

The Olympic Spirit and Pierre de Coubertin

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Abstract

This article seeks to offer an overview of the Olympic spirit by saying that it is linked to the values and ideals of Olympism. The spiritual dimension of the Games was stressed from the beginning by Pierre de Coubertin himself and the Olympic values, which constitute the foundations of sports and Olympic education, were based on it. Whichever way to look at it, the underlying trend is clear; competition is one of the most complex characteristics of the human condition: On the one hand you can descend into the domains of destruction, suffering and bad sportsmanship. On the other hand, competition can trigger resilience, development, and progress. It is not just about the thrill to succeed, but rather the spirit and feeling of pride that all your hard work and sacrifice was worth it. It must express love for competitive truth, which would always be fair, noble, and loyal. For this reason, the heart of competition is called the Olympic Spirit.

Keywords

Olympism, Olympic spirit, Pierre de Coubertin, Olympic education

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A Humanistic Educational Paradigm

The significance of our current educational reality has its origin in the History of Education in Ancient Greece. In fact, it was the Greeks who, for the first time, put the formation of the Human Being as a problem.

Content is identified in these people that is both practical and moral. From Education in this sense, the formation of Man is distinguished by the creation of an ideal type that is intimately coherent and clearly defined. As Jaeger (2001) points out, this training reference is not possible without offering the spirit an image of man as he should be. Utility is indifferent, or at least not essential. What is fundamental is the *kalos*, that is, beauty, in the normative sense of the desired image, of the ideal.

In terms of Education, the Greeks not only defined the model, but also indicated the pedagogy to be followed. The concept that originally expressed the Greek educational ideal is that of *arete*. Originally formulated and made explicit in the Homeric poems, this *arete* is already, in these works, something that is not given but conquered, something that is sought after consciously, for this very reason, an ideal whose realization is sought to be as close as possible.

However, *arete* is not understood here as a virtue, as in classical Greek, but as excellence, moral superiority, in short, *arete* designates an attribute proper to nobility, a set of physical, spiritual and moral qualities such as: bravery, courage, strength and dexterity of the warrior, eloquence and persuasion, and, above all, heroicity, understood as the fusion of strength with moral sense. This ethical element was placed at the center of all other excellences and should be placed at the service of each man (Barrow 1996; Beck 1964; Jaeger 2001).

In addition to the Spartan conception of *arete* based on *athlon* (athletic activities) and Education, the educational and idealizing idea of primitive sport emerged in Athens through *kaloskagathos*, a more advanced definition of what would be the Olympic and educational sporting ideal for the Athenian people. More than honor and glory, it was intended to achieve physical and moral excellence, differentiating this Athenian citizen from the models of the Homeric and virtuous hero of the Spartans. The attributes that man should seek to develop were beauty (*kalos*) and harmonious action (*agathos*).

The integration between the concepts of the Greek culture of *kaloskagathos* (harmony between body, culture, and morals) and *arete* (excellence) with the qualities observed by Pierre de Coubertin in the English education, led him to a highly educational vision of sport and a paradigmatic conception of Games. In his view, only the intellectual development of the athlete and the combination of sport and art would prevent the transformation of the Olympic athlete into a circus gladiator (Grupe 1992).

In this perspective, the existential and humanist paradigms, seen in Bertrand and Valois (1994), in which there is a predominance of the person integral development as an end in itself and as the center of all activity in society. The totality of everyone's existence and the quality of one's interaction with others and with the world is what must guide the conceptions of society and formation.

The central project of the humanist paradigm of Education, as stated by Bertrand and Valois (1994), is the full development of the person, so that one can feel good and function to one's full potential. According to this view of formation, everyone is free to opt for the

transformative process and to move in any direction.

This focus on the person, the almost total freedom and power conferred on the person in the existential and humanist paradigms imply an enormous responsibility on the part of the individual. The fulfillment of one's individual project - and one's success or failure - depends exclusively on the person and only on them: on their choices, their will, their initiative, their interest, their commitment, and their creativity.

The Olympism

For Habermas (1993) the perspective of building new solidarities from autonomous and competent subjects, will make them able to discuss and revalidate social rules and, with that, revitalize society itself.

At the present time, there is still a lot of indecision in educational circles about the inclusion of teaching values in formal educational processes. We are thus faced with another paradox, this one related to questions of moral education, of ethical values: neutrality or indoctrination? What should be the role of formal education? Surely, these questions are equally valid within the scope of the Olympic Movement.

For DaCosta (1998), the result of questions of this order leads us to a hypothesis that Olympism remains as an alleged objective of unification and, by extension, as an individual achievement through physical activity. Coubertin treated Olympism as a state of mind rather than a system.

So, it is necessary to make it clear that the term Olympism does not refer to the organizational structure of the Olympic Movement, let alone to that of the Olympic Games. Olympism is a philosophical platform of life. A system

of principles, values and meanings that try to expand ideas that are intrinsic to them, as well as proposed values related to economic, cultural, social, and political ideologies (Müller, 2004).

According to this author, the failure to choose a philosophical school that would guide his own thoughts made Coubertin eclectically work on some teachings of philosophy. Coubertin's ideas reveal a state of mind which can never be determined by either a school or a philosophical system.

Parry (1998) suggests that the status of Olympism as a social, political, and educational ideology necessarily stems from an anthropological philosophy. This is understood as an idealized conception of the human being. This author suggests that this anthropological philosophy of Olympism promotes the ideas of harmonious development of the human being in all its particularities; toward excellence and achievement; through effort in competitive sports activities; under conditions of mutual respect, integrity, justice, and equality; with a view to creating permanent friendly relationships; international relations of peace, tolerance and understanding; and cultural alliances with the arts.

Olympism, therefore, is a complex system based on several key principles. Its fundamental principle, in simple words, is to see the human being in all its completeness, in development and constant search.

For Girginov and Parry (2005) this search must occur in the practice of leadership, ethics, and fair play; in relationships based on dignity, respect, friendship, and a peaceful community in which sport is a right for all.

The literature presents different classifications for Olympism. Hans Lenk, for example, seeks to refer to Olympism as a "social philosophy".

Norbert Müller takes another position based on the idea of “a philosophy that should be of an educational nature”. Jim Parry proposes the vision of an “anthropological philosophy”. Lamartine DaCosta alludes to a “philosophical process”, in the sense of a continuous development of Coubertin’s traditional conception of the “philosophy of life”, highlighted by the Olympic Charter. McNeely (1980) refers to “Coubertinian idealism”, while Gustavo Pires reinforces this idea by stating that Olympism, as a “system of values”, cannot fail to be an ideological framework at the service of human development, otherwise it would be useless. I agree with the author’s idea that sport can mean little if it does not bind education, teaching, and, without doubt, the potential learning of the sporting spectacle to a human development project.

The Olympic Spirit

Let’s look not only at theoretical elements but try to link with practical elements for a better understanding of the main topic of this paper. I would like to give you an overview of the Olympic spirit by saying that it is linked to the values and ideals of Olympism. The spiritual dimension of the Games was stressed from the beginning by Pierre de Coubertin himself and the Olympic values, which constitute the foundations of sports and Olympic education, were based on it.

According to the International Olympic Academy (2019):

The contribution of these values to education and society is considered of outmost importance by the International Olympic Committee, the International Olympic Academy, the International Pierre de Coubertin Committee and

Olympic education institutions all over the world.

When we watch different performances at Olympic Games, somehow a countless number of athletes exalt through their bodies expressions that communicate and brings us the idea of an ancient Greek word called *Pathos*, which among many other meanings it also represents passion, a state of mind that translates into the struggle to overcome and transcend.

I would like to put the situation into perspective. The problem is that in sport there is a paradox. This *Pathos* is often associated with the fundamental characteristics of the human condition: the taste for excess and the taste for moderation.

This idea is taken from Coubertin’s (1967, p. 151) ‘Letter on the Olympic Idea’ where he explains Olympism as a “spiritual attitude resulting from a double worship: that for physical effort and that for harmony”. Messing and Müller (2000, p. 185) add that in Coubertin’s conception, “the antithesis of excess which, as a premise for exceeding previous achievements, is a component of Olympic sport, as ‘eurhythmic’.”

In this regard, DaCosta (1998, p. 208) highlights:

Seeking a broader understanding for excess in the context of sport, Coubertin wrote that ‘sport moves towards excesses (...) that is the core of the problem, but at the same time, it is its nobility and even its poetic charm. In another meaningful account, he declared that excess is the sport’s première raison d’être because sport is a passion, worthy of being controlled by wisdom’. In my view, these clarifications may be addressed to the

fundamental core of Miran-Cousin's eclecticism for conceiving effort (sport) as an autonomous and creative body action. Therefore, measure (eurhythmy) is the content needed by sport to master its efforts in harmony and prudence.

Ortega & Gasset (1995) consider the sport myth and its fascination are characterized by the self-expression and self-confirmation in aspiring achievement during competition.

Whichever way one looks at it, the underlying trend is clear; competition is one of the most complex characteristics of the human condition: On the one hand, you can descend into the domains of destruction, suffering and bad sportsmanship.

In the 2020 Olympics in Tokyo, the marathon runner Morhad Amdouni deliberately knocks over all the water for his fellow competitors.

A wish to win at all costs harms thereby a central value of sport, the fairness, and consequently impairs the eurhythmics (Messing and Müller 2000). The same authors (2012, p. 120) still say that "for Coubertin there can be no sense in a record, a contest, a victory 'at any price'. In order to be 'good', a performance is to be achieved by all means with the utmost effort, but only honestly and by permissible means."

Returning to Greek precepts, virtue in Plato was broken down into justice, prudence, piety, and bravery. Therefore, the art of good measure, the virtue of temperance. This is the saving principle of human life, as it can go beyond appearance. If appearance leads to illusion, the art of measurement neutralizes this illusion, as it applies to what the true relationship of things consists of Platão (2003). On the other hand, competition can trigger resilience, development, and progress.

At the 2004 Olympics in Athens, Wanderlei

Cordeiro de Lima was attempting to become the first Brazilian to win an Olympic gold medal in the marathon. Soon after the 35 km mark, holding a lead of around 25 seconds, de Lima was halted and grappled with by spectator Neil Horan, an Irish priest who was later defrocked. De Lima lost about 5–10 seconds in the incident, and he was passed by and finished third, winning the bronze medal. At the closing of the event, the International Olympic Committee awarded de Lima the Pierre de Coubertin medal for the spirit of sportsmanship. During the opening ceremony of the 2016 Summer Olympics, he lit the Olympic cauldron and carried the Olympic flame. De Lima said: "My achievement was greater than the disappointment of not having the gold".

From these two real examples of Olympic sport and, according to Coubertin's thinking (Müller & Todt 2015), sport can bring into play the passions, both the noblest and the vilest; it can develop disinterest and a sense of honor, but also the selfishness of profit and greed; it may be chivalrous or corrupt, manly or bestial; it can, in short, be used both to consolidate peace and to prepare for war. And it is here that the nobility of feelings, the cult of disinterest and honor, the chivalrous spirit, manly energy, and peace constitute the most cherished postulates of modern democracies. Now we know the challenges we are up against. So, what can we learn from these examples?

Competition is not unethical. It is reasonable that winners be rewarded, even if their victories have an element of chance (and all victories have); this is the essence of a game, and games are fundamental to humanity. Celebrating achievement is not in itself unethical - but it can drive some competitors to unethical behavior (British Broadcasting

Corporation [BBC], 2014).

More than anything, we've learned that an Olympic *Pathos* is not just about the thrill to succeed, but rather the spirit and feeling of pride that all your hard work, efforts and sacrifice have paid off. It must express love for competitive truth, which would always tend to be fair, noble, and loyal.

For this reason, the heart of competition is called the Olympic spirit.

At this moment, the question raised by DaCosta (1998) comes to my mind: Here lies a historical dispute of eclecticism and other sorts of humanism: to what extent should harmonious control of actions (eurhythmy) prevail over free-will (sport)?

For Wassong (2013, p. 184) Coubertin "valued sport not only as a leisure pursuit but as a vehicle to develop moral and social virtues, including fair-play, team spirit, democratic behavior, self-discipline and regulated achievement orientation". It is Sport in the highest sense, more than mere training to do it, or to have it. It is Sport in the ethical sense, as the supreme good and supreme human happiness, the good and the beautiful at the service of the formation of man.

In the same way, for Coubertin, the ethics of the Olympic Movement competition should expand to society through the moral values that should guide human interrelations in the most diverse domains.

Thus, competition is not our biggest problem. This historic tradition has, eventually, been closely followed by institutions of the modern world that encourage ethical attitudes, adapting the Olympic Movement to our time. However, even so, the principles proclaimed by Coubertin, present in the 'Olympic History' for more than 3000 years, need to have their meaning questioned in today's world.

As a result, Olympism finds itself thrown between paradoxical choices, that is, how to curb corruption in competitive sports and manage and preserve sports organizations? - usually a source of resources for agents of dubious conduct - while, on the other hand, educational and pedagogical objectives are pursued (the famous *Kaloskagathos*) (Turini & DaCosta 2002).

For their part, sports leaders have raised objections and questions about the lack of fairness in the behavior of athletes, without necessarily highlighting any response. The emphasis on the educational propositions of Olympism can, thus, be seen as a source of contradiction.

Coubertin (Müller & Todt 2015) mentions that the modern movement was just beginning, when corruption was already trying to penetrate it. And by corruption, (one should not only understand profit as the money that directly or indirectly tempts the athlete, the champion in a thousand ingenious ways, but also the destruction of the spirit of chivalry. The day in which the sportsperson ceases to place above all else the joy of his own effort, and the intoxication of the power and bodily balance that derives from it; the day they let themselves be dominated by considerations of vanity or self-interest, that day their ideal will come to an end and the pedagogical value of this ideal, if we can use this expression, will irremediably diminish.

Corroborating this statement, Parry (1998) points out that the sports movement, in global terms, is in a deep crisis, in change. The problem, then, is not to confuse the two dimensions, allowing the ideological dimension of the Olympic Movement to recover reality.

The Most Important Thing

On the BBC (2014), we find the following provocation: Why do we say, “it is not the winning, but the taking part that counts?” It’s a phrase echoed by the founder of the Olympics, Baron Pierre de Coubertin inspired by Reverend Ethelbert Talbot, who said: “The most important thing in the Olympic Games is not to win, but to take part, just as the most important thing in life is not the triumph but the struggle. The essential thing is not to have conquered but to have fought well” (Müller 2000, p. 587).

We can consider that the Olympic Spirit is best expressed in the Olympic Creed I had just mentioned. This is Pierre de Coubertin’s most famous quote, so famous, in fact, that it is officially recognized by the International Olympic Committee as the ‘Olympic Creed’ because taking part in sport is the essential foundation of the philosophy of Olympism.

The Olympic athlete, indeed, serves as an outstanding paragon example, documenting the symbolic meaning of an active achieving life. The Olympic Idea [...] is certainly incorporated, say, incarnated in the ideal type of an Olympic athlete - may he be a winning or a losing contestant. To have fought well (Coubertin), to have achieved one’s best - that seems to be the very core of the Olympic Idea (Lenk 2006, p. 17).

“Most people seem to agree that trying and failing is more admirable than not trying at all. In practice, though, most people seem only to be interested in the medalists” (BBC, 2014).

According to Messing and Müller (2000, p. 151) Coubertin rejects a “guiding line of obligatory moderation” for the champion as

utopian, but at the same time he connects “unhampered freedom” in the pursuit of excellence with the spirit of “chivalry” with fair play.

It is important to highlight that the Olympic spirit can be seen in all those who compete in the Games (and out of them), not just in those who win the medals. This spirit is independent of nationality, economic conditions and even the level of performance. It can be seen in athletes who compete with dignity.

It is not just a matter of consummating an ethical tradition in the field of play. It is a question of attributing to this ethical condition a moral meaning that is projected in society itself and in the life of each one.

Sport should be an optimizer of human development. Personal development stems from qualitative and quantitative learning levels. In this way, the sport needs to be meaningful to reality. In this same direction, Wassong (2013, p. 184) says:

“The young French Baron was convinced of the fact that the character traits developed by sport could be easily transferred to the daily professional and private life. According to him, sport would help to educate citizens who are ready and able to meet the challenges of modern life”.

Lenk (2013, p. 18) also says: “Ideally, the athlete dares to enter a new field of human achievement behavior, namely the field of a symbolic demonstration of strength, not over others, but over himself”.

Adopting this perspective is to underline as a favorable argument the central role of hope for a better world, in which human rights are respected, where mutual understanding is

practiced, in which advances in knowledge serve as instruments, not for distinction, but for the promotion of humankind. As if everything had to be constantly started over, renewed, and reinvented.

Everything leads us to give new value to the ethical and cultural dimension of sport and, in this way, to effectively give each one the means to understand the other, in their specificity, and to understand the world in its chaotic march towards a certain unity. But first, it is necessary to start by knowing oneself, in a kind of inner journey guided by knowledge, meditation and the exercise of self-criticism.

As Georgiadis (2009, p. 53) mentions: “An enlightened life attitude can be achieved through the fulfilment that sport brings us. This breeds personal serenity and a conscious reconciliation with our own self as we cultivate the virtues that the ancient Greeks called *kalokagathia*”.

Thus, formation is also directed to the human, spiritual and moral level, and this must take place in a dimension of freedom.

The Olympic Games give us the chance to celebrate our shared humanity, and the object of the competitors should be to express this humanity by performing fairly and honestly to the best of their natural ability.

In the spirit of the Olympics, the most important thing is to have taken part fairly, and to have done one’s best. This is what the Olympic Games are about, and some might say it is what life is really about as well.

Concluding

So far, we have presented some reasons that justify the importance of the Olympic spirit

in our society. Before finishing my text, I am going to give you five points to consider Coubertin’s true Olympism, which should be:

1. A philosophy that focuses not only on elite athletes, but everyone.
2. Not just a short period, but a lifetime.
3. Not only competition and victory, but also the values of participation and cooperation.
4. Sport not only as an activity, but also as an element of training and development.
5. Influence that contributes to the desirable characteristics of individual personality and social life.

Lenk (2013, p. 18) warns: “The Olympic Movement has to remain aware of and consciously pursue the humanistic, educational and philosophic dimensions of its idea in order to live up to its honorable tradition even if in danger today as ever since”.

It is important to remember: *Citius* means not only athletic speed, but a lively and determined spirit in life; *Fortius* doesn’t just mean more muscular strength but being strong in every fight of every person’s existence; *Altius* signifies not only a higher athletic goal, but the individual’s own elevation to the supreme values of man and life.

And now, more than ever, it is important to say: we are stronger together!

And you? What do you think?

Well, here is our challenge!

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