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Olympism, ethics, and the cultivation of multicultural virtues

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Introduction

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3. Virtue-ethics and Olympism
Olympism as a contested concept 1

1 Olympism is a philosophy of life, exalting and combining in a balanced whole the qualities of body, will and mind. Blending sport with culture and education, Olympism seeks to create a way of life based on the joy of effort, the educational value of good example and respect for universal fundamental ethical principles.

2 The goal of Olympism is to place sport at the service of the harmonious development of man, with a view to promoting a peaceful society concerned with the preservation of human dignity.
3 The Olympic Movement is the concerted, organised, universal and permanent action, carried out under the supreme authority of the IOC, of all individuals and entities who are inspired by the values of Olympism. It covers the five continents. It reaches its peak with the bringing together of the world’s athletes at the great sports festival, the Olympic Games. Its symbol is five interlaced rings.
Olympism as a contested concept 3

4 The practice of sport is a human right. Every individual must have the possibility of practising sport, without discrimination of any kind and in the Olympic spirit, which requires mutual understanding with a spirit of friendship, solidarity and fair play. The organisation, administration and management of sport must be controlled by independent sports organisations.

5 Any form of discrimination with regard to a country or a person on grounds of race, religion, politics, gender or otherwise is incompatible with belonging to the Olympic Movement.

6 Belonging to the Olympic Movement requires compliance with the Olympic Charter and recognition by the IOC (2004)
Olympism as a contested concept

- Analyses (Tavares, 1998; Abreu, 2002) show how different sports politics leaders (Brundage, Samaranch) and philosophers (Lenk, Parry Seagrave) have encapsulated similar but different criteria to interpret this ideology.
- We can call these competing conceptions of “olympism.”
Olympism as a contested concept

Although Olympism is, then, a contested concept, each of the authors incorporate the following in some way:

1. Sportsmanship/fair play
2. Sport for all/mass participation
3. Sport as Education
4. Cultural Exchange
5. International Understanding
Olympism: shared ethics?

In an attempt to explore their potential to give individual ethical content we must consider whether they provide sufficiently thick material that has transcultural reach we will have to determine two questions.

1. might the apparent universality of the defining features of Olympism be justified against claims of Eurocentricity?

2. what virtues might justifiably supply the ethical content of Olympism?
Is Olympism Eurocentric?


• Cultures beyond Europe are represented even by apparently indigenous authors variously, as exotic, immature, in contrast to the developed and mature modernity of Europe.

• She concludes this is evidence of Eurocentrism.

• Or is it the error of “the genetic fallacy”.
Is Olympism Eurocentric?

• In what sense (if any) does Olympism mitigate against transculturalism?

• Two potential criticisms:
  1. **Sports** as mere socialisation or training and **not a real part of liberal education**
  2. The idea of **universal principles** is fundamentally **a Western construct**
Western Ethics: deontology

• The idea of Fundamental Universal Principles is “genetically” located in the West
• The Judeo-Christian Ethic
• Developed by German philosopher Kant (1785)
• Universal obligation (rights and duties)
• Olympism 1 & 4: respect + sport as human right
• Ignoring consequentialism – but noting its universal and impartial character
Duty v Virtue

• Ethics based on excellence of character (arete)
• Not “how do I act according to universal principles?” but “what kind of person am I / do I want to be?”
• Power of role models, emulation & initiation
• Adverbial character: courageous, honest, sensitive, worthy and so on
Why even Olympic athletes need the virtues

• The point is that everyone makes some choices and acts somehow or other in these spheres: if not properly then improperly. Everyone has *some* attitude and behaviour toward her own death; toward her own bodily appetites and their management; toward her property and its use; towards the distribution of social goods; toward telling the truth; toward being kindly or not kindly to others; toward cultivating or not cultivating a sense of play and delight; and so on. No matter where one lives one cannot escape these questions, so long as one is living a human life.

(Nussbaum, 1988: 32)

• (CF The goodness of fragility”)

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Virtue-ethics and Olympism

- Selecting which character traits are virtues and then which might be Olympic virtues or the virtues of Olympism
- Avoiding reductionism not just respect/fairness (again contrast formal Principles of Olympism) but instead celebrating diversity
Virtue-ethics and Olympism

- MacIntyre’s core virtues:
  - Courage, honesty, justice
- Interpreting virtues like courage
- modern v ancient eurocentric (active/passive),
- But which account of justice - liberal, communitarian (cf Eurocentrism)
- Should “tolerance” be a Principle of Olympism (and how far does that extend?)
Virtue-ethics and Olympism

  - Empathy, Humility, Trust, and so on
  - Arrogance (Hubris), Schadenfreude, Pleonexia,
Why Role Models Matter

The summer's flower is to the summer sweet,
Though to itself, it only live and die,
But if that flower with base infection meet,
The basest weed outbraves his dignity:
For sweetest things turn sourest by their deeds;
Lilies that fester, smell far worse than weeds.

Shakespeare Sonnet XCIV
Virtue-ethics and Olympic Education

• Can there really be moral development in sport - many psychologists and sociologists say “no”
• If it can happen how can we “measure” it – or even “evaluate” it objectively?
• Perhaps different sports conduce to different virtues (contrast Archery with Judo or Kendo)
• Sports for strategic success v sports for character development (must they clash? Honda, 2002)
A final, Eurocentric (?) thought

It could be said, as indeed it has been of MacIntyre, that the philosopher (or philosopher of sport, in attempting to establish a singular ethics of Olympism) is harking back to a bygone age. There is some truth in this claim. Oddly, perhaps even paradoxically, the survival of Olympism as an ideology, may well rest not on laissez-faire liberalism but instead on its preservation in the form of a social practice in contrast to the modern idioms of individualism and liberal pluralism that it espouses. So, without some kind of conserving traditions, supported by the virtues, it may be difficult to foresee the kind of Olympic Sport, whose best traditions Olympism tries to preserve, within liberal humanism.
Selected References


