Failure has dawned and will continually dawn on even the most successful of people. As such, the occurrence of failure is relatively unproblematic; in fact, Kobe Bryant eventually came to realize that the act of embracing failure was one of the most important prerequisites for self-improvement. With the courage to fail in pursuit of his goal, Kobe began to cultivate a truly fearless mind.

As time went on in Kobe Bryant’s career, his courage and fearless spirit only grew. Time proved his ability to embrace failure as a key component in his eventual movement into craft mastery. The stability of Bryant’s self-confidence allowed him to venture into challenges that most other people would shy away from. In his photographic memoir on his relationship with the sport of basketball, *The Mamba Mentality: How I Play*, Bryant writes as follows:

When it came to basketball, I had no fear. What I mean by that is: if I wanted to implement something new into my game, I’d see it and try incorporating it immediately. I wasn’t scared of missing, looking bad, or being embarrassed. That’s because I always kept the end result, the long game, in my mind. I always focused on the fact that I had to try something to get it, and once I got it, I’d have another tool in my arsenal. If the price was a lot of work and a few missed shots, I was OK with that.<sup>90</sup>

Centered upon self-improvement and self-discipline, the Mamba Mentality not only embraced, but *encouraged*, temporary failures. Or, in the words of Winston Churchill: “Success is not final [and] failure is not fatal. It is the courage to continue that counts.”<sup>91</sup>

By not allowing himself to get hung up on a self-absorbed and ephemeral feeling of

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<sup>89</sup> “Kobe Bryant EXPLAINS The MINDSET Of A WINNER & How To SUCCEED.” *YouTube*, uploaded by Lewis Howes, 10 Sep. 2018.

<sup>90</sup> Bryant, Kobe. *Mamba Mentality: How I Play*. (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2020) 22.

<sup>91</sup> “Media Matters.” *International Churchill Society*, 11 May 2021.

embarrassment, Bryant allowed his skills to elevate in a manner matched only by those who also cultivated a fearless mind, for ‘it is the courage to continue that counts.’ It is important to note, however, that it is the continuation *through* fear, the recognition of intimidation’s illusion, which engenders courage—not the running away from it or mere ignorance of it.

Still, Kobe Bryant operated under an understanding of failure that is not altogether unique, but rather uncommon. During his BET Experience Genius Talks interview with Jamele Harris in 2015, Bryant was asked how he became one of those people who seem not to be afraid of failing—his response was as much insightful as it was raw. Half smiling, Kobe pronounced “failure” before stuttering and pausing. Then he waves his hand up, busts into a full smile, and says, “It doesn’t exist! It’s non-existent!” He laughs playfully. “What the hell does *that* mean? Seriously, what does *failure* mean? It doesn’t exist. It’s a figment of your imagination. What does it *mean*?” He is partly joking, and fully serious. His explanation is as follows:

Let’s use ‘happy endings,’ and then we can relate this to failure and why it’s non-existent. Everybody talks about how they want a happy ending. Let’s look at a fairytale story; let’s look at snow white. She gets a happy ending, she finds prince whoever, she goes on, she lives happily ever after. Well, I call bullshit on that. Because two months later, the fact is, they had an argument and he’s sleeping on the couch! The point is, the story continues. So, if you fail on Monday, the only way it is a failure on Tuesday is if you decide not to progress from there. So, to me, that’s why failure is on-existent. Because if I fail today, then I’ll learn something from that failure and I’ll try again on Tuesday. And, then I’ll try again on Wednesday.<sup>92</sup>

Regardless of the result, there is a lot to learn from the experience, the journey itself, and using that knowledge to improve is part and parcel of the Mamba Mentality. Failure is an illusion provided the perspective that everything passes and another opportunity awaits tomorrow.

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<sup>92</sup> “BET Experience Genius Talks Kobe Bryant.” *Youtube*, uploaded by It’s Reklaw, 29 Jun. 2015.

Temporary adversity is a challenge to be overcome and, more importantly, an opportunity to progress.

#### *IV. CULTIVATE TRUE SELF-CONFIDENCE & SELF-ASSURANCE*

Upon entering the league, Kobe Bryant made mastering the craft of basketball the center of his existence. He was still fearlessly chasing his childhood dream to be the best player he could possibly be—and he was putting in the work to get there. Of course, his gametime performances were what mattered most. In the first few years Bryant showed glimpses of excellence as he would soar to the rim, slamming a double-clutch dunk,<sup>93</sup> or rising over Shane Battier with a hand in his face for a wild two-point jumper on the wing (see appendix B). His game was clearly improving, and incredibly promising.

It is noteworthy, however, that Bryant did not always execute flawlessly. Far from it. Kobe Bryant has certainly had his fair share of bad games. In fact, Kobe is the record holder for most missed shots in the NBA of all-time.<sup>94</sup> This never phased Kobe Bryant. He once said, “I would go 0-for-30 [from the floor] before I would go 0-for-9. 0-for-9 means you beat yourself, you psyched yourself out of the game. . . . The only reason is because you’ve just now lost confidence in yourself.”<sup>95</sup> Kobe never doubted that the next time the ball rolled off his fingertips, the next time he shot, he was going score. He always believed the basketball would go through the hoop. It did not make any sense for him to stop after missing nine shots—for him, it was just all the more reason the next one should be a make. He was opposed to cowering and emphatically against giving up. If he went 0-for-30, at least you know he was keeping the

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<sup>93</sup> Bryant also won the NBA Slam-Dunk Contest in 1997.

<sup>94</sup> Sherman, Rodger. “Kobe Bryant Has Missed More Shots than Any Player in NBA History.” *SBNation.com*, 12 Nov. 2014.

<sup>95</sup> Silva, Orlando. “Kobe Bryant: I Would Go 0-30 before I Would Go 0-9.” *Fadeaway World*, 10 Apr. 2021.

defense honest, and really trying to secure a bucket.

For example, consider the game NBA Hall of Famer Jerry West called “a defining moment in [Kobe’s] career.”<sup>96</sup> It was 1997, during Kobe’s rookie campaign. The Lakers had made it to the Western Conference Semifinals, still two series away from the NBA championships. In the final seconds of Game 5 the score was tied. Bryant brought the ball up past halfcourt, made his move and drove to the elbow for a 15-foot jumper. It was an airball—it didn’t even reach the rim. The game was sent into overtime. In the final two minutes of overtime, Bryant shot another airball. Then, with 43 seconds left in overtime, Kobe Bryant hoisted up *another* shot, from behind the three-point line this time, and it was short. His third airball in the clutch—if only that were it. With 11 seconds left in overtime, the Lakers trailed by three, and it was time for Bryant to get his redemption. His teammate, Nick Van Exel, brought the ball past halfcourt before getting double-teamed. Van Exel passes the ball to Kobe Bryant with 7.9 on the game clock, and he launches another three. Then, the crowd goes wild—his fourth airball—since the game was played in Utah.<sup>97</sup>

Nearly two decades later, Jerry West, one of Bryant’s truly pivotal mentors throughout his career, reflected on that game. Then, in 2016, West was an executive on the Golden State Warriors, a team stacked with incredible shooters. He said, “If somebody would have shot an airball on our team and they had shot a second one, they would not *shoot* a third one. He was fearless. I think that’s one of the things that spurred him to greatness. He wasn’t going to allow himself to fail.”<sup>98</sup> Accordingly, Bryant’s four airballs are not, in fact, a product of rashness, carelessness, or even egotism; but rather a testament to his courage and self-assurance—that he

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<sup>96</sup> Medina, Mark. “Kobe Bryant’s ‘Airball Game’ in 1997 Was a Defining Moment in His Career.” *Daily News*, 28 Aug. 2017.

<sup>97</sup> “Lakers at Jazz - Game 5 - '97 Conference Semifinals - 5/12/97.” *YouTube*, uploaded by JazzBasketball1, 7 May 2012.

<sup>98</sup> “Jerry West’s AMAZING Press Conference On Kobe Bryant” *YouTube*, uploaded by Lakers Nation, 15 Jan. 2016.

was willing to take a risk, when others were not, despite his previous errors.

This fearless mentality is not uncommon to some of the greatest players to pick up a basketball. Michael Jordan once admitted, “I’ve missed more than 9,000 shots in my career. I’ve lost almost 300 games. 26 times, I’ve been trusted to take the game winning shot and missed. I’ve failed over and over and over again in my life. And that is why I succeed.”<sup>99</sup> Michael Jordan has the most game-winning buzzer beaters of all time, at nine; Bryant, unsurprisingly, is tied for second, at eight.<sup>100</sup> Failure is just the inseparable flip side of success; failure and success come together, but success is not created by failure—it is created by fearlessness in the face of failure. Kobe Bryant knew this and never let it crush his spirits.

As the years went on, Kobe Bryant effectively maximized his potential, time and time again. He hit many game-winners that dropped jaws and sent people into either explosive ecstasy or desolate rage (see appendix B.2). He scored nearly unbelievable buckets, from dunks to deep threes that left viewers doubting the validity of their eyes (see appendix B.3). Yet, almost more impressively, he did so with ease and unwavering fortitude.

At the end of his career, Bryant reflected on his ability to score clutch buckets and play consistent basketball year in and year out, despite wins or losses, without letting doubt cripple his self-assurance. In a 2016 TEDx interview, the recently retired legend then revealed:

Confidence comes from preparation. So when the game's on the line I'm not asking myself to do something that I haven't done thousands of times before. When I prepare I know what I'm capable of doing, I know what I'm comfortable doing, and I know what I'm not comfortable doing. In those moments, if it looks like I'm ice cold or not nervous, it's because I've done it thousands of times before—so what's one more time?<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Nelson, Andre. “A Mind Set on Winning.” *Medium*, Analyst's Corner, 17 Mar. 2021.

<sup>100</sup> Cruz, Mike. “NBA Players with the Most Game-Winning Buzzer-Beaters in History.” *ClutchPoints*, 5 Aug. 2020.

<sup>101</sup> “Power of the Mind.” *YouTube*, TEDxShanghaiSalon, 25 July 2016.



Courage should not be a variant of stupidity—true courage is informed. The fearless mind of Kobe Bryant was, accordingly, a product of reason, perceptive self-awareness, and the ambition to improve. He knew nothing could replace the fruits of sweat and toil; he embodied this knowledge and used it for his advantage.

Bryant did not seek validation from others—not fans nor teammates. This does not mean that he did not care about them or consider how he affected them; it means he was stable and secure internally, and the trust that he had in himself could not be diminished by external perspectives. There will always be other people trying to tear down the success and accomplishments of other people. Whether in high-stakes situations or in moments of reflection, self-doubt can be the enemy. In times of adversity, uncertainty, and chaos, trusting oneself provides the equanimity and energy to persevere.

## V. *REMAIN UNFAZED BY DISCOMFORT*

No matter the person, there is always another difficult situation looming somewhere in the future, and it will probably be uncomfortable and stressful. This is a part of life. As a professional basketball player, Kobe Bryant was vividly aware of the fact that he would have high pressure moments in the future. Psychologically, these daunting situations often invoke a reaction of fight, flight, or freeze. Given that the context of these challenging circumstances is sport-related, fighting is a rational and courageous reaction—if not the only. However, it was not merely that Bryant chose to fight in these situations; it was *how* he fought that helped him excel.

For Bryant it came down to his perception and perspective. He was capable of charging forwards in the face of fear because he oriented his perspective to do so effectively. From an

interview late in his career, Bryant said the following:

“I’ve actually had some of my best performances on the road. When fans boo, I actually love it. I *thrive* on it. They don't understand who I am. Not only am I comfortable being the outsider, that has become a source of *motivation* for me. So, when I go to these places, and you boo, it actually comforts me!”

Perhaps the reason Bryant was able to effectively perform in uncomfortable situations is that he did not let the opinions of others or distractions or fear of embarrassment hold him back. He learned how to be comfortable with discomfort and remain focussed on the goal. This quality of his courage gave him the power to focus and excel in scenarios that countless others would have fled or would have frozen.

Courage as a quality of excellence, not just athletically, but also morally, is expressed in Aristotle’s *Eudemian Ethics*. In Book 3, on the moral virtues, Aristotle argues that “courage makes a man fearless, and that fearlessness consists in fearing nothing, or else few things, and those slightly and reluctantly.”<sup>102</sup> It is clear, in this passage, that fearlessness is not inherently an extreme. Aristotle’s ethics is based on the idea that virtue lies in *between* excess and defect. Aristotle argues that true courage is not the same as simple daring (if that daring is excessive) or being cowardly (on the scale of deficiency), but it does entail an intermediate condition: steady fearlessness. Aristotle concludes that “the daring man, therefore, faces such things with confidence even if reason does not bid him [to] face them, and the coward does not face them even if it does, but only the brave man faces them if reason bids.”<sup>103</sup> In this way, the courageous person exhibits fearlessness when he or she acts in accordance with reason, as did Bryant.

Aristotle also relates this quality of courage to qualities of the athlete when he writes, “owing to this the brave man's state of character is praised because it resembles that of the strong

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<sup>102</sup> Aristotle, *EE* (1228b).

<sup>103</sup> Aristotle, *EE* (1229a).

and the healthy.”<sup>104</sup> Since fearlessness is interconnected, in this way, with the strength and health of an individual, Aristotle could be suggesting that the athlete is substantially well-suited to exhibit the actions of *true courage*. Aristotle later demonstrates how such courage helps lead one to act in an ethically good fashion in the following passage:

Since indeed all goodness involves purposive choice (it has been said before what we mean by this—goodness makes a man choose everything for the sake of some object, and that object is what is fine), it is clear that courage being a form of goodness will make a man face formidable things for some object, so that he does not do it through ignorance (for it rather makes him judge correctly), nor yet for pleasure, but because it is fine.<sup>105</sup>

Therefore, the attributes of fearlessness in Bryant’s Mamba Mentality, in conjunction with Aristotle’s understanding of genuine courage, suggest a practical embodiment and development of ethically virtuous action. In other words, athletic courage and moral courage focus ultimately on what is fine, beautiful (*kalos*), and good (*agathos*).

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<sup>104</sup> Aristotle, *EE* (1228b).

<sup>105</sup> Aristotle, *EE* (1230a).

## CHAPTER FOUR

# THE QUALITY OF RELENTLESSNESS

*Don't rush. Accomplish at your pace. Speed doesn't matter when you decide to relentlessly keep advancing towards your dream which ignites your being.*

Out of all the pillars in the Mamba Mentality, relentlessness may stand as the most decisive quality in the cultivation of excellence, and, perhaps, the most underrated as well. ‘Relentless’ is defined as “oppressively constant, incessant,” and it should be understood as the practical quality that elevates every other pillar to its highest potential.<sup>106</sup> It is the engine of the train that does not stop—much like Aristotle’s *psychē*—the habitual force and movement. Plainly, relentlessness is an advantageous authoritarian quality of mind that toils toward the target objective without question, without hesitation, and without mercy—only after it has consulted reason. Kobe Bryant was, in many ways, defined by his positively relentless drive to improve and dominate the NBA. His objective was always to perform at his best, to fight every night for a win. It was quintessentially through the cultivation of prudent habits that Bryant trained his body and mind to embody the practical elements of relentlessness.

Granted, relentlessness may appear a strange quality of excellence and unworthy of the role of a core pillar in the Mamba Mentality—at first glance. However, relentlessness in the form espoused by Bryant is no relative of dishonor or wickedness, for his aim was not iniquitous. As

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<sup>106</sup> See *Apple Dictionary*, under “relentless.”

one pillar, relentlessness is simply a quality of mind and a disposition of one's being with regard to how one pursues the task at hand. Bryant's goal was to be the best possible version of himself and, consequently, to win NBA championships. In this light, relentlessness can be seen as the habit, built through methodical training and rational contemplation, to remain internally consistent despite the external circumstances. Indeed, it is surely no coincidence that relentlessness is one of the foundations of Christian aesthetic practice in the 4th century C.E.—the Greek term is *hupomonē*, which means, namely, the ability to persist and come through every challenge without losing sight of the goal one has in mind.<sup>107</sup> In other words, relentlessness “is the spirit which bears difficulty, not with resignation, but with blazing hope because it knows glory is coming. [It] is the background upon which courage and glory are painted.”<sup>108</sup>

## I. INVEST IN SELF-DISCIPLINE

At its core, discipline is the cultivation of habits and may be defined as the “experience that provides mental or physical training.”<sup>109</sup> Discipline is the quality that bears temperance, frugality, moderation, and endurance—at least, in part; each of the previously stated virtues are products of other qualities as well, but *only in their marriage to discipline*. A notable variation of this quality is self-discipline: the “correction or regulation of oneself for the sake of improvement.”<sup>110</sup> If nothing else remains free of scrutiny, the self-discipline of Kobe Bryant will. In effect, it is through discipline that one is able to achieve mastery of any kind. Certainly, it is

<sup>107</sup> Kevin Corrigan, *Evagrius and Gregory*, (Ashgate Press UK, 2009) 59.

<sup>108</sup> See *Danville Church of Christ*, under Definition of *Hupomonē*; “*Hupomonē* is not simply the patience which waits passively for the storm to pass. It is the spirit which stares down the storm... *Hupomonē* is not the grim patience that waits for the end but the radiant patience that hopes for a new beginning.”

<sup>109</sup> See *Apple Dictionary*, under “discipline.”

<sup>110</sup> See *Merriam Webster Dictionary*, under “self-discipline.”

no secret that discipline is a key to excellence, yet it is a deceptively difficult art to master.<sup>111</sup>

Kobe Bryant was exceptionally disciplined when it came to basketball. He was always willing to work hard for the sake of improvement. Take, for example, the following story from the 2002-2003 basketball season. The Chicago Bulls were set to play in Los Angeles against the Lakers, the defending NBA champions. At the time, the Lakers were a force to be reckoned with: Shaquille O'Neal and Kobe Bryant combined for the most dominating duo in the NBA at the time—perhaps even, of all time. Jayson Williams, a prominent young player on the Chicago Bulls that year, knew that the game would be grueling and wanted to make sure he was prepared. He decided to show up at the Staples Center, the Lakers' stadium, four hours before the game to make 400 shots in order to warm-up and prime his muscles.

To his surprise, Kobe was already in the gym, drenched in sweat from his own workout. Williams began his workout and stayed on the court for about 90 minutes before finally sitting down. Kobe, on the other hand, kept toiling away. "It's not like his moves are nonchalant or lazy," Williams recalled in the Impact Theory interview, "He's doing like game moves."<sup>112</sup> As the popular athletic adage goes, *You play the way you practice*. Kobe proceeded to drop 40 points on the Bulls later that night. "Williams said he was so impressed he felt compelled to ask Bryant why he spent so much time exercising before the game that day. Williams recalls Bryant telling him, 'I saw you come in and I wanted you to know that it doesn't matter how hard you work. I'm willing to work harder than you.'"<sup>113</sup> Kobe's discipline struck a chord in Williams. He's never forgotten that moment, nor the message it left with him; namely, that a relentless work ethic is a phenomenal foundation for growth.

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<sup>111</sup> Todd F. Heatherton & Kathleen D. Vohs, "Why Is It So Difficult to Inhibit Behavior?" (*Psychological Inquiry*, 1998) 212-216.

<sup>112</sup> "Jay Williams on Kobe's Insane Work Ethic" *YouTube*, 2 Aug. 2017.

<sup>113</sup> Katie Dupere, "This Story Perfectly Demonstrates Kobe Bryant's Incredible Work Ethic." (*Men's Health*, Nov. 2021).

In *Atomic Habits*, a book on the tiny changes that lead to remarkable results, American journalist and author James Clear notes that, ultimately, the truth is, “You do not rise to the level of your goals. You fall to the level of your systems.”<sup>114</sup> It is the system of habits that undergird excellence; after all, excellence is a habit, too. One’s goal to win is futile without a system in place to act as the foundation for—and the epicenter of—gradual improvements. Clear later writes as follows:

The purpose of setting goals is to win the game. The purpose of building systems is to continue playing the game. True long-term thinking is goal-less thinking. It's not about any single accomplishment. It is about the cycle of endless refinement and continuous improvement. Ultimately, it is your commitment to the *process* that will determine your *progress*.

Clear is encapsulating the central theme of the Mamba Mentality, although he might not even be aware of it. Kobe Bryant was relentless in the game, but more than anything, he was relentless about the process. He knew that goals were mere milestones in his pursuit of excellence.

Bryant embodied a relentless quality of mind as he cultivated habits founded on the principle of incremental improvements. Such a dedication to the process may be one of the few commonalities between the late Kobe Bryant and American football legend Tom Brady. Brady is no stranger to relentless discipline either. Consider the following excerpt from *The Washington Post* article, “Beneath the mystery of Tom Brady’s greatness is a modest secret: Self-discipline”:

In the spring of 2020, in the midst of the coronavirus outbreak, Brady participated in the Match II, the made-for-TV golf exhibition with Phil Mickelson and Tiger Woods in Florida. It was hot and raining. Nevertheless, a couple of hours before tee-off, Charles Barkley saw Brady in the parking lot of the golf club. He was running sprints. “What the hell are you doing?” Barkley said. “I’m trying to win a Super Bowl,” Brady replied. Brady’s unquenchable ambition is of course a mystery—but what really separates him is that *he marries it to method*. Without that method, year-round rigor, he

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<sup>114</sup> James Clear, *Atomic Habits: An Easy & Proven Way to Build Good Habits & Break Bad Ones*, (Penguin Random House, 2018) 27.

would be just another guy with big aspirations who couldn't live up to them.<sup>115</sup>

Bryant and Brady shared a remarkable ability to keep the long-term view in mind, and this was potent fuel for self-discipline. They were always planning and training for the benefit of their future self—their seemingly inconsequential efforts today were really an investment in their potential tomorrow. They knew that craft-specific excellence develops over time, and that it would not happen without self-discipline.

## II. *THINK LONG-TERM*

Many people are aware of Kobe Bryant's desire to win games, or his goal to win as many—if not more—championships than Magic Johnson (5) and Michael Jordan (6). As a kid, Kobe actually wanted to win eight Titles. However, many people might not be aware that the secret to Kobe Bryant's success as a basketball player was far deeper than the generic ambition to win. In *Atomic Habits*, Clear recognizes that “every Olympian wants to win a gold medal. Every candidate wants to get the job. And if successful and unsuccessful people share the same goals, then *the goal cannot be what differentiates the winners from the losers.*”<sup>116</sup> Clear, one of the world's leading experts on habit formation, is pointing out the obvious: it is not one's goals that lead to accomplishment, but rather one's *system* of refined, atomic habits that induce incremental improvements. In this way, persistence is the incessant practice, the sisyphian quality of climbing a mountain though it may be insurmountable, which leads to excellence.

The development of Bryant's basketball skills is in accordance with Clear's observations about a system of refined adjustments leading to remarkable results. Near the end of his *Mamba*

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<sup>115</sup> Jenkins, Sally. “Perspective | Beneath the Mystery of Tom Brady's Greatness Is a Modest Secret: Self-Discipline.” *The Washington Post*, WP Company, 12 Nov. 2021.

<sup>116</sup> James Clear, *Atomic Habits: An Easy & Proven Way to Build Good Habits & Break Bad Ones*, (Penguin Random House, 2018) 25.



*Mentality: How I Play*, Kobe Bryant writes in all capital letters, “I BUILT MY GAME TO HAVE NO HOLES.” But such a multifarious game did not magically emerge overnight—no, Rome was not built in a day. Bryant’s interview with Bloomberg in 2014 sheds light on how one builds a game to have no holes. He said, “You start with where you want your game to be... What would make your game the most unstoppable, or hard to deal with... And then you work backward from there. You start building it one piece at a time, one move at a time, one counter at a time.”<sup>117</sup> Gradually, the gaps start to close.

Bryant had great foresight. He knew that a persistent dedication to improve might not pay off today, tomorrow, or next week, but it would eventually separate him from the competition. Bryant explains how he contemplated the best path to improve, saying, “I always felt like if I started my day early, I could train more each day. If I started at 11, I’d get in a few hours, rest for a few hours, and then get back in the gym around 5 to 7.”<sup>118</sup> Two training sessions was not enough for Bryant, who was chasing his dream to be the best basketball player he could be (see appendix B.4). In order to maximize his potential, Bryant needed to train harder and more frequently. Bryant considers an alternate training schedule to achieve his goals in the following passage:

Imagine you wake up at 3, you train at 4, from 4 to 6. Come home, have breakfast. Now you’re back at it again from 9 to 11, relax, and now you’re back at it again from 2 to 4. Now you’re back at it again from 7 to 9... Look how much more training I have done by simply starting at 4. So now you do that, and as the years go on, the separation you have with your competitors and peers grows larger and larger. By year five and six, it doesn’t matter what kind of work they do in the summer—they’re NEVER going to catch up.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> Jay Yarow, “Kobe Bryant’s Entrepreneurial Mindset.” *Inc.com*, Inc., 22 July 2014.

<sup>118</sup> Bryant, Kobe. *Mamba Mentality: How I Play*. (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2020) 26.

<sup>119</sup> “Power of the Mind.” *YouTube*, TEDxShanghaiSalon, 25 July 2016.

To be excellent in the future requires action *now*. Ambitious goals take time to achieve and the path is not easy. Despite the absence of immediate gratification, Bryant relentlessly trained for years to finally reap the rewards of his grueling efforts. Bryant always kept the long-game in mind throughout the course of his career, which helped guide his actions.

### III. SELF-ASSESS & ADDRESS

On that same page in *Mamba Mentality*, Kobe Bryant writes, “What separates great players from all-time great players is their ability to self-assess, diagnose weakness, and turn those flaws into strengths.” This is how Bryant built his game to have no holes: he habitually toiled to perfect his craft. Bryant wasn’t born as a basketball phenom—sure, he was genetically gifted with height and both his father and uncle hooped, and this is significant. However, legends are not born, they are made—by interactions with their environment through time.<sup>120</sup> Certainly, a child prodigy who never trains will resemble nothing of his or her full potential self in adulthood. Interdisciplinary thinker Scott Kaufman, well-known for his work as a humanistic psychologist and his studies on the depth of the mind, and the expanse of human potential, notes the following in his book, *The Complexities of Greatness*:

Researchers operating under the expertise performance framework argue that greatness is largely the result of a large amount of domain-specific knowledge, acquired through many thousands of hours of deliberate practice where one is constantly striving to learn from feedback and push beyond his or her limits.<sup>121</sup>

Remaining disciplined and persistent in one’s pursuit of excellence may be one of the fundamental components of cultivating craft-specific mastery. For this reason, once Kobe Bryant

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<sup>120</sup> Scott B. Kaufman, editor. *The Complexity of Greatness: Beyond Talent or Practice* (Oxford University Press, 2013), 8.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid*, 10

established his goals with accord to reason, he turned his attention toward the process—and he placed a lot of *trust* in the process, that it would eventually produce results given the proper attention and rigor (consider *hupomonē*). No matter the setbacks, even if he didn't perceive the results immediately, Bryant was certain a profound commitment to the process of improving—including self-assessment—would prove worthwhile in the long-haul. This fundamental trust in the process, ultimately, stems from his perspective that “greatness is an infinite growth.”<sup>122</sup> He reflects on his process by asking himself “every single day, are you getting better and better and better—are you constantly growing?”<sup>123</sup> Errors will never be entirely eliminated, but by persistently toiling to improve, every single day, one embarks on the journey of excellence. Ultimately, Bryant asserts that “greatness is not a destination, it is a process.”<sup>124</sup>

Following his appalling collapse in Game 5 of the Western Conference Semifinals against Utah in 1997, Kobe Bryant actualized the Mamba Mentality by impressively demonstrating his relentless mind—indeed, his discipline, persistence, and determination. It was the infamous *four airballs* game during his rookie postseason. After the Lakers' loss that night, their season was over. When Bryant was asked about that game two decades later, and his rookie offseason, he recalled as follows:

I didn't have an offseason. I went straight to Palisades high [school] that night, as soon as we landed. I went straight to the gym. The janitor opened up the gym for me, and I was there until the sun came up. Then I was back there again the next day, and the next day after that, and the next day after that.<sup>125</sup>

Following the game in which he shot four airballs in decisive moments, Bryant knew what he

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<sup>122</sup> “The Mind of Kobe Bryant - Learning” *YouTube*, uploaded by Poitrekz Productions, Oct. 2018.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>125</sup> Luke Norris, “What Kobe Bryant Did after Putting up Four Airballs against the Utah Jazz in 1997 Was Pure 'Mamba Mentality'.” *Sportscasting*, 24 Aug. 2020.

had to do and he did not quit. Just a few days after their season ended that year, he sat down with his trainer and re-evaluated the conditioning program he had been doing. They made adjustments and he worked hard all summer long. Bryant later realizes, “although the shots felt good [leaving my fingers], the truth of the matter is my legs were tired. I wasn’t ready.” But he was determined to change that. In a 2006 interview with Steven A. Smith, Bryant asked himself, “What am I going to have to do now to get ready, so next time I’m in that position I’m going to make those shots?”

Many years later, after his retirement, Bryant reflected again on this moment in his career in another interview—this time with Patrick Bet-David. When Bet-David asked Bryant how he got so mentally and emotionally tough, Bryant’s reply was that “you have to get over yourself. It’s not about you, man. Okay, you feel embarrassed—you’re not *that* important.”<sup>126</sup> By being able to embrace failure as a part of the learning process and non-indicative of his value, Bryant was able to move into the truly beneficial part of making mistakes. Bryant explains his thought process in the following passage:

You’re worried about how people may perceive you as you walk around and it’s embarrassing because you shot five airballs... get over yourself, right? Then, after that, it’s: *why* did those airballs happen? High school, the year before, we played 35 games, max, with a week in between—spaced out with plenty of time to rest. In the NBA it’s back to back to back to back to back to back to back: I didn’t have the legs. If you look at the shot, every shot was on-line, but every shot was short. I’ve got to get stronger. I’ve got to train differently. The weight training program that I’m doing, I have to tailor it for an 82-game season, so that when the playoffs come around my legs are stronger and that ball gets there. I look at it with rationale. I say, okay, well the reason why I shot airballs is because my legs aren’t there. Next year, I’ll make sure they’ll be there.

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<sup>126</sup> “Kobe Bryant’s Last Great Interview” *YouTube*, uploaded by Valuetainment, 23 Aug. 2019.

Bryant demonstrates how an acknowledgement of failure as temporary can lead to productive reflection and self-assessment. Ultimately, when the lessons of reflection are paired with discipline—that is, deliberate action—improvement in future opportunities naturally ensues. Kobe Bryant became increasingly more effective in the years that followed, eventually helping lead the Lakers to a victorious postseason and championship in 2000.

While self-assessment is a crucial component to effective progress, the capacity to be relentless ultimately relies on one's ability to act—not just think. In fact, thinking excessively about doing something, in the form of deliberating its value, can inhibit effective action. As Aristotle articulates this idea, “art does not deliberate, it simply performs.”<sup>127</sup> By building habits Bryant eliminated the step of conscious deliberation and avoided the continuous need to make decisions. In other words, following his rational commitments, Bryant developed habits to help him maintain a relentless work ethic, which subsequently launched him to greatness. Conscious deliberation might be eliminated, but true purposive deliberation is already embodied in the athletes action and training regimen.

In his *Mamba Mentality: How I Play*, Bryant writes, “I never thought about my daily preparation. It wasn't a matter of whether it was an option or not. It was [a matter of], if I want to play, this is what I have to do, so I'd just show up and do it.”<sup>128</sup> It was simple reasoning. Without self-discipline and prudent habits, one is constantly stuck questioning his or her actions and waiting for a spark of motivation to spur him or her into action. All too often this leads to inaction or inconsistent action. By being aware of his goals and what it would realistically take to achieve them, Bryant exhibited his relentless mind through the cultivation of and dedication to

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<sup>127</sup> Aristotle, *Physics* (II.VIII).

<sup>128</sup> Bryant, Kobe. *Mamba Mentality: How I Play*. (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2020) 42.

habits that maximized his potential and pushed him to improve.

Habits, or strict codes of conduct, make action in difficult situations much easier. Through the analysis of Bryant's career and the way he carried himself toward his goal of excellence, one recognizes that he believed nothing could stop him from accomplishing his pursuit beside himself. This is why he remained steadfast in the commitment he made to himself. "I'm not negotiating with myself." Bryant stated in an interview with Danny Morel. "The deal was already made: the deal was made when I set out at the beginning of the summer and said this is the training plan I'm doing."<sup>129</sup> He continued to emphasize that he pushed through mental temptations intending to divert him from his goal and plan, saying, "I signed that contract with myself—I'm doing it. Throughout that process, you'll start talking to yourself like, *man I gotta... I think I need to... maybe if we...* Nope! No. This is non-negotiable."<sup>130</sup>

It is vitally important to always allow for changes throughout the process—changes that are necessary and genuinely beneficial for accomplishing the desirable end-product; but, equally important is the ability to recognize those temptations that are not truly instrumental for the deliberate goal, those that are disadvantageous and inhibitive to positive progress. That these repeated positive actions resulted in an elevated capacity of excellent performance is not strange, as Aristotle contends that virtues "are made perfect by habit."<sup>131</sup>

In order to eliminate the possibility of his dream remaining a mere dream, but instead manifest it as reality, Bryant did not offer excuses, entertain doubt, or perceive daily practice as optional, he *just did it*. It did not matter if his finger was broken, his back was sore, or he was too tired; his habitual nature to persist allowed him to take action when others might hesitate or quit.

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<sup>129</sup> "Kobe Full Interview + Q&A" *YouTube*, uploaded by Danny Morel, 26 Jan. 2021.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>131</sup> Aristotle, *EN*, II.I (1103a).

When considering his own doubts in a post-retirement interview with Jim Gray, Bryant made the following remarks:

Doubt is such a strange thing. There are times when you'll succeed and times when you'll fail. So, wasting your time doubting whether you will be successful or not is pointless—it is. You just put one foot in front of the other, control what you can control, and then you see what the outcome is. If you win, great, but you have to wake up the next day and do the journey all over again. If you lose, that sucks, but you get to wake up the next day and do the journey all over again... You train as hard as you can, and you step out there and let it flow.<sup>132</sup>

In this way, Bryant did not waste any time consciously deliberating or questioning his skill, his purpose, or his potential. He worked relentlessly to maximize his potential day in and day out.

What Bryant achieved was to internalize thought in action so that there is no longer a dichotomy between thinking—conscious deliberation, on the one hand, and acting, on the other hand.

Instead, action becomes thought.

#### *IV. REST AT THE END, NOT IN THE MIDDLE*

Kobe Bryant's English teacher, Mr. Fisk, introduced him to this quote, 'rest at the end, not in the middle,' and it is a saying of which Bryant has always kept with him and always lived by.<sup>133</sup> In 2018, Kobe Bryant traveled to Alabama University, where he talked to the collegiate football team about the Mamba Mentality and the value of habits. He stated the following:

If I'm playing against a weaker opponent and I start coasting, I'm building nothing but bad habits myself. If you want to play at an excellent level, if you want to do something excellent, you have to be excellent all the time. It's a way of life. It's not just: I show up on Monday and be excellent. No, it doesn't work that way. You have to be excellent across the board, and that's how you build *habits*. When excellence becomes a *habit*, then that's just who you are. It doesn't matter if I was

<sup>132</sup> "End of an Era: A Conversation With NBA Great Kobe Bryant" *YouTube*, uploaded by Milken Institute, 3 May 2016.

<sup>133</sup> "Kobe Bryant EXPLAINS The MINDSET OF A WINNER & How To SUCCEED." *YouTube*, uploaded by Lewis Howes, 10 Sep. 2018.

playing a game against Memphis or Sacramento—it doesn't matter to me.<sup>134</sup>

No matter what the opposition, Bryant showed no mercy. By and by, his relentless actions transformed from a result of choice into an element of his identity. Accordingly, his persistent habituation of body and mind created a truly relentless disposition. Kobe Bryant was fully aware that the path to craft mastery and excellence demands prudent habits—much as Aristotle suggested in his *Nicomachean Ethics*. With excerpts from Aristotle's *EN* (II.IV), Will Durant writes the following in *The Story of Philosophy: The Lives and Opinions of the World's Greatest Philosophers*:

Excellence is an art won by training and habituation: we do not act rightly because we have virtue or excellence, but we rather have these because we have acted rightly; "these virtues are formed in man by his doing the actions"; we are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act but a habit: "the good of man is a working of the soul in the way of excellence in a complete life ... for as it is not one swallow or one fine day that makes a spring, so it is not one day or a short time that makes a man blessed and happy."<sup>135</sup>

The process of cultivating habits in accordance with his self-determined goals remained 'oppressively constant' in every circumstance for Kobe Bryant. He did not yield in strength, severity, or determination in his pursuit to win multiple championships and perform at the highest level.

In 2009, the Lakers made it to the NBA Finals for the second time in a row. After losing in the previous year's championship series 4-2 against the Boston Celtics, Bryant was determined to write a different headline the following summer. That year, in 2009, they went head-to-head against the Defensive Player of the Year, All-Star Dwight Howard and the Orlando

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<sup>134</sup> "Kobe Talks to Alabama Football Team" *YouTube*, uploaded by CRC Sports, 9 Aug, 2018.

<sup>135</sup> Will Durant, *The Story of Philosophy: The Lives and Opinions of the World's Greatest Philosophers*, "Aristotle and Greek Science," 2.7 "Ethics and the Nature of Happiness" (1926).



Magic. In the NBA playoff bracket, teams are paired to compete in best-of-seven-games series. The first team to four wins advances and the losing team is eliminated. After the first two games, Bryant was averaging 34.5 points, 8 assists, 6 rebounds, and 2 steals—leading the Lakers to a 2-0 start. It is important to understand that the NBA playoffs are a grueling battle of the best teams in the league, all fighting for a chance to win the championships. It is, beyond a shadow of a doubt, the *most competitive* domain of professional basketball *in the world*. Sixteen teams enter, and one wins.

Again, Bryant and the Lakers began the 2009 NBA Finals up two games to none. Historically, only 7% of teams have ever recovered from a 0-2 deficit in an NBA playoff series. Following the second win, Kobe Bryant answered questions from reporters in his post-game interview, as is typical. After a few minutes, one reporter asked, “Kobe, I’m still waiting for a big smile out of you—you’re up 2-0. What’s the story? Are you not happy? Or only half-happy?”

Bryant, sporting a Stoic facial expression, shrugged. “What’s there to be happy about?”

“You’re up 2-0,” the reporter chuckled. He sounded baffled.

Then Kobe Bryant said something confounding, something of the sort that exemplified the legend’s relentlessness. Without hesitation, he said, “Job’s not finished.” Then he looked at the reporter dead in the eyes and asked, “Job finished?” But the reporter gave no response. “I don’t think so.” Bryant insisted, and that was that.<sup>136</sup> He was determined to win, drawing on all his discipline and focus to summit the mountain of the NBA Playoffs. The LALakers then went on to win two of the next three games, defeating the Orlando Magic 4-1.<sup>137</sup> Then, only after securing his fourth ring—the first without Shaquille O’Neal—Bryant celebrated (see appendix

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<sup>136</sup> “2009 NBA Finals Game 2- Kobe Bryant (Post-Game Interview)” *YouTube*, uploaded by SlickGenius, 8 June 2009.

<sup>137</sup> See *Basketball-Reference*, under “2009 NBA Finals - Magic vs. Lakers.”

B.5). Winning without O’Neal proved that Bryant was a legitimate basketball star and that his success could not be reduced to simply being O’Neal’s teammate.

Bryant had no intention to let up on the task at hand. In fact, he had *every* intention to dominate the entire 2009 postseason. He tore his opponents up, relentlessly. Consider this: “since 2000, only 11 players that advanced past the first round [in the NBA playoffs] have averaged 30 points, five rebounds and five assists. Kobe Bryant accomplished that in the 2003, 2008 and 2009 postseasons.”<sup>138</sup> Not to mention, he saved the best for last. In the Championship series, Kobe Bryant validated his excellence by averaging 32.5 points and 7.4 assists per game—the only other players to accomplish such a feat are Jerry “The Logo” West, Michael Jordan, and LeBron James.<sup>139</sup>

The truth is, after winning the 2009 NBA Title, the job was still not finished. For Kobe Bryant, the job was *never* finished—and it never could be. He was on a constant quest to better himself every single day, and that job takes a lifetime.

## V. *KNOW YOUR PRIORITIES*

In April of 2013, the Los Angeles Lakers played the Golden State Warriors in one of the last games of the NBA regular season. Kobe Bryant, the elder statesman of the team, was in his 17th season with the franchise. With five championship rings and fifteen NBA All-Star nominations in his bag, Bryant had solidified his mastery of the sport—he was already an all-time legend. But he was still hungry. His idol and mentor, Michael Jordan, won six championships, and he wanted to match it. Though the Lakers did not make it past the second

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<sup>138</sup> Kerry Miller, “Ranking the Greatest NBA Shooting Guards since 2000.” *Bleacher Report*, Turner Broadcasting System Inc., 24 June 2019.

<sup>139</sup> See *StatMuse*, under “Players To Average 30 Ppg And 7 Apg In A Single Finals Series.”

round of the playoffs either of the two years prior (losing to the Dallas Mavericks in 2011 and the Oklahoma City Thunder in 2012),<sup>140</sup> Bryant's competitive fire never waned. He wanted a ring in 2013 as badly as any other year, and despite his age he fought for it. With a 42-37 record leading into the matchup against the Warriors, a team that had already clinched a playoff spot, the Lakers needed to win all of their last three games.

The Warriors proved formidable opponents. Bryant and the Lakers fought their way through the first half, often trailing Golden State. Two minutes into the third quarter, Kobe hurt his calf while driving past a defender on the baseline, only to get fouled by a different defender at the rim. Lakers fans in the Staples Center feared the worst when he fell to the ground clutching his left leg, but after a couple minutes he was at the free throw line. Despite the collision, Bryant kept fighting. Not five minutes later in the game, halfway through the third quarter, he tweaked his right ankle while driving, yet another time to the rim.

It would be easy to ponder why Kobe Bryant, as an aging star at 35, was driving to the rim and into contact so frequently. The answer seems twofold. On the one hand, while Bryant's body aged, his tenacity to fight did not. At no point in his 20 year basketball career did he shy away from contact. He was fearless and relentless. If he wanted a bucket he was going to do everything in power to get it. The aggression and 'killer instinct' of Bryant on the basketball court is what gave him the nickname, the Black Mamba: an incredibly fast african snake. Commonly measured at two meters (about the height of Bryant), just two drops of its venom is enough to kill a human; likewise, two dribbles from Bryant is often enough to kill his defender (see appendix B.6).

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<sup>140</sup> See *NBA.com*, under "Lakers Playoff History."

On the other hand, Kobe kept driving because it was strategically wise for his performance. Bryant was a phenomenal mid-range scorer. Many times he did not even need two dribbles with the ball to beat his defender because with just two pump-fakes and a jab step he could create enough space to sink a jumper. Yet, if he *only* shot the ball, his opponents would play extremely tight defense on him every possession. In order to keep the defenders on edge, he needed to also show them that he was willing to drive right past them, or sometimes through them, to score. Afraid that Bryant might drive to the basket quickly, his defenders would step back on his jab step and give him a sliver of space. In this way, his drives to the rim were strategically conducted so that he could have slightly more space from his defender on the subsequent possession. Every movement of the body triggers a reaction. On the court basketball players are a lot like dancing chess pieces with a mind and control of their own—or, at least that is how Bryant saw it: “these young guys are playing checkers. I’m out there playing chess.”<sup>141</sup>

After hobbling on his right ankle, Bryant took to the foul line to shoot his free throws. As they were trailing the Warriors by seven points with 18 minutes left in the game, Bryant was determined to claw back into the contest and secure a win. At this point, he had scored 17 points and still had the energy to fight. He shook off his second injury of the night and kept playing. In his next ten minutes on the court, partitioned by only a few minutes of rest, Kobe Bryant nearly doubled his point total—which included two back to back three pointers in the last 5 minutes of the game to tie the score at 107. A couple plays later, with three minutes left in the game, the Warriors were back up by two points. The Lakers had possession, and Kobe drove from the top of the key. After a couple steps, Kobe was fouled and suddenly fell. This time he was grasping at

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<sup>141</sup>Shabazz, Daaim. “Kobe Bryant’s Chess Mind.” *The Chess Drum*, 30 Jan. 2020.

his heel.

In April of 2013, Kobe Bryant tore his right Achilles tendon (see appendix B.7). When it happened, he wasn't writhing in pain. He wasn't immediately escorted to the locker room. No. Instead, after the timeout, Bryant slowly made his way to the free throw line. He stood there as focussed as he had ever been and sunk both foul shots—again, tying the score at 109. Then, Bryant slowly made his way off the court as fans wondered if their days of watching the Black Mamba's display of mastery and excellence were over.

To be sure, the attempt to walk off an Achilles injury is impressive; but, then, to score *two* free throws in crunch time right afterwards is nothing short of extraordinary: this is true endurance. The Lakers went on to beat the Warriors that night, but would eventually get swept in the first round of the playoffs without Bryant.

Something was different about Kobe Bryant—not just different from an ordinary person, but even from an ordinary basketball player. In fact, there was even something different about Bryant than other great basketball players. It was not just that Bryant had the skill or the talent to be a master at basketball and to exhibit excellence in his craft, it was that he had the undying dedication to do so and the mental *grit* to toil for it.<sup>142</sup> He did this by cultivating specific components of mind and by focussing on the contents of life that were in his control. In many ways, he adopted a similar frame of mind as Marcus Aurelius, the ancient Roman Stoic who wrote about focusing on refining the qualities that are directly in one's own power. It seems Marcus Aurelius and Kobe Bryant both intended to focus on the actions in their mental and physical control and perform to the best of their ability despite external influences.

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<sup>142</sup> See *Grit*, by Angela Duckworth—professor of psychology at the University of Pennsylvania and in 2013 was named a MacArthur Fellow. She clarifies, “Grit is passion and perseverance for long-term goals. One way to think about grit is to consider what grit isn't. Grit isn't talent. Grit isn't luck. Grit isn't how intensely, for the moment, you want something. Instead, grit is about having what some researchers call an “ultimate concern”—a goal you care about so much that it organizes and gives meaning to almost everything you do.

Bryant was later asked about his injury and said, “when the game itself is more significant than the injury, you don’t feel the injury. The injury won’t get in the way because it’s not important to you.”<sup>143</sup> While Bryant was speaking about his physical pain, he is really describing his general disposition toward any kind of injury that impedes his path to an inspirational and virtuous life. If Kobe Bryant had never read *Meditations* by Marcus Aurelius, the stoic wisdom still found him. In his *Meditations*, nearly two millennia prior, Marcus Aurelius recorded “that things of themselves have no hold on the mind, but stand motionless outside it, and all disturbances arise solely from the opinions within us.”<sup>144</sup> In this view, every mind has the capacity to shape its own reaction to the outside world, to interpret the occurrences external to the mind. It is in no way an easy task, but, again, *easy* is inherently opposed to the pursuit of excellence. In other notes to himself, Marcus Aurelius expresses the idea that if one rejects his or her sense of harm, then the harm disappears.<sup>145</sup> Indeed, Bryant’s mindset was so empowering because he was not merely *familiar* with philosophical wisdom, but because he *embodied it* and practiced it every day throughout the course of his life. To have perspective is not a product of theoretical knowledge, but a result of actively practicing wisdom on a daily basis—something which Bryant did whole-heartedly.

There is support for relentlessness in Aristotle’s philosophy, as well. Given the nature of virtues and ethical excellence as habitual activities, or performances, Aristotle identifies the need of practice and training in order for an individual to become a truly moral agent. Aristotle claims that virtues are embodied and understood through constant practice. It is only through experience and training that one develops the habitual disposition for excellence. Aristotle writes that “the

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<sup>143</sup> “The Mind of Kobe Bryant - Obsession” *YouTube*, uploaded by Poitrekz Productions, Oct. 2018.

<sup>144</sup> Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, 4.3 (Oxford University Press, 2011).

<sup>145</sup> Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, 4.7 (Oxford University Press, 2011).

virtues we get by first exercising them... and are made perfect by *habit*.”<sup>146</sup> Thus, the virtuous individual is a product of repeated action—indeed, training one’s physical and intellectual capacities—in accordance with the true nature of virtues. According to Aristotle, one cannot become ethically good unless he or she practices virtue in action and habitually improves. This perspective suggests that the attributes of relentlessness espoused by Kobe Bryant provide practical lessons for the eventual embodiment of virtues through a disciplined and persistent frame of mind.

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<sup>146</sup> Aristotle, *EN*, II.1.

## CHAPTER FIVE

# THE QUALITY OF PASSION

*Passion is the genesis of genius.*

To be sure, passion is the primal energy that everyone possesses. While it may be directed at different objects depending on the individual, each person is passionate about some sphere of activity. A positive passion—the kind which Bryant demonstrates as the central pillar of the Mamba Mentality—is one that holds to a good goal and is self directed; in other words, a positive passion involves conscious agency and self-dependence. A negative passion is one that has no true goal in terms of agency; instead, it is driven almost exclusively by external forces. A positive passion, therefore, eventually develops into a fruitful purpose because that positive passion is already implicit in it from the beginning. This is perhaps the meaning of Aristotle’s term *entelechy*; which signifies an activity that has its goal internalized: *telos plus echein*—literally meaning ‘to have a goal.’

It is this quality—passion—that attracts us and makes us genuinely curious to learn without end: passion towards an object, event, or idea compels us to deeply participate in it. As such, participating in the content of one’s passions is naturally and, more importantly, intrinsically rewarding. In an interview with Lewis Howes, Kobe Bryant is asked about his passion for the game and how he understands this love. “I don’t think I would describe love as happiness,” Bryant says. His explanation is as follows:

I think I would describe it as a beautiful journey. It has its ups and downs—whether it’s in marriage or whether it’s in a career. Things are never perfect. But through love you continue to persevere... and when you get through



that storm, a beautiful sun emerges. And inevitably another storm comes, and—guess what—you ride that one out too. So, I think love is a certain determination and persistence to go through the good times and the bad times with *someone* or *something* that you truly love.<sup>147</sup>

Bryant gave himself to the sport of basketball for almost his entire life simply because he loved it. All of the work and pain he endured was both voluntary and worthwhile. There were still challenges, but with the passion, it was never unbearable to work harder, never impossible to invest more. When one's progress is intrinsically motivated by a purpose or passion, then there is no limit to his or her potential. Bryant also realized that passion engenders the will to improve. Ultimately, the mark of the Mamba Mentality's positive passion is to love the process and inspire others to cultivate and invest in their own passion.

## *I. PURPOSE IS A RESERVOIR INTRINSIC MOTIVATION*

One of the most significant elements to consider while examining Kobe Bryant and his athletic excellence, is the fact that he loved the game of basketball as much as life itself. On numerous occasions Bryant has spoken about his love of all things basketball—from the way the ball smells, to the sound of it swishing through the net, to the feel of the leather. His passion for the game of basketball was essentially undying. Once he realized that he actually had the potential to excel, in some capacity, as a basketball player, he dedicated himself to the game. As a result, Bryant determined that his purpose was to play basketball—at least, for his young adulthood—and he made it his mission to be the best player he could possibly be.

Everyone has their own set of strengths, which demarcate one's potential pursuits of

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<sup>147</sup> "Kobe Bryant EXPLAINS The MINDSET OF A WINNER & How To SUCCEED." *YouTube*, uploaded by Lewis Howes, 10 Sep. 2018.

excellence. But it is not until one of those strengths is also a passion that a purpose is unveiled. A purpose renders all the sweat, blood, and tears intrinsically fulfilling. Bryant's purpose was the fuel that thrust him forwards, toward excellence. "I had a constant craving, a yearning, to improve and be the best," Bryant explains, "I never needed any external forces to motivate me."<sup>148</sup> Bryant's genuine love of basketball was the intrinsic motivation of fruitful agency. Though his process to improve was exhausting and arduous, he found it genuinely pleasurable. He loved playing basketball. His dedication to this passion gave all the toiling and suffering a deep and irreplaceable significance. The purpose he identified for himself, to be his best self, propelled him for all the decades of his basketball career.

The pursuit of excellence can hardly, if at all, be attained without a profound care and interest in the content of the aim. The pillar of passion, in this sense, is the acknowledgement that mastery and excellence fundamentally emerge from the passionate mind. Bryant's implicit goal of becoming his best self was particularly operative in the sphere of basketball, but it clearly involves a tacit analogy with becoming the best ethical self. Since his self-directed purpose was intertwined with his strengths and passions, Kobe Bryant was able to surpass obstacles, dedicate himself whole-heartedly, and reach an exceptionally high potential. Without a purpose that ignites passion, there is little motivation to excel and the toil is only extrinsically rewarding.

## *II. LOVE THE PROCESS*

Aside from the idea of consistent improvement, there is perhaps no quality more prevalent or fundamental to the Mamba Mentality than enjoying the journey. Every day is a new

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<sup>148</sup> Kobe Bryant, *Mamba Mentality: How I Play*. (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2020) 22.

day with new challenges, and though it may all be in pursuit of some greater potential, some greater good, it is the process of attaining those aims which is truly beautiful and truly meaningful. Kobe Bryant demonstrated a love for the process ever since he was a kid in high school. He practiced before school, after school, and even during school.<sup>149</sup> On numerous occasions Bryant elaborates on his passion to learn and compete and improve. Yet, perhaps he was not able to fully convey this piece of wisdom until he had retired from the NBA.

In December of 2017, the Lakers retired the two numbers that Kobe Bryant wore during his two-decade career with the basketball organization: 8 and 24. His first jersey number was 8 and he switched to 24 half-way through his career in the 2007-2008 season. In the final part of his jersey retirement speech, he addresses his four daughters in the following way:

You know that if you do the work, you work hard enough, dreams come true. You know that, we all know that. But hopefully what you get from tonight is the understanding that: Those times when you get up early and you work hard. Those times you stay up late and you work hard. Those times when you don't feel like working—you're too tired, you don't want to push yourself, but you do it anyway. That is actually the dream.<sup>150</sup>

Kobe Bryant emphasized that value is in the process of toiling toward excellence— improving, struggling, and learning in pursuit of your aim in life.

In *The Mamba Mentality*, Bryant reflects on the recovery process of his Achilles, writing: "As I sit here now, when I take off my shoe and I look down at my scar, I see beauty in it. I see all the hard work, all the sacrifices. I see the journey that it took to get back to this point of being healthy. And I see beauty in that struggle. That's what makes it beautiful."<sup>151</sup> And so, there is something inextricably valuable in the *activity* of pursuing a goal and performing excellence. In

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<sup>149</sup> "Kobe Bryant - The Black Mamba (RIP - The Complete Career Documentary)" *YouTube*, uploaded by Joseph Vincent, 7 Aug. 2019.

<sup>150</sup> "Kobe Bryant's Jersey Retirement and Speech" *YouTube*, uploaded by Bleacher Report, 19 Dec. 2017.

<sup>151</sup> Kobe Bryant, *Mamba Mentality: How I Play*. (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2020) 74.

this way, Bryant accomplished his goal when he retired, becoming one of the best basketball players in NBA history, but it was not the best part, or the “dream,” as he says. His performance of basketball excellence stopped when he retired. Kobe Bryant *was* an excellent basketball player. Even though he reached the destination of his journey, the process was the best part.

Bryant’s emphasis on the pleasure of the activity is something not unfamiliar to the readers of Aristotle. Since Aristotle emphasizes the importance of pleasure in a way rather different from his predecessor, Plato—it is only at the end of the *EN* (X.I-IV), that Aristotle comes to investigate the nature of pleasure. That is, after he analyzes the moral virtues, intellectual virtues, weakness of will, and friendship. Pleasure is the culmination of Aristotle’s ethics prior to his treatment of contemplation; yet, pleasure is still an intrinsic part of the contemplative process. Furthermore, since Aristotle identifies God’s life as the purest act of pleasure,<sup>152</sup> positive pleasure is a genuine guide to the most successful activity, whether this be excellent athletic performance or excellent moral action. In this light, Bryant’s words to his daughters can be seen as an encouragement to find the good in life and pursue it relentlessly through action—that is truly what brings the fulfillment and pleasure when all else is said and done. In following the good life, pleasure will naturally manifest.

### *III. MAKE PRUDENT SACRIFICES*

The pursuit of excellence is unequivocally demanding. The athlete J.J. Watt captured this idea succinctly in 2014 when he said: “Success is not owned. It’s leased, and rent is due every day.”<sup>153</sup> As a fellow athlete, Watt understood the same truth concerning the pursuit of excellence

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<sup>152</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, XII.VII.

<sup>153</sup> Jay Baer, “What Did You Do to Get Better Today?” *Convince & Convert*, Jay Today TV, 8 Oct. 2014.

as Kobe Bryant; later clarifying in the interview, “Every single day someone’s coming for your job, someone’s coming for your greatness. If you’re the greatest, someone else wants to be the greatest. So if you’re not constantly improving your game, somebody else is.”<sup>154</sup> This is the same principle that not only motivated and encouraged Bryant to train relentlessly, but also prompted him to make sacrifices in order to reach his highest potential.

In *The Mamba Mentality: How I Play*, Bryant emphasizes his perspective that sacrifices are necessary for anyone toiling to achieve excellence and mastery in the following way:

If you want to be great in a particular area, you have to obsess over it. A lot of people say they want to be great, but they're not willing to make the sacrifices necessary to achieve greatness. They have other concerns, whether important or not, and they spread themselves out.<sup>155</sup>

The kind of obsession that Bryant speaks of allows him to focus on one pursuit, double down on his strengths, and fully commit to his self-directed goal. In his book, and elsewhere, Bryant mentions that given his top two priorities are his family and the sport of basketball, he sacrificed hours of sleep, especially early in his career.

As he aged, Kobe Bryant made more time for sleep; however, throughout his career his dedication to the game, and also his family, led him to make many sacrifices, especially social ones. “There’s a choice we have to make as people,” Bryant writes in *The Mamba Mentality*, “as individuals, if you want to be great at something. You have to make the inherent sacrifices that come along with that... so you have to have an understanding circle of family and friends.”<sup>156</sup> Of course, Bryant also knew there was great significance in passing time doing things other than basketball. “There’s a fine line between obsessing about your craft and being there for your

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<sup>154</sup> Jay Baer, “What Did You Do to Get Better Today?” *Convince & Convert*, Jay Today TV, 8 Oct. 2014.

<sup>155</sup> Kobe Bryant, *Mamba Mentality: How I Play*. (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2020) 33.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid.

family. It's akin to walking a tightrope," he writes.<sup>157</sup> While Bryant was able to pass much of his time off the court with his family, surely, nothing about the pursuit of excellence is for the faint-hearted—it demands attention just as any serious commitment to master a craft does.

Sacrifices are, by nature, not easy. By that same token, sacrifices are necessary and even inherent in every pursuit, especially for attaining excellence. It should also be noted that there are both good and bad sacrifices; which is to say, while some sacrifices are prudent and temperate, others can be counter-productive and ill-advised—not to mention that the decision to make a sacrifice can be easy, burdensome, or anywhere in between.

Kobe Bryant, being the astute athlete he was, tended toward making the worthwhile and beneficial sacrifices: those that aligned with his goals and enabled him to reach them. "At the age of 18," Bryant writes, referencing his first year in the league, "I knew that I was not going to be stopped. This was my life. We all can be masters at our craft, but you have to make sacrifices that come along with making that decision."<sup>158</sup> Bryant advocated an understanding of excellence that is available to anyone, given he or she employs the right frame of mind and work ethic—which is invariably one that embraces the necessity of making sacrifices.

It is important to also note, however, that oftentimes Bryant's decision to make sacrifices was not a difficult process. Bryant believed that "*Sacrifice* is a loaded word," since we all make sacrifices, of some sort, everyday of our lives.<sup>159</sup> The pursuit of mastery and excellence, or really anything, necessitates that one gives *something* up. "But to be honest," Bryant continues, "if they feel like sacrifices, you're probably not doing the thing that you were meant to do."<sup>160</sup> This

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<sup>157</sup> Kobe Bryant, *Mamba Mentality: How I Play*. (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2020) 33.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid, 93.

<sup>159</sup> "The Mind of Kobe Bryant - Obsession" *YouTube*, uploaded by Poitrekz Productions, Oct. 2018.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid.

perspective of the decision-making process behind sacrifices indicates that Bryant fully embraces the inherent necessity of sacrifices—and does not fight it—simply because it is an unavoidable aspect of pursuing an aim which he loves.

#### IV. *INSPIRE OTHERS*

To be sure, the pursuit of excellence is not one that is exclusively concerned with oneself; this is to say that while a singular individual does pursue and perform excellence, it cannot be achieved without the help of others, and—I further contend—excellence cannot be properly exhibited without affecting the public sphere, namely inspiring other individuals to pursue excellence. In this fashion, I believe Kobe Bryant was truly remarkable: his name and legacy serve as a symbol of inspiration for people to find their purpose and toil for excellence. The lasting impact of Bryant's influence is not limited to within American culture, his legacy extends globally—especially to China and to Italy, the place of his childhood.<sup>161</sup>

Kobe Bryant certainly inspired other athletes, particularly those in the sphere of basketball. While Bryant was dominating the league in the 2000s, future NBA stars would watch him, learn from him, and idolize him. These players, such as Kawhi Leonard, James Harden, and Jayson Tatum, all had great respect for the ‘Black Mamba’ and wanted to learn from his experience.<sup>162</sup> After his basketball career came to an end, in 2018, Kobe Bryant co-founded the Mamba Sports Academy, with “some of the best-known professionals in the sports industry.”<sup>163</sup> As a public space, much like the ancient Greek *gymnasia*, the Mamba Sports Academy is open to

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<sup>161</sup> Sapan Deb, “How Kobe Bryant Helped the N.B.A. Conquer the World.” *The New York Times*, 28 Jan. 2020.

<sup>162</sup> “Kobe Taught Kawhi & Kyrie his SIGNATURE MOVES at Mamba Sports Academy.” *YouTube*, uploaded by Josh Carson, 16 Nov. 2019.

<sup>163</sup> Bernadette Giacomazzo, “Everything You Need to Know about the Mamba Sports Academy, Founded by the Late Kobe Bryant.” *YourTango*, 29 Jan. 2020.

both children and adults.<sup>164</sup> Extending over 100,000 square feet, Bryant's modern *gymnasia* "boasts some of the most enviable sports and fitness facilities in the United States," including a self-defense dojo, a mondo running track, and five full-sized basketball courts.<sup>165</sup> Principally concerned with developing the next generation of athletes, the Mamba Sports Academy also held scrimmages, practices, and training sessions led by Bryant himself for current NBA players. Likewise, while Bryant was still in the league, his Mamba Mentality encouraged better competition throughout the NBA. All-star Paul Pierce of the Boston Celtics recognized that Kobe Bryant was one of the best and, as a result, brought the best out of himself whenever they competed (including twice in the NBA Finals).<sup>166</sup>

In the TEDx interview in Shanghai, Kobe Bryant elaborated on how he perceives inspiration to be one of the ultimate accomplishments of achieving excellence. He said as follows:

I won five championships, that's great. Another team won a championship this year, a team's going to win a championship next year—those things they come and they go, but what stays is how do you use your passion to inspire somebody else to create their passion and how can they pass that on to the next person. That is true success.<sup>167</sup>

Bryant's perspective was that victories—even becoming an NBA champion, one of the greatest feats of an athlete—are only temporary designations. 'True success,' as he sees it, comes from inspiring the future generation to find a purpose they are passionate about and pursue it whole-heartedly, which largely explains why he co-founded the Mamba Academy.

As his career came to a close in 2016, this quality, of giving others the fuel to toil for

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<sup>164</sup> See *Mamba Sports Academy*, under "Bios" (Industry Professionals).

<sup>165</sup> Bernadette Giacomazzo, "Everything You Need to Know about the Mamba Sports Academy, Founded by the Late Kobe Bryant." *YourTango*, 29 Jan. 2020.

<sup>166</sup> "Paul Pierce remembers Kobe Bryant | The Jump" *YouTube*, uploaded by ESPN, 29 Jan. 2020.

<sup>167</sup> "Power of the Mind." *YouTube*, TEDxShanghaiSalon, 25 July 2016.



excellence, was at the center of Bryant's focus. "How are you inspiring others to find themselves?" he rhetorically asks in the interview, "that is the ultimate championship."<sup>168</sup>

Bryant's primary concern, or evaluation of success, was no longer determined by how many championship rings he collected over the course of his career, it was about how he inspired others to 'create their passion' and find happiness in their own pursuit of mastery and excellence. And it was precisely in this way that Kobe Bryant's legacy was immortalized. He wanted to give back to the world what was given to him, by the likes of Magic Johnson and Michael Jordan: inspiration to chase one's dreams and embody excellence.

While we can plainly see the resemblance of Kobe Bryant's establishment of the Mamba Sports Academy as analogous to the Lyceum, in certain respects, his perspective on inspiration also has significant connections to Aristotle's philosophical work, namely, in its relationship to Aristotle's writing on friendship. Often misunderstood as a kind of psychological egoism,<sup>169</sup> Aristotle's theory of friendship asserts that a good friend is primarily a "lover of self (for he will both himself profit by doing noble acts, and will benefit his fellows)."<sup>170</sup> Friendship, Aristotle argues, is one of the greatest sources and demonstrations of living happily and virtuously. Indeed, while living a life of *eudaimonia* concerns one's own thoughts and actions, it is only fully brought into existence and actualized through intimate connections with others. In essence, we live for others. We live to pass time in good company; to celebrate and suffer together, "for without friends no one would choose to live, though he had all other goods."<sup>171</sup>

It is, as Aristotle contends, that true friends give to others the best part of themselves and, in so doing, bring out the best in their friends. Thus, one needs—first and foremost—to cultivate

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<sup>168</sup> "Power of the Mind." *YouTube*, TEDxShanghaiSalon, 25 July 2016.

<sup>169</sup> See *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, under "Egoism."

<sup>170</sup> Aristotle, *EN*, XIII (1169a).

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*, (1155a).

the best part of oneself in order to be a positive friend, leader, or comrade. Of course, Kobe Bryant was actively focussed on this personal pursuit throughout his NBA career. In fact, the personal performance of excellence (along with the rigorous ethic required to achieve it) is central to the Mamba Mentality. As such, this particular attribute—of inspiring others—is a critical manifestation of the Mamba Mentality; and, analogously, it is one of the greatest gifts of friendship, according to Aristotle.

## V. *HELP THE YOUNG IMPROVE*

Within the Mamba Mentality there are several attributes of leadership, most of which I will not cover given the confines of this work. However, to build upon the idea of inspiring others, Kobe Bryant’s leadership was certainly concerned with helping the people around him reach their highest potential. As a player and leader of the LA Lakers for two decades, Bryant worked alongside many talented individuals. Early in his career, Bryant teamed up with Shaquille, “The Diesel,” O’Neal—probably *the* most dominant big man professional basketball has ever seen (see appendix B.8). After winning three championships in a row (a ‘three-peat’), Bryant still felt as though O’Neal was not maximizing his potential. Bryant consistently urged O’Neal to have a stricter exercise regimen, cultivate a healthy diet, and be more dedicated to the craft of basketball. Make no mistake: as it was, Shaq was unstoppable in his prime. But, in a way, this frustrated and perplexed Bryant even more—if O’Neal was virtually unstoppable while being somewhat out of shape, his potential must have been nearly unimaginable. Kobe Bryant himself asserted that if “The Diesel” had *his* work ethic, the Mamba Mentality, Shaq would be

the greatest basketball player of all time, and they would have won 12 championships as a duo.<sup>172</sup>

Bryant did not shy away from confrontation and sincerely believed that honesty is the best policy, even if this was at times brutal. In fact, Bryant's desire for Shaq to maximize his potential, his constant encouragement (often perceived as nagging), ultimately drove a wedge between the two teammates. Granted, in this way, Bryant's actions can be perceived as having negative consequences. But Bryant remained unwavering in his principles. He held himself to a high standard—to practicing and performing at the highest level he could. He wanted those around him to be equally dedicated to the pursuit of excellence, and he was honest to those around him who did not show as much concern for this as he did. Even though O'Neal was a phenomenal basketball player, Bryant was still intent on pushing his teammate to be the best version of himself possible. When this task became apparently futile, Shaq and Kobe parted ways.

The departure of Shaquille O'Neal from the Lakers in 2004 did not mean that Bryant had failed at improving his peers; rather it signified that Bryant was interested in surrounding himself with people who would be intent on constantly improving. Bryant noticed that O'Neal's commitment to excellence was negatively affecting the culture of the team.<sup>173</sup> Although he was willing to move himself to another organization, in an attempt to effectively build a culture of commitment to the aim and undivided engagement, the Lakers franchise shipped Shaquille O'Neal instead. As Bryant progressed through his career with the Lakers, he became more focussed on how to help his teammates reach a higher potential. He found ways to motivate his teammates on and off the court.

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<sup>172</sup> "Kobe Bryant's Last Great Interview" *YouTube*, uploaded by Valuetainment, 23 Aug. 2019.

<sup>173</sup> "Kobe Full Interview + Q&A" *YouTube*, uploaded by Danny Morel, 26 Jan. 2021.

In practice, Bryant played hard against his fellow Lakers teammates. As the leader, he pushed them in practice in order to elevate their performances and better prepare them for the grueling games of the postseason. There is one player in particular that Bryant was focussed on helping improve: Pau Gasol. Gasol was traded to the Lakers prior to the 2007-2008 season, after the franchise went four years without winning a Title. At this time, Bryant was still in his prime, maintaining his spot as one of the best players in the league; but if the Lakers wanted to bring another NBA championship back to Los Angeles, they needed another asset—that was Pau Gasol. In their first season playing together, Bryant and Gasol made it to the NBA Finals. This was the year the Lakers lost to their long-time rivals, the Boston Celtics, 4-2.

When Bryant reflects on this series later, he points out that the Celtics had their way with Gasol. He was a great player, but in order to win that series against Boston, a team with several All-Stars, Gasol needed to play more aggressively, intelligently, and skillfully. Bryant's mission, then, was to help prepare Gasol for the next year, as they would give another run at winning the NBA Championship.

Following the loss to the Celtics in 2008, Bryant and Gasol parted ways for the Summer Olympics in Beijing: Bryant led team USA and Gasol helped lead his home country's team, Spain. The United States ended up winning the Gold medal, and, knowing how to motivate his teammates, Bryant hung his Gold medal in Gasol's locker before the first day of practice the following season. Gasol felt immense pride in representing Spain in the Olympics and desperately wanted to win Gold. Bryant knew that hanging his medal in Gasol's locker would irk him to the core, but more than anything it would push him to work even harder. Pau Gasol was livid when he saw the medal. Bryant laughed and said, "Listen: you lost to the Celtics, you lost

to us in the Gold medal match, let's not make this three in a row." That sent Gasol on a mission. As Bryant explained in his interview with Lewis Howes, "Pau was a phenomenon to begin with, but for him it was [about] stepping up to a level of physicality that we needed him to get to, which he did. And we went on to win back-to-back championships."<sup>174</sup> The second of these was against the Boston Celtics.

Throughout his career, Bryant was criticized for not sharing the basketball with his teammates as much as he should have. "But that's not how you make guys better," he explains to Howes. "You have to really affect their *behavior*." One way he did this was by hanging his Gold medal in Gasol's locker prior to the 2008-2009 season. Another way he did this was by leading his team as an example. While he often encouraged his teammates not to go out on nights between a back-to-back (this is when a team plays a game one night and then another game the night after— usually there is a day or two for rest), they did not always listen. So, sometimes he would go out *with* them. "I'll drink with you," he says to them, "but the next morning, I'm banging on your door at 5 in the morning. Let's go." They would practice in the morning, travel to their next game, and by the time it was over his teammates would be exhausted: "lesson learned."<sup>175</sup>

Bryant's desire to make those around him better only grew as he aged, since his physical prowess began to decline in his mid-to-late 30s. He began embracing his role as a mentor for the younger generation of athletes and passed on the wisdom he had accumulated throughout his illustrious career. Not only did he mentor the younger players in practice and throughout games, he also evolved his style of playing basketball to be more openly focussed on the team's success.

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<sup>174</sup> "Kobe Bryant EXPLAINS The MINDSET OF A WINNER & How To SUCCEED." *YouTube*, uploaded by Lewis Howes, 10 Sep. 2018.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid*.

Helping others improve and reach their highest potential is also a quality expressed in Ancient Greek philosophy, by both Aristotle and one of his predecessors, Socrates. Of course, Aristotle's account for the value in helping those around you improve and become more virtuous can be readily observed in his two chapters on friendship, at the end of his *Nicomachean Ethics*. One section, XIII.I, specifically examines the role of friendship in action, and argues that friends direct and encourage one another towards virtuous activities.<sup>176</sup> According to Aristotle, it is friendship that “helps the young to keep from error; it aids older people by ministering to their needs and supplementing the activities that are failing from weakness; those in the prime of life it stimulates to noble actions-'two going together'—for with friends men are more able both to think and to act.”<sup>177</sup>

Similarly, while contemplating the nature of habits as a virtue, as an expression of states of character, Aristotle writes, “[t]hus, in one word, states of character arise out of like activities... It makes no small difference, then, whether we form habits of one kind or of another from our very youth; it makes a very great difference, or rather *all the difference*.” Aristotle is clearly attentive to the value of inspiring and improving the next generation.

On the other hand, even earlier, Socrates expresses his concern to help the youth become more virtuous through dialogue and discourse in at least two Socratic dialogues recorded by his pupil, Plato—the *Euthyphro* and the *Symposium*. In many ways, an intention of assisting others in their pursuit of excellence, albeit ethically, is at the heart of Socrates' mission as a philosopher; moreover, it is likely that akin concerns prompted the establishment of Plato's Academy and Aristotle's Lyceum (and Bryant's Mamba Academy). In the *Euthyphro*, for

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<sup>176</sup> Aristotle, *EN*, XIII.I.

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.*, (1155a).

instance, Socrates says, “it is right to care first that the young should be as good as possible, just as a good farmer is likely to take care of the young plants first.”<sup>178</sup> It is from this belief that Socrates spends his days conversing with the youth of Athens in the Agora and asking them questions on the nature of things—so that they may become wiser and better.

The aim to develop virtue in the youth is similarly expressed in the *Symposium* when Diotima-Socrates, in articulating the ladder of ascent, explains that the greatest form of love is one ultimately focused upon the idea of the Beautiful.<sup>179</sup> So the role of a wise adult is to lead the younger generation so that they may become more virtuous. At every level of the ladder of ascent, the guide and the apprentice give birth to discourses that will make the young better. Indeed, the reason Socrates is sharing his perspective at the drinking party (*symposium*) in the first place is simply to assist in the improvement of the other figures from different walks of life in the room.

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<sup>178</sup> Plato, *Euthyphro* (2d).

<sup>179</sup> See especially: Plato, *Symposium* (212a).

## CHAPTER SIX

# THE QUALITY OF OBSESSIVENESS

*I was not discourag'd by the seeming Magnitude of the Undertaking, as I have always thought that one Man of tolerable Abilities may work great Changes, and accomplish great Affairs among Mankind, if he first forms a good Plan, and, cutting off all Amusements or other Employments that would divert his Attention, makes the Execution of that same Plan his sole Study and Business.*<sup>180</sup>

At first glance, obsessiveness might seem like a negatively excessive quality. To obsess about something, is often to be in the power of the object that obsesses you. Kobe Bryant uses the word in a rather contrasting sense—in a way that maintains full agency. His obsessiveness is inherently intentional and mindful. It is no secret that Kobe Bryant was obsessed with not solely playing basketball, but also improving his skills and capacities of the sport. Obsessiveness, as a pillar of the Mamba Mentality, is the quality of mind that is fully capable and content to immerse in some object of awareness without pause. It is from this mental disposition that areas of weakness are exposed and all the fine details are ironed out. Bryant spent many of his waking hours contemplating, preparing, and practicing his game—from the fundamentals to the extremely complicated—and he always applied a keen and critical lens in order to understand the deeper intricacies of the sport.

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<sup>180</sup> Franklin, Benjamin. *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* (Pocket Books, 1954) 3.10.



In his book, *The Mamba Mentality: How I Play*, Kobe Bryant articulates his perspective on the precise aim of his obsessiveness in the following way:

I always tried to train and prepare intelligently, but as I got older my pre- and post-game routine evolved... That's all par for the course. The only aspect that can't change, though, is that [of] obsession. You have to enter every activity, every single time, with a want and need to do it to the best of your ability.<sup>181</sup>

Bryant acknowledges that changes in certain practical elements of his approach overtime are natural; and, representative of his keen and conditioned mind, he adapts accordingly. Bryant's obsession, as he points out, is to strive toward perfection, although he knows he may only ever approach it. "The obsessiveness is having an attention to detail for the action you are performing at the time you are performing it," Bryant explains.<sup>182</sup> It is, itself, a kind of flow-state, a kind of dedication to one's purpose and aim—indeed, a kind of deliberative excellence and industriousness.

To be clear, obsession in and of itself, is not a bad thing. Indeed, many prominent philosophers from antiquity regarded philosophy, the pursuit of wisdom, as the highest aim. In Plato's *Dialogues*, Socrates explicitly references the highest form of Beauty as engaging in philosophy, and for that reason many philosophers dedicated their lives to the pursuit of wisdom—they were, as one could say, mindfully and rightly obsessed with philosophical practice. In fact, in Plato's *Symposium*, Socrates-diotama articulates love as a desire to possess the good forever.<sup>183</sup> Ultimately, the highest love is not simply interested in the objects or phenomena of the beautiful (*kagathos*) and the good (*agathos*); it concerns the active process of creation in Beauty to refine knowledge and develop wisdom. Aristotle also dedicated himself

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<sup>181</sup> Kobe Bryant, *Mamba Mentality: How I Play* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2020) 48.

<sup>182</sup> "Power of the Mind." *YouTube*, TEDxShanghaiSalon, 25 July 2016.

<sup>183</sup> Plato, *Symposium* (The Penguin Group, UK, 1999), 207d-210a.

fully to philosophical life, and as such demonstrated his obsession with cultivating wisdom and inspiring others to do the same. This obsession—rooted in love, reason, and mindfulness—with philosophy has given birth to countless philosophical texts and cultivated many wise minds.

Kobe Bryant's mindfulness dedicated to basketball excellence, similarly, cultivated a wise mind and gave rise to the active process of creation in Beauty through his thoughts and actions. His obsession was superficially about basketball, but fundamentally about the process of improving his mind and his body to more readily and consistently perform excellently. By obsessively training his mind, Bryant analogously cultivated wisdom and inspired others to embark on a journey that would do the same.

## *I. STUDY, PRACTICE, PERFORM, REPEAT*

Upon investigation, it seems the practical actions that lead to the constant improvement which is so deeply embedded and interwoven with Kobe Bryant's Mamba Mentality, boils down to a ceaseless cycle of studying, practicing, and performing. This is the system behind Bryant's talent. He studies frequently and critically; then, he implements the lessons directly and meticulously into his game. This is inherently an intellectually engaging task. Gradually, over the course of his career his capabilities and capacities grew to envelope excellent athletic performance. Indeed, other attributes or qualities are necessary to implement and improve this system; however, the 'study, practice, perform, then study again' cycle is a manifestation of the Mamba Mentality—which is to say, it is an attribute itself.

Studying was a crucial component of Kobe Bryant's success. He was focussed on learning material that would actively assist in his pursuit of athletic improvement. As Bryant

explains through the heading on page 29 of *The Mamba Mentality: How I Play*, “I DIDN’T TRAIN ONLY MY BODY— I TRAINED MY MIND, TOO.”<sup>184</sup> Certainly, physical fitness is a valuable asset to an athlete, which requires physical conditioning; yet, Bryant emphasizes training of the mind as an equally significant factor in attaining excellence.

The art of studying takes many forms—some independent, some collaborative. For the most part, Bryant’s studying can be classified as a primarily off-court activity: it is the material for which subsequent practice then concerns. There is a complementary relationship between study and practice. Bryant summarizes the value and method through which he trained his mind in the following passage:

The only way I was able to pick up details on the court, to be aware of the minutiae on the hardwood, was by training my mind to do that off the court and focusing on every detail in my daily life. By reading, by paying attention in class and in practice, by working, I strengthened my focus. By doing all of that, I strengthened my ability to be present and not have a wandering mind. Just as important as reading was cultivating relationships with the greats who’d come before me. As evidence of this, look at my retirement ceremony and who was there. That will tell you how I managed to get my jerseys up there... Bill Russell, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, Magic Johnson, Jerry West, James Worthy. Those guys taught me the lessons that gave me an edge over my competition. That’s why I think it’s so important to have those mentors, those north stars, who you learn from and look up to.<sup>185</sup>

Bryant strengthened his focus and awareness through reading, studying film, and conversing with others—specifically past NBA all-time greats. His preparation for improvement was this kind of inquiry: one concerned with the training of the mind. He learned all about how previous elite basketball players led their teams to championships and attained a level of basketball mastery that forever impacted the sport.

On several occasions, Kobe Bryant has acknowledged his tendency to “take the ball to

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<sup>184</sup> Kobe Bryant, *Mamba Mentality: How I Play* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2020), 29.

<sup>185</sup> Ibid.

the basket. That’s just what I would do,” he wrote in *The Mamba Mentality*.<sup>186</sup> “I relished the challenge, the contact, the decision making.” As Bryant studied and practiced, his driving capabilities—that is, his ability to assertively navigate from the perimeter of the court to the hoop—improved tremendously. As has been noted, Bryant’s training regimen enhanced his already natural athletic abilities; that physical robustness paired with his well-seasoned skill engendered a basketball expertise that can be compared to only a select few.

What further established Bryant’s authority on the basketball court, and elite basketball legacy, was his developed intelligent quotient—which is commonly referred to as ‘basketball IQ.’ There is no official definition of this concept; however, it can be effectively understood as “the ability to pick up on small cues during play that will allow players to anticipate what’s going to happen next with a higher probability. This requires deep knowledge of the game and a sharp eye for detail.”<sup>187</sup> It was Bryant’s obsessiveness that cultivated a sharp eye for detail and an impressively deep knowledge of the flow and possibilities of the game. The continuation of Bryant’s reflection in *The Mamba Mentality*, on his tendency to take the ball to the basket, resulted in the following insight:

I was in control of the action and the whole flow of the game. I was in control of whether I would finish strong or pivot back around and find open shooters on the perimeter. A large part of that in-air decision was based on scouting individual and team tendencies. I would know who would jump vertically and allow me to finish. Likewise, I would know who was more confrontational and likely to foul me or leave an open passing lane. It all depended on who was waiting for me at the basket and what the smart play was going to be.<sup>188</sup>

Clearly, Bryant’s studies provided him with indispensable information. His decision-making

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<sup>186</sup> Kobe Bryant, *Mamba Mentality: How I Play*. (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2020) 191.

<sup>187</sup> Coach Mac, “How to Develop a High Basketball IQ.” *Basketball For Coaches*, 6 Aug. 2021.

<sup>188</sup> Kobe Bryant, *Mamba Mentality: How I Play*. (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2020) 191.

capabilities were augmented by his knowledge of his opponent's tendencies, self-awareness, and repeated experience. Over time, his brain became habitually conditioned to evaluate his opponents' body language, recall their specific tendencies, and take decisive action.<sup>189</sup> Kobe Bryant's athleticism, skill proficiency, and basketball IQ were all substantially improved through this simple cycle of studying, practicing, and performing.

Aesthetic life—albeit, specifically in antiquity—is based on this same principle. From Socrates to Aristotle to Marcus Aurelius, there is an explicit emphasis on not only the cultivation of true wisdom, but also the proper embodiment of that wisdom through virtuous actions. In both cases, of Kobe Bryant and of philosophers from antiquity, the capacities of performance are instinctive actualizations of one's process of studying and practicing. Bryant does not expect to do anything in a game that he has not prepared for, mentally and physically. Similarly, one's capacity for ethical performance is a direct product of one's studying and practicing virtue. Although a more comprehensive examination of whether the practical development of virtue, or moral excellence, is integral to the life of wisdom in antiquity would be meaningful here, it is beyond the purview of this paper; however, I do address this topic more substantially in another paper, titled “The Evolution of Virtue through antiquity: Practical Development in Plato, Aristotle, and Stoicism.”<sup>190</sup> In short, Bryant's emphasis upon the complementarity of learning and practice exactly captures Aristotle's emphasis upon the complementarity of the intellectual and moral virtues in ethical action.

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<sup>189</sup> Wood, W., Quinn, J. M., & Kashy, D. A. (2002). Habits in everyday life: Thought, emotion, and action. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 83(6), 1281–1297. This psychology study regards the scientific research conducted that demonstrates how habitual behaviors or actions require less neural activity in the brain, thereby allowing cognitive capacities to concern other matters at hand. Given the habitualization of a behavior, actors will likely be able to better perform on the higher-order functions.

<sup>190</sup> Philosophy as a Way of Life by Henry Yeary ([https://docs.google.com/document/d/107T9Cy21vjHVrl-D5MaXz6oY98bIL\\_0m62\\_6ez7qqho/edit?usp=sharing](https://docs.google.com/document/d/107T9Cy21vjHVrl-D5MaXz6oY98bIL_0m62_6ez7qqho/edit?usp=sharing))

## II. FEED CURIOSITY

To be sure, Kobe Bryant was an abnormally curious player. His interest in the game of basketball even surpassed his own ego. In *The Mamba Mentality*, Bryant writes beside a two page photograph of him and his idol, Michael Jordan, “I wanted to improve, learn, and fill my head with the history of the game. No matter who I was with—a coach, hall of famer, teammate—and no matter the situation—game, practice, vacation—I would fire away with question after question.”<sup>191</sup> He was passionately, relentlessly, and obsessively curious all because he wanted to be a better athlete. He wanted to be a better on court problem-solver, have a quicker first-step, and better defend players off of screens. Bryant later reflects on his own perspective of curiosity when he writes the following passage:

A lot of people appreciated my curiosity and passion. They appreciated that I wasn't just asking to ask, I was genuinely thirsty to hear their answers and glean new info. Some people, meanwhile, were less understanding and gracious. That was fine with me. My approach always was that I'd rather risk embarrassment now than be embarrassed later, when I've won zero titles.<sup>192</sup>

From his predecessors Bryant learned about effective workouts and efficient footwork; he learned how to read defenses, be a beneficial leader, and remain focussed. His passion for the game provided him with an insatiable curiosity, but it was through action and self-assurance that he fed it.

Throughout his 20-year career, Bryant acknowledged that he was always a student of the game, always learning how to perform better. In fact, Kobe Bryant himself articulated that “curiosity is the most important thing,” in an interview with David Belasco.<sup>193</sup> Given that the

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<sup>191</sup> Kobe Bryant, *Mamba Mentality: How I Play*. (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2020) 40.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid.

<sup>193</sup> “Kobe Bryant Interview | Mamba Mentality | USC Performance Science Institute” *YouTube*, uploaded by TheLeapTV, 25 Apr. 2018.

Mamba Mentality is a way of life centered upon constant improvement and that curiosity is one of the greatest internal gateways to knowledge, it would not be too far off to say that, along with discipline, curiosity is one of the most critical attributes of the Mamba Mentality—and, thus, the performance of excellence. It is true that curiosity can serve as a vice, not a virtue—in that, curiosity can be over-scrupulous through which an agent is driven by external forces, and thus loses the power of true agency. In Bryant’s case, curiosity is both mindful and full of agency.

In a different interview, Bryant notes that a desire to learn is at the essence of his quest. While there is no doubt that Kobe Bryant had a fiery desire to compete and win, one that drove him to reach his full potential as an athlete, his perspective on the result of games is far more mature than one might presumptuously realize. Bryant says that he is neither the kind of player that loves to win, nor the player that hates to lose. He clarifies his position as follows:

I play to figure things out. I play to learn something. If you play with a fear of failure or you play with the will to win... I think it’s a weakness either way. If you play with the fear of failing, you have the pressure on yourself to capitulate to that fear. If you play with a sense of *I want to win*, then you have the fear of *what happens if you don’t*. But if you find common ground in the middle, in the center, then it doesn’t matter—you’re unfazed by either. That enables you to stay in the moment, stay connected to it, and not feel anything other than what’s right in front of you.<sup>194</sup>

Kobe Bryant explicitly acknowledges that *the mean* between these two extremes, of loving to win and hating to lose, is the stance of greatest equanimity. It is here, too, in this space of equanimity that flow-state is fully realized. Ultimately, it is neither of these fears or passions that propel Bryant, but rather a genuine curiosity to learn and improve. I suggest that this embodies one iteration of Aristotle's moral mean between excess and defect—not to mention its relationship to meditation and the philosophical traditions of the East (the Buddhist term

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<sup>194</sup> “BET Experience Genius Talks Kobe Bryant.” *Youtube*, uploaded by It’s Reklaw, 29 Jun. 2015.

*samādhi* roughly translates to undistractible-lucidity; having singular preoccupation, a singular focus).<sup>195</sup>

### III. *PAY ATTENTION TO THE DETAILS*

The introduction to Kobe Bryant’s *The Mamba Mentality: How I Play*, is written by one of the greatest coaches of all time, Phil Jackson. While Jackson was very fortunate to have coached Michael Jordan and the Chicago Bulls (1989-98) as well as Kobe Bryant and the Los Angeles Lakers (1999-2011), it cannot go without saying that he is one of the brightest minds to have ever led an NBA team from the sideline. His 70% winning percentage as a coach can also attest to his greatness—highest of all time and well above the next coach who played more than 1000 games.<sup>196</sup> So, when he acknowledges Bryant as “one of the greatest players of all time,” it is nothing to brush off.<sup>197</sup> Jackson, later in the introduction, praises Bryant again, writing that “[h]e achieved [his] goal through determination and perseverance... his success came entirely from within.”<sup>198</sup> Expanding on the qualities of Bryant and his mind, Jackson asserts, “It’s one thing to have talent, but another to have the drive to learn the nuances.”

Kobe Bryant certainly had every intention to learn the game’s nuances. In fact, it seems his ability to focus on the subtle intricacies of basketball—and subsequently master them—was largely a product of his obsessiveness. He was not merely concerned with whether or not his shot goes in or the Lakers win; he was also concerned with the precision of his footwork, the positioning of his hands on defense, all the way to the subtle signs of his opponents’ body

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<sup>195</sup> Roger Gabriel, “The 3 Levels of Samadhi.” *Chopra*, 12 Nov. 2020

<sup>196</sup> See *Basketball-Reference*, under “Phil Jackson.”

<sup>197</sup> Kobe Bryant, *Mamba Mentality: How I Play*. (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2020) 17.

<sup>198</sup> *Ibid.*



language. While Jackson coached the Lakers, “film was broken down to the smallest detail,” Bryant recalls in an interview with David Belesco. He specifies, “it was broken down to the right angle. It was broken down to foot placement, timing, looking at the posture of a teammate—what could he be thinking, what could he be feeling. Same thing with the opposition.”<sup>199</sup> This is to say that he cared as much, if not more, about the tiny details of the process as he did the result.

One of the primary methods that Bryant used to hone in upon the nuances and understand the sport on a deeper level was by watching game film. In his book, Bryant explains the value of film study, his relationship with it, and the effect it had on him in the following way:

From a young age—a very young age—I devoured film and watched everything I could get my hands on. It was always fun to me. Some people, after all, enjoy looking at a watch; others are happier figuring out how the watch works. It was always fun to watch, study, and ask the most important question: *Why?* The biggest element that changed over time, however, was I went from watching what was there to watching *for* what was missing and should have been there. I went from watching what happened to what could have and should have happened. Film study eventually became imagining alternatives, counters, options, in addition to the finite details of why some actions work and others don’t work.<sup>200</sup>

It was through a continuous process of studying the details that Bryant was able to refine his performance over time and cultivate excellence. His curiosity propelled him deeper into the details, and his mind eventually became conditioned to see new possibilities that would be more effective.

The details were precisely what Aristotle was concerned with when it came to virtuous action. Of course, in virtue ethics, the mean between two extremes is derived from a keen perception and attention to variable details. Virtue theory argues a “virtuous person is someone who performs the right action, in the right way, at the right time, in the right amount, toward the

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<sup>199</sup> “Kobe Bryant Interview | Mamba Mentality | USC Performance Science Institute” *YouTube*, uploaded by TheLeapTV, 25 Apr. 2018.

<sup>200</sup> Kobe Bryant, *Mamba Mentality: How I Play*, (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2020) 28.

right person.”<sup>201</sup> Surely, the ability to discern ‘what is best’ in any given moment, according to the kind of virtue theory proposed in Aristotle’s work, is entirely dependent on one’s abilities to pay attention to the details and, subsequently, make a proper rational analysis.

#### *IV. REFINE MENTAL ENDURANCE, FOCUS.*

In Kobe Bryant’s fourth year in the league, Phil Jackson became the Lakers’ head coach. As previously mentioned, Jackson had coached Michael Jordan and the Bulls for about a decade, during which they won six championships in the ‘90s. Beyond the shadow of a doubt, Phil Jackson was different than any of the coaches Bryant had prior. He was an eclectic yet rational individual who was a big proponent of meditation and mindfulness. In *The Mamba Mentality*, Bryant acknowledges that “when Phil Jackson came [to Los Angeles]... I started to understand the importance of my personalized meditative process. From then on, I placed an increased emphasis on it.”<sup>202</sup>

As coach, Phil Jackson introduced the Lakers players to a series of meditation techniques and mindfulness practices. Sometimes he had them envision themselves in postseason scenarios, dealing with challenges, in order to orient their priorities and instill a vision for them to chase and to manifest. Other techniques were focused on breathing in order to reset one’s internal composure. Bryant discusses his meditative practices in a post-retirement interview in the following way:

I meditate everyday... It’s like having an anchor. If I don’t do it, I feel like I’m constantly chasing the day, as opposed to being able to be [self] controlled and dictate the day. Not that I am calling the shots on what comes forward, but the fact

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<sup>201</sup> “Virtue Theory: The Right Action in the Right Way.” *Academy 4SC*, 5 Mar. 2021.

<sup>202</sup> Kobe Bryant, *Mamba Mentality: How I Play*. (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2020) 87.

that I am set and ready for whatever may come my way. I have a calmness about whatever comes my way, a poise.<sup>203</sup>

According to Phil Jackson, the practice of meditation really resonated with Bryant when he first introduced it. This training helped Bryant both on and off the court to become more present, aware, composed, and confident. Eventually, Bryant led the Lakers with the same emphasis on mindfulness as Jackson. For example, Bryant has concluded his pre-game team huddle speech by saying, “We’re going to have one collective breath and go out there and do it together.”<sup>204</sup> It was also this training of mindfulness and meditation that helped Bryant establish a disposition in the mean; which is to say that he cultivated a mindset that was equally composed during times of success and times of adversity. “We were never too high, never too low, we were just in the moment, and felt very secure in who we were,” Bryant recalls about his time playing under Phil Jackson. He was especially interested in practicing meditation after he saw the initial benefits it had on the team. Even “in a hostile environment with fans yelling and screaming in pressure situations, and it had no effect on us,” Bryant explains. The practice of meditation helped Bryant calm and discipline his mind, as much as it sharpened his ability to focus.

In an interview with Danny Morel in 2020, Kobe Bryant was asked how he overcame all the distractions that tempted him throughout his career that could have broken his focus, but did not; why he kept toiling after he could have easily stopped. His response was as follows:

Isiah Thomas asked me that question one time, after a game in Boston and the first thing that came to my mind was those Nat-Geo shows where you see a lion and he's got his sights set on some poor antelope. And then they zoom in on the lion's expression and—the crazy thing about it is—you see all these gnats buzzing around his eyes and landing on his face. I'm thinking that has got to feel really weird... But the lion's gaze and focus was completely fixated on what he was going after and what he was there to kill. So those gnats are *irrelevant*. They're

<sup>203</sup> “Kobe Bryant & Phil Jackson | Meditation” *YouTube*, uploaded by The Flow Station, 1 Jul. 2017.

<sup>204</sup> “Lesson 1 Mindfulness Basics.” *YouTube*, uploaded by MindfulnessWOBorders, 9 Jan. 2013.

buzzing around but they're not important. If you find yourself getting distracted by things that are pulling at you on the perimeter, then maybe you need to look in the mirror and ask yourself if you are as focussed as you should be—because if you are it won't matter.<sup>205</sup>

In essence, Bryant did not care about those distractions and temptations. He knew what was important to him and did not deliberate. His obsession with the sport and achieving excellence captured his focus entirely. No distractions were going to deter him from accomplishing his goals. This mental quality of Bryant speaks volumes to his capacity as both a thinker and an actor: with a mind capable of intense and undistracted focus Bryant found yet another way to increase his potential and actualize improvement.

Kobe Bryant's trained focus allowed him to exist precisely in the present—the implications of which are philosophically relevant to not only the accumulation of wisdom, but also the active embodiment of both happiness and wisdom. Indeed, a vital constituent of a wise disposition was seen as the capacity to be knowledgeable of the past and the future, but to be emotionally and mentally tethered to *neither*. Accordingly, within many schools of thought in antiquity, “the present sufficed for happiness, because it was the only reality which belongs to us and depends on us.” Furthermore, they understood “the infinite value of each instant: for them, wisdom is just as perfect and complete in one instant as it is throughout an eternity.”<sup>206</sup> And so, I argue, Bryant's intense focus, his obsessiveness, should be understood not only as a particular quality of excellent performance, but also a catalyst for both happiness (*eudaimonia*) and wisdom (*sophia*). Ultimately, “philosophy in antiquity was an exercise practiced at each instant. It invites us to concentrate on each instant of life, to become aware of the infinite value of each

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<sup>205</sup> “Kobe Full Interview + Q&A” *YouTube*, uploaded by Danny Morel, 26 Jan. 2021.

<sup>206</sup> Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault* (Blackwell Publishing, 2017) 268.

present moment,” and, in that, see the beauty and wisdom in the cosmos.<sup>207</sup> To be sure, a mind with refined ability to focus is more capable of learning, improving, and inspiring others through their accomplishments and composure.

## V. *FIND YOUR FLOW-STATE*

On the surface, basketball seems to be concerned exclusively, or primarily, with athletic bodily functions—and yet, mindfulness is absolutely critical to the practical discipline of play and performance. According to a medical dictionary, ‘flow-state’ can be described as “an altered state of consciousness in which the mind functions at its peak, time may seem distorted, and a sense of happiness prevails. In such a state the individual feels truly alive and fully attentive to what is being done.”<sup>208</sup> For obvious reasons, being in a flow-state is not only positive, but fully conducive to operating at peak capacity and excelling. In many ways, the pleasure that results from immersing in a flow-state is comparable to the pleasure inherent in Aristotle’s highest ‘good.’ Reid clarifies this connection in the following way:

As with the athletic phenomenon dubbed ‘flow’ or ‘the zone’, the highest pleasures ‘complete’ excellent activity that maximises the subject's capacity. As with all activities, though, the worth of athletic performance derives solely from the excellence (*aretē*) of an agent.<sup>209</sup>

It is this form of mindfulness, that Bryant himself realizes, which is analogous to the mindfulness of the sage—that which Aristotle calls *spoudaios* (the serious person). Certainly, flow state and mindfulness do not inherently denote virtue, but they may be understood as a symptom of excellent performance or virtuous action—that are anticipations of moral virtue and healthy

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<sup>207</sup> Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault* (Blackwell Publishing, 2017) 273.

<sup>208</sup> See *Medical Dictionary*, under “Flow-state.”

<sup>209</sup> Heather Reid, “Aristotle’s Pentathlete.” *Sport, Ethics, and Philosophy*, 2010, pp. 183–194.

functioning.

Kobe Bryant's passion for basketball allowed him to enter into a flow-state during practices and games. His complete immersion in the present moment gave him increased awareness, tranquility, and pleasure. It is notable that the medical dictionary clarifies that the flow-state "is distinguished from strained attention, in which the person forces himself to perform a task in which he has little interest." Unlike flow-state, strained attention has many negative ramifications, such as tiredness, nervousness, and decreased awareness.<sup>210</sup> When passion underlies the pursuit of excellence, this allows one to concentrate in hugely beneficial ways.<sup>211</sup>

It is no secret that Bryant was passionate about the game of basketball. In *The Mamba Mentality*, Kobe explains how he used the time during the singing of the national anthem before each game to hone his focus. "During those precious moments, I'm hearing all the little sounds and imbibing the energy of the arena. I'm taking the opportunity to be aware of what's going on, to be aware of the teammates around me, the basket in front of me, the basket behind me, all the other sounds and objects. It's a full concentration and understanding of the arena."<sup>212</sup> This process of immersion into a flow-state would not be possible for Bryant if he did not have such a refined focus and enduring passion for his craft. "In essence," he continues, "I'm trying to feel the energy of the environment and allow it to move through me. That then propels me and fuels me to have a great performance."<sup>213</sup>

Not only is the immersion in a flow-state a quality of living with the Mamba Mentality, it

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<sup>210</sup> See *Medical Dictionary*, under "Flow-state."

<sup>211</sup> Raghavendra, B.R., and Prashanth Singh. "Immediate Effect of Yogic Visual Concentration on Cognitive Performance." *Journal of Traditional and Complementary Medicine*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2016, pp. 34–36.

<sup>212</sup> Kobe Bryant, *Mamba Mentality: How I Play*. (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2020) 87.

<sup>213</sup> *Ibid.*

is also scientifically relevant for the exhibition of excellent performance. Inasmuch as performance is concerned with the mind and mental functioning, studies suggest that immersing in a flow-state can drastically improve brain functioning, such as problem solving, body awareness, increased speed of processing, and more.<sup>214</sup>

The manner through which Bryant exemplifies the obsessive quality of the Mamba Mentality has some meaningful connections to philosophers from antiquity. Bryant's actualizations of discipline, focus, temperance, high-mindedness, and deliberative excellence all relate to aspects of ancient Greek and Stoic virtues.<sup>215</sup> Consider how Reid interprets the work of Aristotle's ethics to directly entail components flow-state (through words like 'harmonious,' 'pleasure,' 'in the zone,' etc.) in the following passage:

“The balanced and harmonious beauty of these athletes' bodies reflects Aristotle's ideal of a virtuous soul: one able to discern noble ends and means, and to transform those ideas into physical activity completed by the pleasure appropriate to happiness (*eudaimonia*). In fact, a good model for such happiness is the pleasure felt by athletes who experience being 'in the zone' after training leads them to achieve skills in balance with the challenges presented by sport. In stark contrast to the aristocratic idea of inborn virtue, Aristotelian *aretē* is a matter of deliberate education. It is acquired first of all by deliberate character training (*ethos*), then complemented by the intellectual understanding of what is intermediate (*metrion*) and noble (*kalon*), and finally perfected in our relationships with others and service to our community.<sup>216</sup>

Furthermore, Bryant's quality of obsessiveness is comparable to the Stoic virtue of industriousness, which can be understood as “the capacity to work energetically and devotedly, to be hard working and diligent, to possess a strong work ethic.”<sup>217</sup> While this definition

<sup>214</sup> Payne et al., “In the zone: Flow State and Cognition in Older Adults.” *Psychology and Aging*, 2011, pp. 738–743.

<sup>215</sup> Curtius Philo, et al. “Roman Virtues.” *Roman Republic Respublica Romana*, 15 Sept. 2019.

<sup>216</sup> Heather Reid, “Aristotle's Pentathlete.” *Sport, Ethics, and Philosophy*, 2010, pp. 183–194.

<sup>217</sup> Brian O'Brien, *The Philosophy of Greatness* (Columbia, 2020), 48: The overlap between Ancient Roman virtues and the virtues that Benjamin Franklin espoused and recorded is evidently well-documented.

effectively explains a central theme in the pillar of obsessiveness, perhaps the whole of the Mamba Mentality has its roots in industriousness. As Ben Franklin interprets the Stoic virtue:

“Lose no time; be always employed in something useful; cut off all unnecessary actions.”<sup>218</sup>

Again, there is no positive evidence that Bryant was an explicit student of the philosophers from antiquity; however, it is clear that the ideas postulated and promoted by ancient thinkers like Aristotle and Marcus Aurelius invariably coincide with much of the Mamba Mentality.

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<sup>218</sup> Brian O'Brien, *The Philosophy of Greatness* (Columbia, 2020), 49.



CHAPTER SEVEN

## THE QUALITY OF RESILIENCE

*How satisfying it is to dismiss and block out any upsetting or foreign impressions, and immediately to have peace in all things.*

Resilience is the innate hunger in someone that does not see giving up as an option when times are difficult or when obstacles arise. Failure is inevitable. Suffering and hardship dawn on every person no matter their luck or privilege. As Sylvester Stallone famously said, “It’s not about how hard you hit. It’s about how hard you can get hit and keep moving forward. How much you can take and keep moving forward.”<sup>219</sup> This encapsulates the pillar of resilience. It is not just the physical toughness, but often the mental toughness that broadens boundaries and unbounds potential. Kobe Bryant proved his disposition toward resiliency consistently throughout his career—and emphatically so when he lost the NBA Finals in 2008 and also when he ruptured his Achilles tendon in 2013.

### *I. MENTAL TOUGHNESS IS ABOUT STRIKING A BALANCE*

In his *Mamba Mentality*, Bryant writes “Everything negative—pressure, challenges—is all an opportunity for me to rise.”<sup>220</sup> The toughness, grit, and tenacity of Kobe Bryant extended well beyond the physical; his resilient mind remains one of the most inspiring and philosophically compelling manifestations of the Mamba Mentality. “Mental toughness is all

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<sup>219</sup> “It’s Not About How Hard You Hit.” *YouTube*, uploaded by Michael DePinto, 15 Jul. 2012.

<sup>220</sup> Kobe Bryant, *Mamba Mentality: How I Play* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2020), 101.

about not getting too high, not getting too low, but staying pretty even—that’s kind of the trick to it, not to get too emotionally attached to the situation... Certain emotions you have to watch out for...”<sup>221</sup> Bryant then acknowledges that excitement is natural in many cases, but he explains how making mistakes, failing to achieve a temporary goal, or sustaining an injury can often take a mental toll on the mind, and if that mental sphere is not properly maintained, negative experiences can begin to intensify and lengthen.

The exacerbation of negative experiences, both mentally and physically, can lead to unnecessary, and often detrimental, additional consequences—which Bryant avoids by not “letting [it] linger.”<sup>222</sup> In referencing such negative distractions and the unfavorable feedback loop, again, he explains, “now I can identify [it] pretty quickly... So if something is frustrating me I can always react to it” in an intentionally mindful way and “get right back into the pocket I need to be in pretty quickly.”<sup>223</sup> Indeed, *this* is the practice of mindfulness, of returning to the breath, and remaining at an equilibrium despite the circumstances of the outside world.<sup>224</sup> It is from this equilibrium that one embraces the trials and tribulations of life, relinquishing any kind of distress or agitation, to rapidly and repeatedly recover from inevitable confrontations with adversity, and to participate in the good life. For Aristotle, of course, this balance was the path to human flourishing (*eudaimonia*), indeed, the ultimate pleasure in life; the Stoics, similarly, view this equilibrium and stability of the mental sphere as integral to *ataraxia*, which literally translates to freedom from disturbances, but effectively signifies their idea of human flourishing.

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<sup>221</sup>“Kobe Bryant Mental Toughness.” *YouTube*, uploaded by Ben Williams, 14 May 2008.

<sup>222</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>223</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>224</sup> “What Is Vipassana Meditation, A.k.a. Insight Meditation?” *Headspace*, 2022.

Certainly, this mental capacity of Kobe Bryant has profound philosophical implications. His acknowledgement of a middle way, a balance, as the source of stability, and as a catalyst for excellent performance, suggests that Bryant himself, through the process of his career—which entailed rigorous athletic training, indeed an education of the body, mind, and spirit—came to acquire real, genuine wisdom. Already in this work, we have seen several manifestations of Bryant’s resilient mind, both in action and in thought—namely, the time he mindfully demonstrates his commitment to and awareness of the middle way, the mean between two extremes, as the best course of action.

Furthermore, I argue, the tranquility and grace that Bryant displayed in his excellent performances—that is, his resilience, courage, capacity for self-control and self-composure—is a result of the wisdom that he accumulated through his experience in training and performance, both of mind and body together. “For real wisdom does not merely cause us to know: it makes us “be” in a different way,” as Pierre Hadot writes in *Philosophy as a Way of Life*.<sup>225</sup> So Bryant’s practical demonstrations of sagacity, as encapsulated in these pillars and their corresponding attributes, indicate the presence of genuine wisdom. Insofar as it pertains to ancient thinkers of virtue ethics, Hadot ultimately concludes that “wisdom, then, was a way of life which brought peace of mind (*ataraxia*), inner freedom (*autarkeia*), in a cosmic consciousness.”<sup>226</sup> This analysis would suggest that Bryant developed qualities of the sage (*spoudaios*), through the cultural and educational institution of *athletics*, rather than via modern academia—thus, further supporting the philosophical merit of the Mamba Mentality.

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<sup>225</sup> Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault* (Blackwell Publishing, 2017) 265.

<sup>226</sup> *Ibid.*

## II. USE NEGATIVE EXPERIENCES AS MOTIVATION

While the future remains largely uncertain, one cannot ignore the inescapable fact that negative experiences will eventually occur. In these moments, it is important to not get swept up by emotions, dwell in self-pity, or seek out excuses; instead, the Mamba Mentality advocates for employing a perspective that transforms the negative into the positive. For instance, Dwayne Wade fouled Bryant on a layup and accidentally broke his nose in the 2012 All-Star game. After the game, Wade called the Lakers star and apologized for hitting him and told him that he had harbored no intention to injure him. However, Bryant was not hung up on it, and responded saying “Bro, I love it.” Wade was confused, and didn’t know what to say. *How could he love it?* Then Bryant said it again, “I love it.”<sup>227</sup>

Not two weeks later, Bryant’s Lakers played Wade and the Miami Heat. Miami had three incredible players in Wade, LeBron James, and Chris Bosh—and not surprisingly, later that season they went on to win their first of back-to-back championships together. Wearing the face mask, Kobe Bryant shot an impressive 60% from the field; and led his team to a ten point victory over the Miami Heat, scoring 33 points in the contest.<sup>228</sup> He never let up. The obvious truth is that a face mask is not an ideal accessory for any athlete, especially in such a fast-paced game like basketball, since it inhibits a full field of vision, which is critical on the court—not to mention the overt annoyance of a plastic mask dripping with sweat. Regardless, Bryant would not perceive it as a crutch. He embraced the mask instead of resisting it, and that gave him power. In fact, it may be more accurate to say Bryant refused to let it hinder him and shifted his perspective in a way that let him use the mask as motivation—and it fueled him.

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<sup>227</sup>“Dwyane Wade on Kobe Bryant ‘I Broke His Nose & He Went PSYCHO.’” *YouTube*, uploaded by HighlightsCentral312, 14 Feb 2019.

<sup>228</sup> See *ESPN.com*, under “Heat vs. Lakers - Game Summary - March 4, 2012.”

There are many circumstances in which Kobe Bryant uses criticism or an obstacle to propel him forwards, persevere, and reach new heights. In 2002, when Bryant returned to Philadelphia, where he played high school ball, for the All-Star Game, Bryant thought he would be greeted with love from the crowd. As it turned out, the notoriously harsh and vocal fans of Philadelphia actually booed Bryant. At the time he noted that he was surprised and it was not an ideal welcome home, but he later admitted that he used it as motivation.<sup>229</sup> Whether by learning from his mistakes or reorienting his perspective in order to astutely interpret certain aspects of his circumstances, Bryant habitually transformed negative experiences into positive forces of motivation to reach for even higher goals.

In some ways, this is analogous to the composure and disposition of Socrates after the Athenian jury found him guilty, as recorded in Plato's *Crito* and *Apology*. Despite the inherently negative quality of being sentenced to death, Socrates essentially uses it as an opportunity to demonstrate yet another instantiation of his remarkable commitment to philosophical life.<sup>230</sup> To be sure, Socrates does not fear death; in fact, the tranquility and grace with which he embraces his fate, defends the principles of justice and democracy, and realizes qualities of the sage, was so powerful that it cemented his legacy as one of the greatest teachers of philosophy in antiquity—and, arguably, of all time.<sup>231</sup> Not to mention, his contemplation of death and acceptance of fate are analogously interconnected to the Stoic conceptions of *Amor Fati* (to love one's own fate) and *Memento Mori* (remember you must die).<sup>232</sup> Taking this into account, one's

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<sup>229</sup> "Kobe Bryant Booed at 2002 All-Star Game MVP Presentation." *YouTube*, uploaded by Ryan Van Dusen, 14 Feb. 2015.

<sup>230</sup> See Plato's *Apology* and *Crito*.

<sup>231</sup> Plato, *Crito*, 46b - 54d.

<sup>232</sup> William Breitbart, "Memento Mori, Amor Fati," *Palliative & supportive care* 2019.

ability to take negative experiences, accept them, embrace them, and thereby interpret them as opportunities to evolve and improve is a true mark of wisdom and influence.

### *III. BOUNCE BACK AND ENDURE*

While not all immediate reactions to adversity must be positive, it is essential to endure and overcome such negative experiences—as actualizations of the Mamba Mentality have repeatedly demonstrated. Back in 2013, not even a full day after he ruptured his Achilles, Kobe Bryant was struggling to process the implications of his injury. Most professional athletes are never the same after injuries of similar caliber (i.e., torn ACL, fractured ankles, damage to the spine, etc.).<sup>233</sup> While the physical rehabilitation process is long and grueling, the mental aspect of recovering from a severe injury is arguably more onerous. Especially in Bryant’s case, as it was the 17th season of his career (not only is the average NBA career under five years, but there is typically a rapid decline in performance once a player is in their early-to-mid-thirties), the recovery was bound to prove arduous.<sup>234</sup> Yet, the 2013 postseason was arguably his last realistic chance to win a sixth NBA championship, save perhaps the Lakers Organization acquiring other All-Star players (which they did not). This realization made Bryant’s road to recovering his ruptured Achilles as much, if not more, mental than physical. Bryant shared his immediate reflections on social media that morning after the injury; he wrote as follows:

This is such BS! All the training and sacrifice just flew out the window with one step that I've done millions of times! The frustration is unbearable. The anger is rage. Why the hell did this happen?!? Makes no damn sense. Now I'm supposed to come back from this and be the same

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<sup>233</sup> William Kraemer et al., “Recovery from injury in sport.” *Sports health* (2009).

<sup>234</sup> Milla Henson, “The Exact Age That NBA Players Are in Their Prime.” *Sportscasting*, 26 Nov. 2019.

player or better at 35?!? How in the world am I supposed to do that?? I have NO CLUE. Do I have the consistent will to overcome this thing?

Maybe I should break out the rocking chair and reminisce on the career that was. Maybe this is how my book ends. Maybe Father Time has defeated me... Then again maybe not! It's 3:30am, my foot feels like dead weight, my head is spinning from the pain meds and I'm wide awake... Feels good to vent, let it out. To feel as if THIS is the WORST thing EVER! Because After ALL the venting, a real perspective sets in. There are far greater issues/challenges in the world than a torn Achilles. Stop feeling sorry for yourself, find the silver lining and get to work with the same belief, same drive and same conviction as ever.

One day, the beginning of a new career journey will commence. Today is NOT that day. "If you see me in a fight with a bear, pray for the bear". I've always loved that quote. That's "mamba mentality." We don't quit, we don't cower, we don't run. We endure and conquer... Maybe now I can actually get some sleep and be excited for surgery tomorrow. First step of a new challenge... Mamba Out.<sup>235</sup>

Kobe Bryant drew on the same unwavering conviction and drive to excel that he always had, despite the nearly insurmountable obstacle in front of him. He goes through a wave of emotions and frustrations before he is able to gather his composure and assess his situation. He knew that recovery would be an uphill battle, but he was ready to endure and improve. "If you see me in a fight with a bear, pray for the bear." What a powerful message—that his challenge appears monumental, yet he is fully willing, and determined, to take it on. And win. When Bryant fully recovered from an injury that usually requires ten months of rehabilitation in seven months, he further demonstrated the capacity to bounce back quickly from adversity. In regard to the recovery process, Bryant demonstrated exceptional resilience in both his perspective and his actions, as much as he did passion, courage, and determination.

Of course, Kobe Bryant had been exhibiting aspects of resilience throughout the duration

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<sup>235</sup> "Kobe Bryant Up Close Interview with Jimmy Kimmel." *YouTube*, uploaded by All Honesty, 25 Aug. 2013.

of his career, prior to the Achilles injury. In fact, one of the most profound actualizations of Bryant’s resilience occurred back in 2008, following the NBA Finals. Former All-Star Chris Bosh, a two-time champion with the Miami Heat, shed light on this experience in his Hall of Fame (Class of 2021) induction speech. He paid tribute to the great players that came before him, those who inspired him throughout his career—and then he particularly singled out Kobe Bryant to share a lesson that he learned from the late great NBA legend. Bosh recited the following:

He was such an inspiration for my generation. It was 2008. The “Redeem Team” was formed. We were in Vegas for the start of training camp and we’re getting ready for the Olympics in Beijing. I wanted to establish myself as a young leader on the team by waking up bright and early, day one. So, the goal was to be the first one at breakfast. I set my alarm, I make sure I’m awake at sunrise, I get out of bed, I put on my gear and I head downstairs. But when I get there, Kobe’s already there—with ice packs on his knees, drenched in sweat. Now, it took me a minute to figure it out, but this guy wasn’t only awake before me, he had already worked out. He had just played in the finals days earlier; meanwhile, I’d been off for months and I was still exhausted. What he had done that morning was incomprehensible to me. That dedication he had only days after falling short of an NBA championship, taught me something I’ve never forgotten: legends aren’t defined by their success, they’re defined by how they bounced back from their failures.<sup>236</sup>

The resilience demonstrated by Kobe Bryant throughout the entirety of his career is the mark of a true legend. His dedication to the game and to the process of improvement has, understandably, inspired many. However, there is actually more to know about Bryant’s role in the 2008 Beijing Olympics—where Team USA went on to win gold (the second of Bryant’s career). Not only had he worked out before the entire team that first morning, but Mike Krzyzewski (Coach K)—the selected coach of that year’s Olympic team—recalls Bryant knocking on his door two days before any of the other players even *arrived*.<sup>237</sup>

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<sup>236</sup> “Chris Bosh Tells an Inspirational Story about Kobe Bryant during his Hall of Fame Induction.” *YouTube*, uploaded by StirpTV, 15 Sep. 2021.

<sup>237</sup> “Why Kobe Bryant Refused to Shoot on Team USA | Coach K’s Amazing Kobe Story.” *YouTube*, uploaded by JJ Redick, 15 Oct. 2020.



Needless to say, Kobe Bryant was different. It turned out, he met with Coach K before training camp began because he wanted to guard the best perimeter players on every opposing team. That year, following the 2007-2008 NBA season, Kobe was arguably the best player in the league. He averaged about 28 points, 6 rebounds, 5 assists, and 2 steals per game during the regular season.<sup>238</sup> He also led the Lakers to the 2008 NBA Finals as the only All-Star on the team—ultimately losing the series 4-2 against the Celtics, who had three All-Stars (and one soon-to-be All-Star in Rajon Rondo).<sup>239</sup> He was not only a scoring machine and offensive virtuoso; he was a defensive animal. While talking to Coach K, Bryant leaned in—glaring—and said “Coach, I promise you I’ll destroy them.”<sup>240</sup>

Bryant was so serious about locking down the opposing team’s best offensive guard, that during their first team workout, he didn’t even take a shot. Coach K called him over and wanted to know why he was only working on his defense and not shooting. Evidently, he was committed to destroying the opposing guard defensively. Coach K responded, “I have seen you destroy teams offensively. Will you please shoot the ball!” Bryant smiled, claiming that Mike Krzyzewski was the only coach that ever asked him to shoot.<sup>241</sup> Even though the Lakers had just lost in the NBA Finals, Bryant kept his head high and exhibited resilience by attending his next commitment with determination and focus. And, as previously mentioned, the “Redeem Team” went on to win the gold.

To be sure, Kobe Bryant’s dedication to the game and unwavering focus allowed him to endure more than most. A prime example being the manner in which he led the Los Angeles

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<sup>238</sup> Chase Sagum, “Kobe Bryant’s 07-08 Statistics,” *Bleacher Report*, Turner Broadcasting System Inc., 3 Oct. 2017

<sup>239</sup> See *Wikipedia*, under “2008 NBA Finals.”

<sup>240</sup> “Why Kobe Bryant Refused to Shoot on Team USA | Coach K’s Amazing Kobe Story.” *YouTube*, uploaded by JJ Redick, 15 Oct. 2020.

<sup>241</sup> *Ibid.*

Lakers in 2010 to win an NBA Championship against their long-time rivals, the Boston Celtic. Bryant played exceptionally throughout the seven-game series, averaging an impressive 29 points per game, along with 8 rebounds and 4 assists—all the while, he was nursing a broken index finger on his shooting hand for weeks.<sup>242</sup> Despite only shooting 40% from the field (53% true shooting percentage), Bryant showed no signs of weakness, playing remarkable defense on one of the greatest shooters in NBA history—Ray Allen only converted on 36% of his attempted field goals.<sup>243</sup> While statistics occasionally fail to capture the true excellence of a player's performance, Bryant's defensive presence was certainly recorded, as he pulled down fifteen rebounds in game seven to secure the win.<sup>244</sup>

Kobe Bryant could not fathom losing another NBA championship series to the Boston Celtics, who had maintained their same four core players. And he also knew how important this win was for the Lakers Organization, given the longstanding sports rivalry between Boston and Los Angeles. Since Bryant and the Lakers lost to the Celtics just two year prior, this was their moment for revenge and redemption. Bryant had been waiting for this moment since the Celtics won Game 6 in 2008. He knew that his goal was to win another championship and, even with a fractured finger, he endured to honor the Lakers franchise and his own personal aims. Bryant remained resolute and resilient in the pursuit of his fifth NBA Championship. All his dedication and resilience paid off when Kobe put on the sweetest ring of them all—number five (finally winning one more than Shaq).<sup>245</sup>

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<sup>242</sup> See *Basketball-Reference*, under “2010 NBA Finals.”

<sup>243</sup> See *StatMuse*, under “Ray Allen 2010 NBA Finals Stats.”

<sup>244</sup> See *StatMuse*, under “Kobe Bryant 2010 NBA Finals Stats.”

<sup>245</sup> “Kobe Bryant: I just got One More than Shaq.” *YouTube*, uploaded by Arkange08, 18 Jun. 2010.

#### IV. BE A TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADER IN YOUR COMMUNITY

Granted, Kobe Bryant is often criticized for shooting the ball too often and not passing enough to his teammates. Furthermore, Bryant's mentality has often been uncharitably perceived as individualistic and his game reduced to a certain kind of egoism. Perhaps this is because Bryant notoriously responded to Shaquille O'Neal's comment that there is no 'I' in 'team,' by exclaiming, "I know, but there's an M-E in that mother-fucker." Given this was early in his career, when Bryant was toiling to assert his dominance and establish his greatness, there is good reason to believe this was not a driving or predominant perspective of his mentality. But before explicitly addressing the ways in which Kobe Bryant *did* positively lead and transform with his teammates, it is important to recognize two important details about Bryant's philosophy.

First off, the Mamba Mentality is predominantly the result of Kobe Bryant's *entire career*, which is to say that number 24 Kobe Bryant (2006-2016) was more wise and refined than number 8 (1996-2006) and, therefore, espoused a more precise and comprehensive version of the Mamba Mentality. In other words, while his younger self was more physically capable, his older self was significantly more prudent and perceptive. From this line of thought, I would have liked to investigate the maturation of Kobe Bryant from a psychological perspective, to see how he embodied different archetypes of masculinity at different points in his career—for example, how young Kobe symbolized the Warrior archetype, while Bryant later came to embrace more of the King archetype.<sup>246</sup> Alas, such an analysis will have to be conducted independent of this thesis.

The second important detail is that Bryant's philosophy was developed through experience in real time. He made mistakes—several in his younger days—that do not accurately

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<sup>246</sup> See Moore and Gillette, *King, Warrior, Magician, Lover* (1990).

honor or represent the Mamba Mentality in its purest form. Whether on the court or off the court, Bryant was subject to fault and error, just like the rest of us. And so, I argue, in accordance with Bosh, it is not the isolated mistakes or misrepresentations of the Mamba Mentality that define Kobe Bryant, his career, or his philosophical influence, but rather a cohesive understanding of his philosophy that pertains specifically to the result of the evolution, and consistent performance, of his body and mind—that is, as the ancients would call it, his soul (*psychē*), in this more comprehensive sense of including the integration of both (as in Aristotle’s usage in *EN* II.VI).

We have already seen how Kobe Bryant motivated his teammates through social and psychological methods.<sup>247</sup> What we also see, through the analysis of Bryant’s career as it evolved, is an increased emphasis on improving his teammates and leading them to success. “I went from being primarily a scorer, and a floor general... to being a *leader*, and that means putting others first.”<sup>248</sup> His focus shifted from himself to concern the flourishing and future of his team. He did this by being a transformational leader in the Lakers’ locker room, by assisting his teammates in the ascension to becoming champions. The ability to be a transformational leader is an attribute of resilience precisely in that it strengthens the team, organization, and community to better weather challenges and inspires the whole to function as a tough, dynamic system.

Although his number, mind, and body all changed throughout his twenty-year career, Bryant’s work ethic never did, and his dedication to the process never diminished. This fundamental quality of Bryant’s leadership—lead by example—made an impact on his teammates. His embodiment of the Mamba Mentality was contagious. Others followed him

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<sup>247</sup> See Chapter 5.5: Help the Young Improve

<sup>248</sup> “Kobe Bryant EXPLAINS The MINDSET Of A WINNER & How To SUCCEED.” *YouTube*, uploaded by Lewis Howes, 10 Sep. 2018.

because he practiced what he preached, and he saw results. Many of Bryant's former teammates credit him, to varying degrees, for their dedication to improving as athletes—including Ron Artest, Caron Butler, Derek Fisher, Sasha Vujacic, Pau Gasol, and more.<sup>249</sup> Surely, as Bryant became more experienced, he came to realize that he could not achieve success, excellence, and true greatness alone—this inherently necessitated teamwork and communication. It is a rare and welcome sight to see someone harmonize their thoughts and actions in the pursuit of excellence—and this is what Bryant did: he lived his philosophy.

In the Spike Lee film, *Doin' Work*, which is a documentary that follows one of his performances in 2009 against the San Antonio Spurs, Bryant repeatedly engages with his teammates in a productive fashion. He is constantly giving them advice, critiques, and new techniques to improve their performance; he is trying to get his teammates in rhythm by finding them in their most effective shooting pockets. He makes the simple reads and passes to assist his teammates; on defense, he calls out “pick right” or “help-side” to effectively communicate with his teammates. With or without the ball, on or off the court, on offense or on defense, Bryant was a vocally collaborative leader. In fact, even Bryant, the film's narrator, declares, “I didn't realize I talked *this* much,” as he guides the audience through his performance via in-depth analysis. He talked to every single one of his teammates for them to play better. His comprehensive knowledge of basketball is on full display throughout this documentary as he continuously breaks down the plays both in real time to his teammates and in his narrative reflection to the film's audience. He was being—what basketball minds call—a floor general.

Through *Doin' Work* we see qualities in Bryant that demonstrate instantiations of a

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<sup>249</sup> “Why Kobe Bryant Is A GREAT Teammate In The NBA.” *YouTube*, uploaded by MJ2KAllDay, 11 Oct 2014.

transformational leader. Indeed, a leader of this kind “seeks to change the status quo by articulating to followers the problems in the current system and presenting a compelling vision of what a new organization could be.”<sup>250</sup> Bryant worked intimately with his comrades, to fix the issues they faced as a team; and, for twenty years, Bryant was instrumental in shaping the modern culture of the Lakers, bringing the franchise 5 NBA Championship Titles—which is quite a compelling image. “Authentic transformational leadership has an impact in all cultures and organizations because transformational leaders have goals that transcend their own self-interests and work toward the common good of the followers.”<sup>251</sup> Whether ‘followers’ refer to his teammates—directly inside the organization—or to fans—directly part of the community, Bryant fulfilled this quality equally: they all wanted a championship, and he helped secure them five.

Early in his career, Bryant co-led the Lakers with O’Neal. This unstoppable duo won three championships in a row, before losing to the Detroit Piston in the NBA Finals.<sup>252</sup> After O’Neal parted ways with Bryant, his season stats began to decline. Although Shaquille O’Neal was also aging, it is clear through the evolution of O’Neal’s game that he benefited greatly from playing alongside Bryant. On the Lakers, O’Neal averaged 27 points per game and 12 rebounds per game—compared to 19.5 and 9 respectively in the four seasons after in Miami, and 16.5 and 9 respectively in Phoenix thereafter.<sup>253</sup> Their opposing work ethics led them to different paths, not their inability to work together or to achieve great accomplishments.

In the post Kobe-Shaq era, Bryant became the primary leader on the Lakers team. In an

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<sup>250</sup> C. Achua and R. Lussier, *Effective Leadership* (South-Western Cengage Learning, Mason, 2013), pp. 331.

<sup>251</sup> Bernard M. Bass and Ronald E. Riggio, *Transformational Leadership* (2006), pp. 16.

<sup>252</sup> See *Basketball-Reference*, under “2004 NBA Finals.”

<sup>253</sup> See *Basketball-Reference*, under “Shaquille O’Neal.”

interview from this time, Bryant emphasizes the need to listen, to observe, and then find a dynamic method to motivate his teammates. In the summer of 2006, Bryant switched his jersey number to signify the start of a new chapter in his career. Along with Phil Jackson's coaching strategy, known as the Triangle Offense,<sup>254</sup> number 24 Bryant established a culture for the Lakers that gave everyone a role in the system. "Followers of transformational leaders viewed their work as meaningful, and they were thus more self-engaged and harmonious with the values of the organization, and had higher levels of job satisfaction."<sup>255</sup> Many of Bryant's teammates came to eventually outperform their career expectations—such as Derek Fisher and Andrew Bynum. Another former teammate of Bryant, Lamar Odom, noted that he "needed Kobe in his career," for him to encourage him, instill trust in him, and to be able to maximize his potential playing alongside him.<sup>256</sup>

Ultimately, transformational leaders, "by definition, are expected to maximize the collective performance of talented subordinates by encouraging them to emulate their leader."<sup>257</sup> This best substantiation of Kobe Bryant improving his teammates is seen by analyzing the career of Pau Gasol. Though his season-average rebounds per game and field-goal percentage significantly improved when he started playing alongside Bryant in 2008, basic statistical evidence does not properly demonstrate his evolution. In the 2008 postseason, specifically the Finals, Gasol was getting blocked in the post, losing the battles for rebounds, and visibly in

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<sup>254</sup> See Coach Mac, "Triangle Offense - Complete Coaching Guide," *Basketball For Coaches*, 2018. Basic definition: "The triangle offense is a continuity basketball offense that combines perfect spacing with a series of actions based on player decisions resulting in a beautiful basketball offensive system. It is best utilized by players with a high basketball IQ and great basketball fundamentals. There are an endless number of potential actions out of the triangle offense (far too many to cover in this guide) which is what makes it such a deadly offense. It can be customized to take advantage of the strengths of the team as a whole and the strengths of the individual players."

<sup>255</sup> Gómez-Salgado, Juan et al. "Engagement, Passion and Meaning of Work as Modulating Variables in Nursing: A Theoretical Analysis." *International journal of environmental research and public health* (2019), pp.108.

<sup>256</sup> "Kobe Bryant - Leader of the Pack (Rare Footage)." *YouTube*, uploaded by Darrem Kandola, 16 Apr. 2018.

<sup>257</sup> Hans Westerbeek and Aaron Smith, "Fair Game: Leaders and Followers," *Business Leadership and the Lessons from Sport* (Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, Hampshire, 2005), pp. 58.

distress. Literally, Gasol's body language lacked composure and resilience—and this makes sense, since he was getting hounded by the opposing big men on the Celtics. Gasol had 13 turnovers in the 2008 Finals, compared to only 5 the subsequent year. He scored 88 points in the 2008 Finals, averaging 17.1ppg and 9rpg throughout the postseason. In 2009, he scored 93 points in the Finals, averaging 18.3ppg and 10.5rpg in the postseason. And in 2010, Gasol scored 130 points in the Finals, averaging a significantly improved 20ppg and 11.5rpg in the postseason.<sup>258</sup>

Be that as it may, the most significant qualitative transformation of Gasol was this: he was hugely ineffective in the 2008 Finals series when it came down to critical momentum swinging sequences. In 2010, on the other hand, Gasol was *instrumental* throughout the entire postseason, especially in the Finals. He was no longer getting bullied and beaten by the Celtics forwards and centers. He asserted his dominance. In the final three minutes of Game 7 in the 2010 Finals, Gasol showed up for the Lakers, scoring five straight, crucial points, which put the finishing touches on the Lakers' successful Championship run. His last basket in the sequence was over three defenders, in impressive fashion—something of which his 2008 self would not have been able to do (see appendix B.8). He also recorded key blocks, grabbed pivotal rebounds, played effective defense, and maintained his composure in the heat of the moment.<sup>259</sup> This was the wonderful evolution of Paul Gasol that occurred alongside Kobe Bryant. And it did not come easily. Gasol remembers how Bryant used to constantly test his teammates and challenge them both physically and mentally to see if they could be trusted in decisive game moments. Over the course of the seasons, Gasol worked to earn Bryant's respect, and he proved it well-deserved,

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<sup>258</sup> See *Basketball-Reference*, under "Pau Gasol."

<sup>259</sup> "Finals MVP Moment Kobe Bryant! 4th Quarter of Game 7 Rewind | Lakers Vs. Celtics 2010." *YouTube*, uploaded by MoVe'S ReWinD, 2020.



particularly in the last few minutes of the most important single contest: Game 7 of the NBA Finals.

The actualization of the Mamba Mentality, to be a transformational leader of the collective, has direct, meaningful connections to Aristotle's ethics; indeed, "Aristotle seems to recognise the *gymnasium* as an important public space where young men could come together to train and cultivate not only competitive virtues, but also the virtue of friendship that binds the community together." While the NBA is not public, the institution does provide a space, much like the ancient Greek *gymnasium*, for teammates to compete with one another and establish fruitful partnerships that then inspired the citizens of the city who watched them cooperate in games. Moreover, "Aristotle's highest form of friendship is based upon excellence (*aretē*) and it stands to reason that such virtue-based friendships could develop in the course of mutual cultivation of excellence through athletic training."<sup>260</sup> This was certainly true for Bryant and the teammates of his that were intrinsically motivated to pursue excellence, such as Pau Gasol—they became truly great friends that inspired the best in one another. Of course, this is supported by the fact that they won two championships together. Friendships of this kind transcend the others that Aristotle articulates—namely, friends for utility and friends for pleasure—fundamentally because their interactions regarded the cultivation of virtues and excellent performance.

In addition, the process of embodying qualities of a positive transformational leader naturally concerns the cardinal virtues for Aristotle. Through communication and collaboration in athletic performance, Bryant's mental disposition became attuned to the functioning and flourishing of others. As Reid identifies, "athletics are also a means to learning about justice, the

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<sup>260</sup> Heather Reid, "Aristotle's Pentathlete." *Sport, Ethics, and Philosophy*, 2010, pp. 183–194.

virtue Aristotle characterises as concerning our relations with others: ‘And the best person is not the one who exercises virtue [only] towards himself, but the one who [also] exercises it in relation to another, since this is a difficult task’ (*EN* 1130a).<sup>261</sup> And so, it remains not just the refinement of physical and mental dispositions implicit in Kobe Bryant’s Mamba Mentality, but also the process of athletic training itself, that helps orient a character toward the embodiment of true philosophical virtue through action.

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<sup>261</sup> Heather Reid, “Aristotle’s Pentathlete.” *Sport, Ethics, and Philosophy*, 2010, pp. 183–194.

CONCLUSION

## PHILOSOPHY AS A WAY OF LIFE

*All who have meditated on the art of governing mankind have been convinced that the fate of empires depends on the education of youth.*<sup>262</sup>

*Legacy*

On January 26, 2020, Kobe Bryant, his daughter, Gianna, and seven other beloved people passed away in a helicopter crash. I remember the day, the moment I heard the news, that Kobe died in the hills of Calabasas, California. I was, as fate would have it, in Athens, Greece. It was evening time and I was sitting inside a cafe bar with some friends near Syntagma Square, the city center. While looking at his phone, one of my friends suddenly, under his breath, exclaimed, “No way,” in disbelief—and then he told me. The energy changed immediately. Given our shared love of basketball and, naturally, the players that have impacted the game in a significant way, we were both devastated.

Kobe Bryant was not just a basketball icon; he symbolized the pursuit of excellence. His physical and mental qualities resembled something of the likes that ancient Greek statues of the pentathlete would portray—in a way, divinity. But how could someone so wise, so healthy, so successful, so close to the divine, die? The fruitful post-basketball career he had only recently begun came to an abrupt end, along with the future of his basketball legacy—in his main basketball-loving daughter, Gianna. Yet, one could argue that Bryant made the time he did have

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<sup>262</sup> Charles William Wason, *Journal of the Royal United Service Institution* (W. Mitchell and Son, 1857), pp. 458.

truly meaningful through his commitment to pursue excellence of a specific, self-directed aim. His legacy lives on, just as his practical and intellectual contributions to the active pursuit of excellence merit admiration. In some ways, he finished his story; his transformation was complete—he understood the importance of looking outwardly, and inspired countless people across the world.

The ancient Greek thinker “Plato defined philosophy as a training for death, in the philosopher as the person who does not fear death, because he contemplates the totality of time and end of being.”<sup>263</sup> Provided everything in this work, I hope it is clear that Kobe Bryant lived a truly philosophical life. In this sense, it should come as no surprise, then, that when asked about his relationship with death, Bryant responded in the following way:

A comfortable one. It’s a comfortable one, an understanding [that] you can’t have life without death, you can’t have life without the dark. So, it’s an acceptance of that, and when it came time to decide whether or not I should retire, it was really an *acceptance* of that mortality—that all athletes face. If you combat it, you will always have that struggle within yourself. So, I’m comfortable with it.<sup>264</sup>

Bryant’s untimely death means that his future accomplishments are left blank and unachieved. Within four short years, his post-basketball career had already included impressive recognition. In 2018, for instance, Bryant won the Oscar in the animated short category,<sup>265</sup> which effectively demonstrates that his philosophy on the pursuit of excellence was not particularly constrained to his performances in the NBA. Although he had only begun the transition into a new stage of life, his accomplishment does show that the Mamba Mentality is applicable to the pursuit of excellence in other domains outside of athletic performance—for it is not merely *anyone* who

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<sup>263</sup> Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault* (Blackwell Publishing, 2017) 269.

<sup>264</sup> “Death, Mythology, and Basketball: An Interview With Kobe Bryant.” *YouTube*, uploaded by The Ringer, 10 Nov. 2016.

<sup>265</sup> Dave McMenamin and Ohm Youngmisuk, “Kobe Bryant’s ‘Dear Basketball’ Wins Oscar for Animated Short,” *ESPN*, 2018.

wins an Oscar Award, but only those who have shown the capacity to engender something excellent.

Certainly, the Mamba Mentality is intellectually profound and its broader implications should be appropriately evaluated and appreciated. The ESPN reporter Dave McMenamin put it succinctly in the following way:

For all of his statistical achievements—the five championships, the 81-point game, the 60-point finale, the league MVP in 2008, the 20 seasons all with the same franchise—Bryant's lasting legacy is his mental edge and burning desire to master the sport. "Mamba Mentality" became more than a kitschy catchphrase after Bryant's death [sic.]; **it is now a blueprint for how to chase your dreams.** He'll forever be on the short list of players you'd want to take the last shot with the game on the line.<sup>266</sup>

On the night of Kobe's death, I spent four hours watching footage of him playing basketball. I watched the Spike Lee film *Doin' Work*. Then, I watched clips of Kobe Bryant throughout all points in his career: his high school games, the 2001 Finals against Allen Iverson and the 76ers, the 2008 Finals against the Boston Celtics, and, of course, the first full NBA Finals I ever watched, the 2010 series against Boston. For so many reasons—only few of which I have been able to capture in this work—my life, amongst many others, has been forever changed by Kobe Bryant and the life of excellence that he strove to lead. His legacy will continue to live on in the stories of his excellence, the accomplishments he achieved, the institutions he founded (like the Mamba Academy), the individuals he inspired, and the philosophy that guided his life.

### *The Implications of Bryant's Five Pillars*

The Mamba Mentality is significant in many intellectual, philosophical, psychological, and societal ways. As you have just undergone an extensive, yet partial, overview of Kobe

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<sup>266</sup> Grant Hughes, "Blueprint for Kobe Bryant to Become the NBA's All-Time Leading Scorer." *Bleacher Report*, 2017.

Bryant's career and philosophy, I hope we can agree that the Mamba Mentality is not solely restricted to athletic training—insofar as it entails attributes that inherently relate to the creation and cultivation of genuine wisdom, not just athleticism. By properly embodying the Mamba Mentality in its fullest sense *and* in pursuit of wisdom via contemplation of that which is intrinsically good, I contend that Bryant's way of life can inspire truly virtuous agents. While the process of espousing the Mamba Mentality is, today, something that only an individual must seek to undergo, this need not be the case if our institutions realize that there is an intrinsic relation between athleticism, self-discipline, and the development of a genuine, thoughtful form of actively participating in the world.

By separating athletics and academics in some of our institutions in the west, we have implicitly severed the youth from one of the most indispensable guides to virtuous action. The implications of Bryant's philosophy suggest that a more substantial incorporation of athletic training in our contemporary educational models could help assist the youth in the adoption of mental capacities that coincide with excellent physical, moral, artistic, and intellectual performance. Indeed, if we dare to embark on the journey of reconceiving the entire educational model, in light of that which genuinely helps to form and foster agents of a virtuous disposition, we might conclude that effective education necessitates the integration of disciplines that seem to lie outside of the classroom—disciplines that are unfamiliar to higher education in the west as it currently conceives itself to be. Indeed, the story of Kobe Bryant, including the insights of his Mamba Mentality, is not simply about an individual destined for greatness: it is about the theoretical and practical wisdom one accumulates through a commitment to constant improvement. It is about self-transformation. But, more than anything, the story of Kobe Bryant

is really about inspiring a positive transformation in others. Let me go back to the beginning of this thesis and recapitulate the statement of Kobe Bryant with which I started:

*Once upon a time, there was a young [kid] who had dreams of becoming one of the greatest basketball players of all time. He worked day and night, every day, for years and years and years and years and years. And as time went on, twenty years had passed—and he felt he had accomplished all that he set out to accomplish. But what he had come to realize is that the goal he set out initially, to become the greatest of all time, was a very fickle one. And he realized that the most important thing in life is how [his] career moves and touches those around [him], and how it carries forward to the next generation. He realized, that is what makes **true greatness**. So, the story would be about transformation—of a kid looking inwardly to then growing up and understanding the importance and power of looking outwardly.*

### *On the Education Process*

It took someone like Plato to invent the Academy and someone like Aristotle to invent the Lyceum—to create a school or a new mode of education—in order to drastically alter and improve how the youth might develop. How did they do such a thing? Certainly with a vision; but, they also critically examined that which was best in their society—by looking at the qualities of good people with good habits—and established a school based on that. From dedication, self-reflection, and persistent habitual good practice, they discovered and articulated a mode of education that involved both the body and the mind. However, whatever scholars may think of Plato’s separation of soul from body, Socrates constantly emphasizes the need for body and mind to be attuned to each other, or more precisely—for the body to be attuned to the mind. “The person of good sense will cultivate the harmony of the body for the sake of the symphony of the

soul.”<sup>267</sup> What is striking, in my view, is that intelligent people anywhere at any time can achieve something similar. Intelligence and practice can not only be learnt, but trained.

In the modern world we tend to demarcate things out into different disciplines, and sometimes we do not allow these disciplines to communicate or interact with one another. And so we can simply exist with this prejudice that athletic form contains nothing intellectual or intelligible about it; and while successful athletes can garner significant wealth we can, nonetheless, reduce them to stereotypes. As if repeated practice, or sport expertise, has no mindfulness about it!

This thesis has argued for a totally different picture: an interdisciplinary conception for all life activities in which different perspectives, domains, or disciplines should communicate with one another, and in which spirit, mind, and body should go together. Here we have adopted, principally Aristotle’s ethics, among other perspectives, as the lens through which we can see effectively how good habits can give rise to the flourishing development of mind, and how necessary mindfulness is for the full flourishing of athletic, musical, and moral activities.

The gracefulness of the athlete is a trained gratefulness that requires endurance, persistence, and the embodiment of virtues, often against all the odds. Aristotle argues in his ethics that good virtues can be like spotlights to guide us on the way to higher performance—be it athletic, aesthetic, artistic, or ethical. Throughout his ethics, he articulates a system of moral virtues and intellectual virtues which illuminate these paths of human development. This system is effectively conducted in his Lyceum.

What is striking about the Mamba Mentality is that Kobe Bryant developed a similar system of spotlights, some of which I have articulated in this thesis. What this demonstrates, to

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<sup>267</sup> Plato, *Republic*, IX (591c).



my mind, is that athletic excellence is not trivial, nor something independent of higher-order functions, but rather integral to the development of those functions. What we see in the graceful and perfectly controlled actions of the athlete is actually mind in motion, thought in action, or a form of actively mindful thought.

In the modern world we tend to compartmentalize things into their respective boxes, and not to appreciate the intrinsic connections between sports and literature, individual achievement and community mindfulness—or even between athletics and theology. Aristotle does not do this. He *emphasizes* the analogies between lyre-playing and wrestling and morally good activity. In the gracefulness of the athletic form, it is not unreasonable to see a reflection of the divine in nature at its best—as much of ancient Greek art portrays. In his *De Partibus Animalium* (I.VI), Aristotle says that even in the lowest functions of nature, the divine is already and intrinsically present. How much more so, then, will this be in the higher-order functioning of an elite athlete, who actually provides a blueprint for living not just in the arena of sports, but also in the still higher arenas of virtuous life?

Kobe Bryant is a modern paradigm of what Aristotle intimated over 2000 years before the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. His life is an indication that, in a globalist age where so many things remain fragmented, the need for integration of perspectives and disciplines is even more necessary now than in earlier ages—precisely because of the modern proliferation of information, and the consequent inability of the individual to integrate learning and life.

The modern era has coincided with a pervasive cultural shift from predominantly active to predominantly sedentary lifestyles. This is having negative affects on our bodies, and, as a result, our minds as well. This highly inactive quality of modern life can be potently discerned in

academia. Now, not only is education as a concept sociologically restricted to the dogmatic institution of academia, but it also is done in a fashion that all but disregards the significance of activity and motion in the learning process. This is, perhaps, most poignant in regard to the discipline of philosophy. In *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, Pierre Hadot makes the following observation:

Philosophy— reduced, as we have seen, to philosophical discourse—develops from this point on in a different atmosphere and environment from that of ancient philosophy. In modern University philosophy, philosophy is obviously no longer a way of life or form of life—unless it be the form of life of a professor of philosophy. Nowadays, philosophy's element and vital milieu is the state educational Institution; this has always been, and may still be, a danger for its independence.<sup>268</sup>

As we meditate upon the importance of philosophy in the development of the youth in modern times, the importance of which is not easily overstated, it is essential that we remember the inseparable nature of body and mind. Philosophy—as a guide not only to the chief good in life, happiness and flourishing, but also to the flourishing of entire societies, as an amalgamation of citizens oriented to act in virtuous dispositions—is a process of refining our whole being. As Hadot writes, “theory cannot be detached from practice, and it is man's action upon the world which gives rise to his representations.”<sup>269</sup> And so, it remains up to us, as responsible citizens, to change our current models of education in order to appropriately prioritize the training of both body and mind, thereby inspiring the next generation of virtuous agents—who love the process, toil for constant improvement, and regard the transformation of others of highest import, as did Kobe Bryant. May he forever rest in peace.

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<sup>268</sup> Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault* (Blackwell Publishing, 2017) 271.

<sup>269</sup> Ibid, 272.

## APPENDIX A: IMAGES OF ARCHITECTURE

**Image 1a: Example of an ancient Greek stadium, part of the *gymnasium*.**

(<https://parnassusprep.com/ruins-of-stadium-and-gymnasium-in-ancient-messina>)



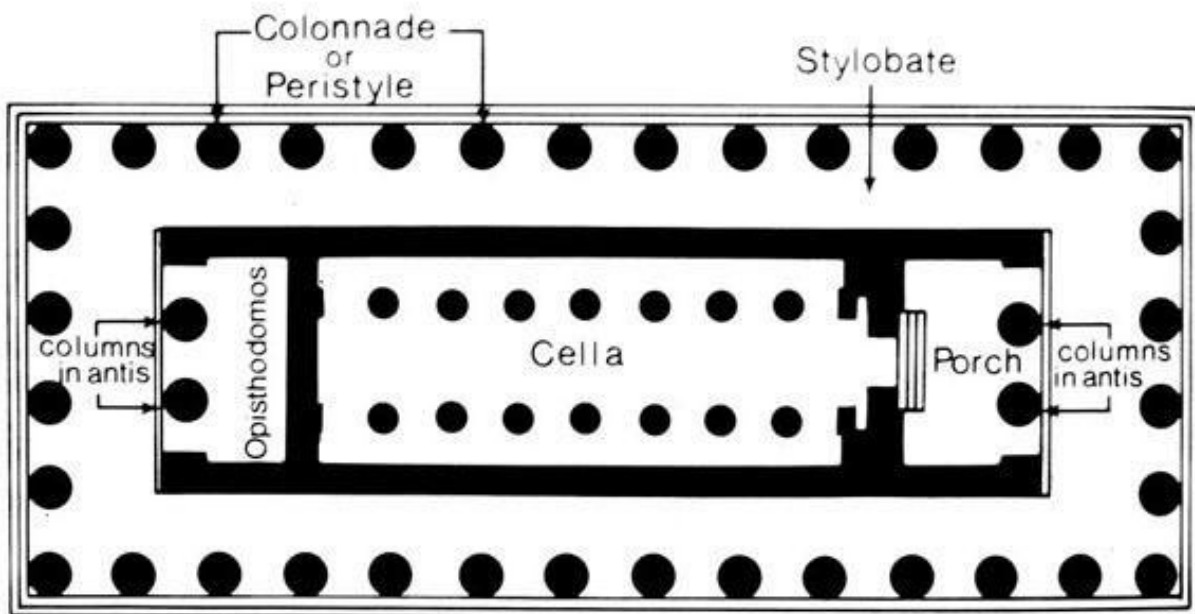
**Image 1b: Another example of what *gymnasia* (the *palestra*) in Antiquity resembled.**

(<https://www.worldhistory.org/image/11251/the-large-palaestra-of-pompeii>)



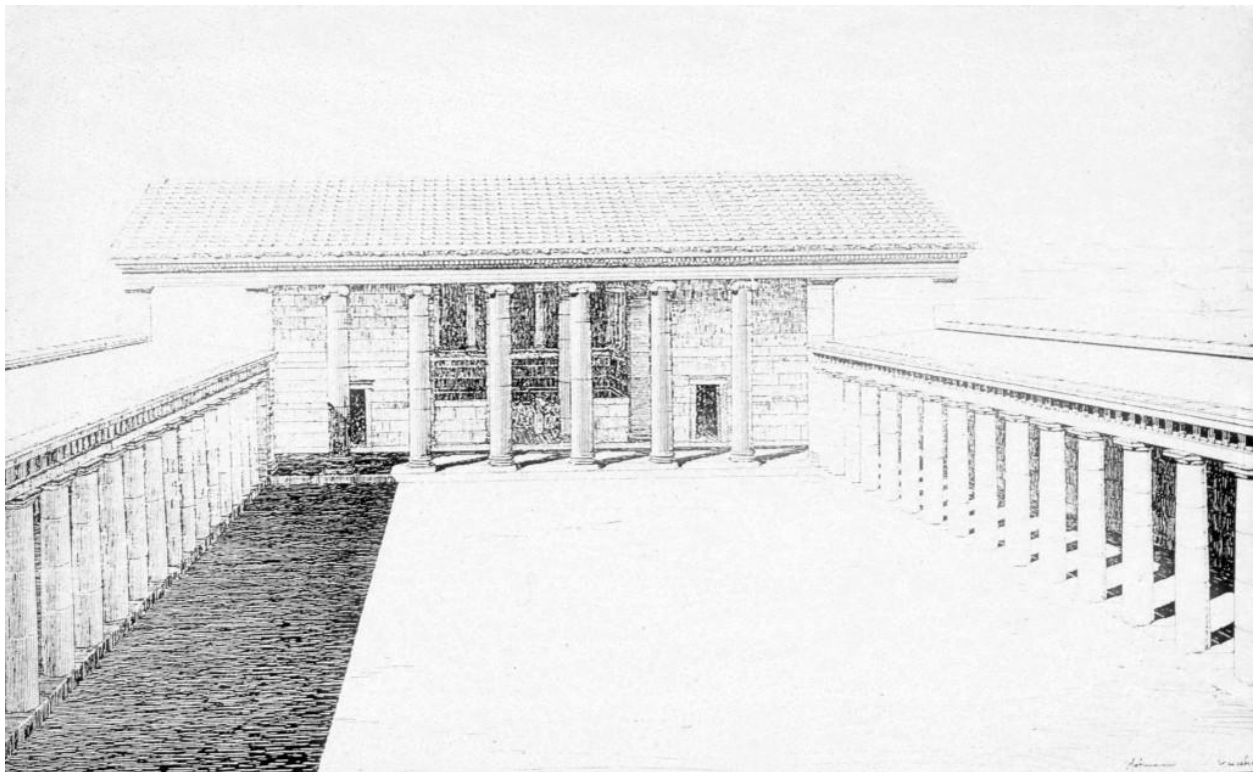
**Image 2a: Floor Plan of Ancient Greek Temple depicting Peristyle (colonnade).**

([https://www.brown.edu/Departments/Joukowsky\\_Institute/courses/greekpast/4747.html](https://www.brown.edu/Departments/Joukowsky_Institute/courses/greekpast/4747.html))



**Image 2b: Reconstruction of gymnasia in Antiquity, showcasing peristyle courtyard.**

(Miletos. *Gymnasium*. Reconstruction. <https://jstor.org/stable/community.12205995>.)



**Image 3: Example of *propyla* in Antiquity.**

(<https://www.nomadsguidetoturkey.com/aphrodisias-ancient-city>)



### Image 4: The Agora in Ancient Athens, Greece

(<https://www.athenskey.com/agora.html>)





**Image 5: Interior of Aristotle's Lyceum in Athens, by Raphael (16th century).**

(schoolworkhelper.net)



## APPENDIX B: IMAGES OF KOBE BRYANT

**Image 1: Kobe Bryant facing toughest competition in the league, Michael Jordan.**

(<https://www.kicksonfire.com/open-letter-kobe-bryant-dont-pass-michael-jordan-scoring-list>)



### Image 2a: Kobe Bryant hitting a ridiculous jumper with hand in his face.

(<https://www.silverscreenandroll.com/2020/6/10/21285386/lakers-shane-battier-says-guarding-kobe-bryant-was-ultimate-chess-match-nba-news-defense-hand-face>)



### Image 2b: Kobe Bryant remaining focussed while Shane Battier defends him.

(<https://www.dukebasketballreport.com/2020/10/27/21535715/you-tube-gold-shane-battier-on-guarding-kobe-bryant-duke-basketball>)



**Image 3: Kobe Bryant shooting one of his 8 game-winning buzzer-beaters.**

([https://www.espn.com/video/clip/\\_/id/30442915](https://www.espn.com/video/clip/_/id/30442915))



**Image 4: Bryant shooting a deep 3-pointer in the 2004 championship game.**

(<https://hoopshabit.com/2020/02/03/detroit-pistons-kobe-bryant-legend/>)



**Image 5: Bryant putting in the practice on the free-throw line.**

(<https://medium.com/@arishdubash/8-ways-to-immortalize-kobe-bryants-work-ethic-into-your-daily-life-f22c570748a9>)



**Image 6: Kobe winning one more than Shaq, 2009.**

(<https://www.republicworld.com/sports-news/basketball-news/kobe-bryant-led-the-lakers-to-their-15th-nba-championship-in-2009.html>)

**Image 6: Bryant putting some dribble moves on his defender.**

([https://www.nba.com/lakers/news/151127\\_kobebryant](https://www.nba.com/lakers/news/151127_kobebryant))



**Image 7a: Kobe Bryant ruptures his right Achilles tendon, 2013.**

(<https://www.nba.com/lakers/lakers-history-kobe-sinks-clutch-free-throws-after-tearing-achilles>)



[Lakers History: Kobe Sinks Clutch Free Throws After Tearing Achilles](#)

**Image 7b: Bryant swishes two free-throws on ruptured Achilles tendon, 2013.**

(<https://lakersnation.com/lakers-news-kobe-bryant-shooting-free-throws-with-torn-achilles-was-message-to-paul-pierce/2020/01/31>)

**Image 7c: Bryant swishes two free-throws on ruptured Achilles tendon, 2013.**

(<https://www.nba.com/lakers/lakers-history-kobe-sinks-clutch-free-throws-after-tearing-achilles>)





**Image 7b: Bryant's bloody marks from the sport.**

(<https://hoopshype.com/2016/11/29/nba-players-with-bloody-injuries/>)

(<https://lakeshowlife.com/2012/03/03/kobe-bryant-out-for-blood-against-dwyane-wade-miami-heat>)

**Image 8: Bryant assisting Shaq: the dynamic duo in 2001.**

(<https://www.nba.com/news/history-top-moments-kobe-shaq-alley-oop-lakers-comeback>)



# GLOSSARY

**NBA:** National Basketball Association/the league.

**Point:** Offensive statistic; often getting awarded 1, 2, or 3 at a time.

**Rebound:** Collecting the basketball after a missed shot.

**Assist:** Passing to a teammate and they score with one or no dribbles.

**Steal:** Taking the ball from opponent without fouling.

**Block:** Stopping the ball from being shot by the opponent.

**Airball:** When the basketball does not hit the backboard or rim; a complete miss.

**Buzzer-beater:** Time runs out after shooting the ball; it can still count if it goes in.

**MVP:** Most Valuable Player Award

**Field Goal Percentage:** The ratio of shots *attempted* from the field (not the free throw line) to shots *made* from the field.

**True Shooting Percentage:** A statistic used to measure a player's actual shooting percentage by factoring in free throws and three-pointers (instead of just two-point baskets).

**Pump-fake:** Pretending to shoot to trick the defender.

**Jab-step:** Faking a drive to put defenders on their heels.

**Layup:** Scoring from very close to the basket.

**Jumper:** The other most common form of scoring, often from beyond 5-10 feet.

**All-Star:** This roughly means the player is a top 25 player in the league that season.

**All-NBA First Team:** This means that the player is the best in their position that season.

**Modern NBA:** The modern era of basketball roughly relates to post-1985.

**81-point game:** This is one of the most impressive offensive performances in NBA history.

**NBA Title:** Championship prize.

**Bucket:** another word for making a basket, or scoring a field goal.

**Pick (right):** A defensive communication. When a player lets his or her teammate know the offensive player is going to set a screen on a certain side, momentarily.

**Help-side:** A defensive location where can also assist in defending a player if he gets by the primary defender Bryant says this exclamation as either a call that *he* is on the "help side." or it's used as a call out for one of his teammates to move to the help-side.

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