

# Olympism and ontological structures of understanding

Susannah Stevens (Susie)

New Zealand Centre for Olympic Studies,  
University of Canterbury, New Zealand  
*susie.stevens@pg.canterbury.ac.nz*

## Abstract

Across the academy, Olympism is scrutinized in paradigmatic ways that centre on its epistemological decree. This critique enables necessary conversation on the appropriateness of Olympism in contemporary times, the definitions of Olympism, Olympism praxis, and Olympic education and its pedagogies. This arguably, positions Olympism as one of the most controversial and debated topics within the human movement field. This paper contends, that by concentrating comprehensively on the epistemology of Olympism, this has subsequently led to a narrow interpretation of the ideology that Pierre de Coubertin embodied. Accordingly, Olympism is perceived as a set of prescribed ideals that seek to morally shape sportspeople; then correspondingly critiqued for their ability, inability or appropriateness in doing so. Consequently, these factors shape how Olympism is interpreted or understood today in human movement, marginalising additional meanings. This paper suggests that a hermeneutical shift from an epistemological analysis to an exploration of ontological structures of understanding, could allow for alternative meanings of Olympism. For example, acknowledging how Olympism was embodied by Pierre de Coubertin and shaped by the space, time and context in which he lived could allow for a deeper understanding of how and why he valued it. Likewise, how you or I value and interpret Olympism, based on our ontological structures of understanding, and the space and time in which we live.

## Keywords

Olympism, Pierre de Coubertin, Embodiment, Human flourishing, Ontology, Hermeneutics.

Stevens, S. (2017). Olympism and ontological structures of understanding. *Diagoras: International Academic Journal on Olympic Studies*, 1, 249–268. Retrieved from <http://diagorasjournal.com/index.php/diagoras/article/view/17>



## Introduction

Horton (1998) once stated that ‘the discourse of what is undeniably one of sport’s most vexatious discussion questions essentially focuses upon the merits and demerits of the ideology of Olympism’ (p. 169). The extensive debate of all things Olympi\*<sup>1</sup> regarding worth, relevance, and power is comprehensively contested across both academia and the public domain. Subsequently and concurrently the (mis) interpretation of Olympism is entrenched through an ambiguity of terminology, praxis and its global biannual celebration, the Olympic Games. This debate has been briefly acknowledged in the first half of this paper, and is necessary to portray the complexity of the epistemology of Olympism. However, this debate is not the intent of the paper. Rather, how these abundant and diverse interpretations play an important role in how one comes to understand Olympism. For example, my understanding of Olympism is unique. It is probably different from yours, and it is different from Pierre de Coubertin’s. This is because experience is constructed by our space, time, context, paradigmatic influence, physiological and psychological feeling, socio-economic status, and culture (Gadamer, 2014; Kinsella, 2006). For an example, my understanding of ‘body, will and mind’ is based upon my knowledge and experience of Hauora (a Māori model of wellbeing). Perhaps as you read, you may already be interpreting ‘truths’ from this paper that are situated from your ontological positioning and educational life-course. Therefore, to find a ‘true’ or ‘correct’ Olympism is difficult because what constitutes knowledge differs from one human being to the next. This paper encourages alternative views of Olympism, that acknowledge Pierre de Coubertin’s ontological structures of understanding; his position and the time and space in which he lived. Advocating, that by looking beyond a fixed set of ideals and the critique that surrounds them, Olympism could perhaps be understood differently. This requires a shift in conversation from epistemological critique and debate, to questions of ontology. However, to firstly position the ‘epistemology’ and common corresponding critique, this paper begins with selected interpretations of Olympism’s ideology and how it is conceptualised.

1. Olympi\* is used here in a similar way to an academic online search to represent several separate terms, that begin the same way. To maximise findings in an electronic database search, the ending is omitted and replaced with an asterisk, indicating any ending can be accepted – Olympism, Olympic, Olympia etc.

## **Olympism at an ideological level – where the interpretation begins**

Patsantaras (2008) claims that the basic compositional elements of Olympic ideology derived from the age of Enlightenment, specifically; ecumenicalism, progress, individuality, respect, acceptance of cultural diversity, freedom in human interaction and secularization. 'Explicitly, Coubertin conceived Olympic ideology through the correlation interrelation of anthropocentric ideas with secularized transcendentalism' (Patsantaras, 2008, p. 3). These aspects encapsulate the concept of *religio athletae*, a sport-religious eminence, one that Parry (2007) suggests is useful in understanding Coubertin's position. This concept of *religio athletae* is translated by Parry (2007) as a 'religion of athletics' and advocates that this was central to Coubertin's Olympic revival, not as a modern religion of sorts, but a concern for the moral value of sport. Similarly, Damkjaer (2004) posits Olympism as multiple forms of praxis stemming from an ideology that promulgates sport as a modern mission for peace, health and character in keeping with a foundational Greek body culture. Therefore, on a global scale the goal of Olympism could be seen as peace, nevertheless the growth and development of humans as individuals is required to reach this goal (Parry, 2006, 2007). This is why Patsantaras (2008) advocates the centrality of the human body in Olympic ideology.

The first Olympic Games, approximately in 776 BC, were founded upon an Ancient Greek belief concerning ethical, spiritual and cultural meanings of sport (Young, 2004) with 'a faith that the force of an ideal could propel the modernized nations of the globe toward world peace' (Brownell, 2004, p. 53). Critically speaking, the Olympic Games are commended for rousing a sense of community, beauty and solidarity (Syndor, 2004) while simultaneously denounced as romanticized and unrealistic (Carrington, 2004). Kidd (1996) and Horton (1998) use the word 'rhetoric' to describe Olympism's ideology. Tomlinson (2004) concurs that Coubertin regularly 'puffed up...lofty ideals and grandiose ambition' (p. 149) claiming that Coubertin was neither a socialist nor historian, thus a neutral perspective is needed when investigating his early interpretations of the Olympic Movement. The critical debate surrounding the ideology of Olympism seems to be intensified by its coupling with humanism. Scholars argue (Arnold, 1996; Binder, 2001; CNOSE, 1994; Comite International

Pierre de Coubertin, 1998; Culpan, 2007; Czula, 1975; Georgiadis & Syrigos, 2009) that Olympism sits comfortably within a humanistic paradigm. For example, the characteristics of Olympism refuse to characterize sport as a physiological compartmentalized entity 'Olympism is a destroyer of dividing walls' (Müller, 2000, p. 548) elucidating the humanistic characteristic of holism. Carrington (2004) however, claims that this is a problem, as Olympism and humanism act 'as an ideological smokescreen for the oppressive mystifications of modern society and culture' (p. 83) and Wamsley (2004) suggests this is seen in the tension created between peace and nationalism. For example, the paradox of competition, hierarchy and an entrenched drive for countries to 'win' medals in high level sporting performance, when the ideology is seeking a more 'peaceful' world. Likewise, Patsantaras (2008) acknowledges that Olympic ideology, concerned with peace and social justice, is somewhat disconnected from social reality. These interpretations of the ideology of Olympism shape how it is understood in society. This can be seen in Olympi\* discourse – the dissemination of 'knowledge', pedagogy and language used.

### **Olympism and its praxis – conceptualisation of the ideological interpretations**

Text. Coubertin's early work on the historical dimension and the organisation of a modern Olympic Games took a back seat to his ambition to develop the philosophical and educational dimension of Olympism. This can be seen post 1911, when the themes of his letters changed and fervently argued for the Olympic Games to be viewed as a celebration of the joy of movement and a vehicle for peace, rather than an event with technical results (Müller, 2000). These considerations however, are often dismissed as either meaningless propaganda for sport or marginalized by a public perception of what 'Olympic' means (Chatziefstathiou, 2012; Kruger, 2004; Swain, 2010). The debate regarding the relevance of the dissemination of Olympism (Arnold, 1996; Culpan, 2010; Horton, 1998; Parry, 2006, 2007) often contradicts the common perception of the Olympic Games, or is superseded by epistemological interpretations of romanticism or complex philosophy (Da Costa, 2006; Hoberman, 2004). Patsantaras (2008) formulates that 'Olympic ideology' was re-conceptualised as 'Olympism', which in turn is interpreted through the Olympic Games and Olympic Education that constitute Olympism's social

praxis. For example, the manner in which Olympic ideology is translated into Olympism incites debate on the principles themselves. Loland (1995) suggests Olympism is devalued by inconsistencies and underdeveloped praxis which leads to the ideals appearing 'vague, ambiguous and open for interpretation' (p. 49). Damkjaer (2004) similarly argues that this is due to the fact the foundational ideology is not aligned with current practice. Da Costa (2006) states that a by-product of Olympism's ambiguity is the difficulty for the anticipated audience (public, teachers, and sports coaches) to understand and practically employ the philosophy. Additionally, he argues that those who do understand the intricate detail of Olympism (academics, philosophers) tend to be isolated from an amateur, non-discriminative sporting environment and this leads to Olympism viewed as two different philosophies; The Olympic Games and the educational sector (Booth, 2003; Da Costa, 2006). Both sites however, are equally important for how one 'experiences' and formulates an understanding of what Olympism means (Stevens, 2011).

Loland (1995) suggests that Olympism is a manipulative cover for a movement concerned with power and profit, and this is synonymous with the Olympic Games. Wamsley (2004) alike, views Olympism as an explicit marketing tool to create capital through the globalization of its 'brand'. Similarly, Eichberg (2004) likens Olympism to a 'reverse Robin Hood', that favours the rich by coercing the poor through media licensing and public support. Moreover, Tomlinson (2004) claims the Olympic Movement and Games have undergone a process of 'Disneyfication' likening them to a theme park phenomenon. These perceptions of the 'Olympic brand' are arguably problematic and perhaps not representative of Olympism; Wamsley (2004) goes as far to say, the day Olympism flourishes, will be the day the Games are abolished. Despite this critique, Parry (2007) and Parry, Robinson, Watson, and Nesti (2007) contend that the contribution of sport to societal development cannot be ignored. In the educational sector, literature has extensively scrutinised and critiqued Olympism's value, function and legitimacy in an educational environment (Bale & Christensen, 2004; Carrington, 2004; Da Costa, 2006; Damkjaer, 2004; Kohe, 2010; Lenskyj, 2012a, 2013; Wamsley, 2004). More specifically, much of the critique centres on the appropriateness of the ancient 'universal' ideal in contemporary times (Damkjaer, 2004; Kohe, 2010; Wamsley, 2004). Olympism is also criticized for inherent homophobia, and oppressive gender

discourse (Lenskyj, 2000, 2012a, 2012b, 2013). Furthermore, Olympic Education is challenged for the lack of criticality, given the history of the 'Olympic industry' (Kohe, 2010). Nevertheless, the Olympic 'ideals' seem to continue to appear in educational environments. The ideals seem to position sport as something more than a physical pursuit:

The ideals of Olympism are most laudable, have a quasi-religiosity and really are the only set of ascribed ethical principles that can be applied to the conduct of sport. No other code, which is central on sport, is available, no other code elevates sport to moral, cultural as well as athletic levels of significance. (Horton, 1998, p. 173)

Parry (2007) similarly states that the philosophy of Olympism is 'the most coherent systematization to have emerged so far of the ethical and political values underlying the practice of sport' (p. 47). These assertions however, are not without the consideration of the difficulty of universality. Parry (2003, 2006) questions the paradox of a 'universal philosophy' which inherently does not change, and is open to inevitable contextual interpretations and globalisation. In agreement with Da Costa (2006), he contends that these values cannot be isolated from social construction, cultural formation and difference. This thinking prompts questions about Olympism's universality given its inherent Eurocentric disposition (Da Costa, 2006; McNamee, 2006; Parry, 2006). For example, Brownell (2004) claims the IOC acknowledge Eurocentrism; however, as a result of power structures, discussion, policy and procedure suggests that familiar territory is elicited for the decision making process. She argues that if the Olympic Movement is to remain, it must become multinational, embrace cultures outside the west and allow more developing nations to host the Games in future. These ideas start to open dialogue for alternative understandings of Olympism. For example, Hsu (2000) argues that Olympism as education can be separated into two parts: An individual development – whereby individuals display good human values towards becoming an ideal human being (an ethical philosophy of life); and an international development – whereby the international society seeks mutual understanding and a peaceful and better world through sport. Hsu (2000) suggests that Olympism in the future cannot just be phrases, aims or goals however it must hold a permanent status in our global dynamic changing society. Therefore, Hsu (2000) argues Olympism cannot be reinforced as a western product. Parry (2006) agrees with



and develops Hsu's (2000) argument stating that Olympism provides a veneer of humanist values which are evident in the practice of sport. He encourages the acknowledgement of wide interpretation of Olympism and for nations to explore individual expression. An example of this is a New Zealand Māori<sup>2</sup> conception of Olympism (Culpan, Bruce & Galvan, 2008) where Olympism is explored and understood within a bicultural context. This example counters a 'universal' ideal, by encouraging Olympism to be interpreted in a way that celebrates the uniqueness of the cultural context of Te Ao Māori<sup>3</sup> (Culpan, et al. 2008).

## A hermeneutic conversation

The work of Brownell (2004); Hsu (2000); Culpan et al. (2008) and Parry (2006) that look towards multiple knowledges and interpretations are important steps to conceptualising alternative understandings of Olympism. Likewise work that acknowledges grander narratives (Carrington, 2004; Loland, 1995). These contributions to knowledge pluralism are important for both the survival and authenticity of Olympism. Arguably however, these works are an aberration and some still inherently conform to the epistemological framework of Olympism. This reduces 'Olympism' to a pragmatic checklist for athletes or human beings to self-reflect in the notions of 'being a good sportsperson'. These criteria can be found in the first fundamental principal of the IOC *Olympic charter*:

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, a way of life based on the joy of effort, the educational value of good example, social responsibility and respect for universal fundamental ethical principles. (International Olympic Committee, 2016, p. 11)

Often the criteria are reduced to four points. For example, in 'Understanding Olympism' published by the New Zealand Olympic Committee (2001):

1. The balanced development of body, will and mind,
2. The joy found in effort,
3. The educational value of being a good role model,
4. Tolerance, non-discrimination and respect for universal ethics.

2. Māori are the indigenous people of New Zealand (Aotearoa).

3. Te Ao Māori means the world of Māori and includes both the language (Te Reo Māori) and the customary, traditional cultural practices (Tikanga).

So here in lies a chance to change the conversation. A chance to question Olympism in a way that *precedes* understanding as a set of ideals, a charter, or part of an international movement. Coubertin's work was positioned in a modernist space and time; accordingly, his thinking was appropriate, accessible and of vital scholarship to challenge the state-led institutionalized thought that enveloped what it meant to live one's life. The modernist epistemological constructs and language that Coubertin used to communicate his vision was appropriate for what he was trying to achieve. Likewise, the many critiques in the first half of this paper, that exist as scholars paradigmatically interpret Olympism through lenses of feminism, poststructuralism or criticality for example. Perhaps these critiques do not go far enough in their want to understand and interpret Coubertin's work in ways that promote cultural relevance and authenticity in diverse contexts. For example, some academics seem to agree that although somewhat trite, Olympism holds value in a contemporary environment and can be achieved by viewing the Olympic ideals critically as a thin layer of contextual humanistic values within the practice of sport (Culpan & Wigmore, 2010; Culpan, 2008; Parry, 2006). Booth (2004) similarly identifies the importance of acknowledging contextual and comparative paradigms regarding the history of the Olympic Movement to identify Olympism's origin. However, these interpretations still seem to be centered on reproducing the same epistemological ideals, just in different ways. Let me explain. There are glimmers of this in 'post-Olympism' dialogue that advocate a move away from a modernist paradigm to allow for dialogue between cultures, and not a singular conversation of the west (Brownell, 2004). However, these ideas insinuate that the IOC set of principles, within an 'Olympic framework' are still at play. So, the 'allowance' of multiple interpretations may look and feel like they are culturally responsive, when they seem to be applying culturally responsive contexts overtop a set of fixed ideals; not starting authentically from the cultural context itself. Perhaps Da Costa (2006) comes close with the suggestion that Olympism become a process philosophy to deal with the historical redefinitions it has encountered. Or, Chatziefstathiou (2012) who similarly contends that 'the ideology of Olympism has not been static; instead its values have been adapted to relevant historical, political, social and cultural shifts in society' (p. 385). However, these claims are based on the ambiguity of



definitions and contextual interpretation, implying that without the ambiguity, Olympism would somehow be 'better'.

Continually centering on the epistemological parameters of Olympism, limits the conversation to how Olympism 'should look' in practice. This is similar to the humanist claim of becoming 'fully human' – suggesting an individual has the knowledge to do that, there is 'one' knowledge or way to do that, and that being 'fully human' is a possible thing (Peters & Burbules, 2004). This is not to say that promoting a singular interpretation of Olympism is 'positive' or 'negative'. Rather, it is a recognition that epistemology is focused on what constitutes knowledge, and if a singular understanding is fostered, then others are marginalised. Whereas, a change of conversation might allow us to explore the fact that:

Understanding is not, in fact, understanding better, either in the sense of superior knowledge of the subject because of clearer ideas or in the sense of fundamental superiority of consciousness over unconscious production. It is enough to say that we understand in a *different* way, *if we understand at all*. (Gadamer, 2014, p. 307)

Without our experiences, our tradition, we have no judgments nor predispositions (Gadamer, 2002). Therefore, the positioning of a researcher, can never really be 'objective' towards phenomena. Heidegger (1962) and Gadamer's (1989) interpretation of understanding is different to a typical modern epistemological approach (Kerdeman, 1998) and Olympism could benefit from this thinking. Heidegger (1962) did not locate understanding in the epistemological realm instead position it within a beings ontological existence. Therefore, understanding in these regards cannot be seen as something of mental or intellectual operation, an isolated happening, however a *way of being* (Heidegger, 1962; Kerdeman, 1998). Patsantaras (2008) hints towards this by acknowledging that it is not appropriate to incorporate Olympism into educational systems without acknowledging its history and considering the complexities of the environment of its intended use. Especially with regards to Olympic ideology that adopted a pragmatic adaptation of ancient Greek idealism moving from 'good' to 'beneficial' (Patsantaras, 2008, p. 46). This is necessary for a hermeneutic investigation; however still does not move from an epistemological focus. Conversely, if ontology is considered, there is a shift from a singular focus on *what* Coubertin was saying,

to one that includes *how* and *why* it was being said. This could allow for deeper, alternative interpretations of what Coubertin hoped to achieve with Olympism. Furthermore, it could allow for Olympism's relevance in contemporary society and different contexts. For example, his desire for people to reflect on history to inform their practice:

The Greek heritage is so vast...that all those in the modern world who have conceived of physical exercise in one of its many aspects have legitimately been able to lay claim to Greece, which embraced them all. Some viewed training as a form of national defense, others as the search for physical beauty and health through a delicate balance between mind and body, yet others as that healthy drunkenness of the blood that has been called *joie de vivre*, and that exists nowhere else as intensely and as exquisitely as in exercising the body. (Excerpt from: The Celebrations of the Congress. Bulletin du Comité International des Jeux Olympiques, Paris, July 1894, no. 1, p.3 in Müller, 2000, p. 532)

Traditionally, and as indicated in the first half of this paper, research dissects the epistemological definitions based on individual worldly interpretations of concepts like 'physical exercise' for example. The same could be said for any of these words in the above passage – training, physical beauty, health and a balance of mind and body, or *joie de vivre*. Here in lies the problem, I absolutely guarantee my understanding is different to yours. For example, my interpretation of *joie de vivre* at the most pragmatic level is prizing my breaths ability to rise my chest and marvelling at the connection between this and my surrounding environment. This resonates and connects to a Māori conception of *whenua* (land) and *taha wairua* (spirituality). This interpretation is based on my physiological feelings of my being as an able-bodied mover, being privileged, and being born in Aotearoa (New Zealand). I doubt any other reader makes this exact meaning for themselves. Let me reaffirm my point with a second example. Coubertin argued that the body needed pleasure to appreciate well-being, engender physical pleasure and enlightened the senses:

If someone were to ask for the recipe for 'becoming Olympic', I would say that the first prerequisite is to be joyful. No doubt, my answer seems surprising. The term Olympic incorrectly evokes an idea of tranquil balance, of forces in perfect counterbalance, a scale with perfect

equilibrium... but come now! This is hardly human, or at the very least, hardly youthful! ...What feeds effort but joy! (Excerpt from: Lettre Olympique VII, in La Gazette de Lausanne, no. 388, December 11, 1918, p. 1 in Müller, 2000, p. 551)

One may read this statement and pluck Coubertin's pursuit for the 'joy found in effort' based on its positioning as an 'ideal'. Yet, what is to say that contextual and cultural interpretations of this ideal would not advocate healthist (Crawford, 1980; Kirk & Colquhoun, 1989) or neo-liberalist agendas? (Evans, 2014; Evans & Davies, 2014; Olssen, 2004). If the focus remains on the epistemology in this situation, this could negate personal meaning, or allow for an interpretation that is void of philosophical intent. I wonder how the joy found in effort can ever be the same interpretation for two people; a human's embodiment of happiness, delight and pleasure? Although Filho (2008) states the definition provided by the Olympic Charter (International Olympic Committee, 2016) is satisfactory in its ability to provide a set of principles that can guide people within the human movement profession, I wonder here if the need for universal ideals is based on control, not understanding.

Coubertin's understanding of Olympism was central to his 'being' and this was not separate from the time in which he lived. His focus was on Olympism as a basis for an educational model that contributed to the individual and society equally (Patsantaras, 2008). This knowledge has subsequently been shaped, reproduced and critiqued within multiple paradigmatic spaces and times (both academic and public). One may think that these pre-conceptions aid interpretation and understanding, albeit edifying, yet Gadamer (2014) argues to learn the 'Other' we must remain open to situating the 'Others' meaning within its context in relation to our own meaning within ours. Interpretation requires 'neither 'neutrality' with respect to content nor the extinction of one's self, but the foregrounding and appropriation of one's own fore-meanings and prejudices' (Gadamer, 2014, p. 282). Just as I, an emerging academic writing this paper, follow my paradigmatic investigations of multiple post-structural knowledges in my desire to 'understand' Coubertin's position. I forge a path based on my limited understanding of his work, but an empathy to see something more than a set of ideals. Similarly, those who critique Olympi\* in a want to expose power or, you, the reader interpreting

‘truths’ from this paper that are situated from your ontological positioning and your knowledge of Olympism.

So, this returns me to one fundamental question. What was Coubertin trying to achieve with Olympism? Before ideals, the Games and the institutionalisation of the Olympic Movement, perhaps it was as simple as enfleshed<sup>4</sup> human flourishing and peace. If understanding is the goal, then this requires a foregrounding of preconceptions of Olympism. For example, ‘parking’ the debate on the use of religion and sport, the marginalisation of women in sport, or the propagandised language in speeches. I am not discrediting any of those pivotal, critical debates, just ‘parking’ them to allow the ‘Other’ conversation to occur. For me, the ‘Other’ starts with revisiting Coubertin’s ‘big picture’, ontology, and an example of this could be Coubertin’s predilection to the idea of ‘human flourishing’ (Nussbaum, 2000, 2011; Oatley, 1997; Whitehead, 2010). There was significantly more at play than just sport when you examine Coubertin’s writings articulating his axiological position on the importance of art and aesthetics, his work on peace and physical culture, the embodied spirit and ethics for example (Chatziefstathiou, 2012; Müller, 2000). Gadamer (2002) maintained that language in hermeneutic enquiry was pivotal in its reliance upon history and the two could not exist without each other. He claimed that when a spoken word was delivered, the word became void and the meaning surpassed the word itself. The language Coubertin used was purposeful. He spoke of a desire for social and political peace, the absence of conflict at a civic and global level:

Now I have said, and I repeat that sport by reason of its potent physical and moral effects will be an inestimable instrument in their hands for the establishment of social peace. (Exerpt from: Lettre Olympique XI in: La Gazette de Lausanne, no. 12, January 13, 1919, p1. in Müller, 2000, p. 173)

4. I use the word enfleshed in place of embodiment drawing from Woodward’s work (2009, 2016) valuing the centrality of the physiological sensations and emotions in experience, as well as the social and cultural setting, space and time, psychological components that all equally shape the way we are, thus understand actions and events of the body, movement and wellbeing.).

The language Coubertin used here was reflective of his humanist, modernist era, therefore very relevant to his cause. His ontological structures of understanding were shaped by aristocracy and sports that suited e.g. boxing, fencing and rowing (MacAloon, 2008). Coubertin’s life was influenced by religion and war (MacAloon, 2008), hence muscular Christianity was not a concept plucked from thin air. His desire for peace could have been influenced

by his own personal unrest (Chatziefstathiou, 2007; MacAloon, 2008). The era in which he lived was prejudiced by nationalism and internationalism, globalisation and cosmopolitanism, and therefore Olympism needed strategy to socially market and 'sell' to the intended audience (Chatziefstathiou, 2007). Coubertin's want for all things 'Olympic' to be an embodied, lived experience is important here. Therefore, hermeneutically, the paradigm in which the thinking originally occurred becomes an important part of future interpretations and understandings of Olympism. For example, the celebration of movement and its ability to succor human growth and development as a way of being. Take this passage for example:

...I said before that the current system engenders physical weakening and intellectual dullness, as well, as always moral collapse. So, you can well imagine what I think of plans to militarize education, and to provide a counterweight against the fatigue caused by study through military exercises. You might well create more solid muscles that way, but you will also assuredly create minds that are even less open, and characters that are even more colorless. We have enough sheep of that kind in our poor country – we do not need any more like them. (Excerpt from: *Le remède au surmenage* in: *L'Éducation Anglaise en France*, Paris, Librairie Hachette, 1889, pp. 3-20 (Chapter I) in Müller, 2000, p. 63)

His want for emancipation or universal ethics were a reasonable modernist vehicle for his protest to systematic conformation. Gadamer (2014) argued that prejudices, pre-judgments and tradition do not need to be seen as undesirable, negative or a barrier to understanding. Coubertin's ontological prejudice was for a human development that advocated the centrality of the body, the physiological and the embodied nature of selves. If the ontology is prioritised, multifaceted epistemological challenges can be acknowledged for the 'good' and the 'bad', and Olympism does not need to be abandoned for being associated to sport or the Olympic movement. For example, sport should be critiqued as a major contributor in the reinforcement of complex paradigms of power and hegemonic discourse (Coakley, Hallinan, Jackson, & Mewett, 2009; Dagkas & Quarmby, 2012; Hokowhitu, 2004). Just like the Olympic 'industry' should be critiqued for its role in gender inequality (Lenskyj, 2013). However, it should be acknowledged

that these critiques are centered on the paradigmatic applications of Olympism, the epistemology, and perhaps do not often consider Coubertin's ontological structures of understanding. I wonder if sport, as it is critiqued today for its unified, systematic, entrenched, regulated and institutionalized form would still be the ideal site for the human development and growth that Coubertin spoke of? Given his speech on not wanting 'sheep', I am unsure.

### **So, what? Some concluding thoughts**

Ramberg and Gjesdal (2014) argue that Heidegger's turn to ontology transformed hermeneutics. Essentially, Heidegger saw hermeneutics as ontology – the conditions of *being* in the world (Ramberg&Gjesdal,2014). When Pierre de Coubertin championed Olympism he did so based on *his* understanding of joy, peace, and holistic movement for human growth (Parry, 2006, 2007). If thinking stays focused solely on epistemology, conversations can get stuck on Eurocentric definitions, misogynistic predispositions or issues of social class and gender. Although these conversations are incredibly important to the shaping of how we view this knowledge today or challenging dichotomies and assumptions, these foci restrain alternative conceptions of Olympism. Exploring Coubertin's' ontological structures of understanding could be a way to challenge our thinking about how Olympism is positioned in the academy and wider society. This could open doors to conversations like the marginalisation of indigenous knowledges and knowledge pluralism and in turn avoid reproduction and acceptance of a universal edict. To date, the way we have interpreted Coubertin's work is heavily influenced by sport and the Olympic Games, which is understandable given he used the context to shape the course of his work. This interpretation, however, has narrowed our understanding of Olympism and how divergent conceptions played pivotal roles in Coubertin's vision of living unique lives as cultured, peaceful and joyful human beings. By using hermeneutical analysis of Coubertin's Olympism, we could awaken ourselves to multiple understandings. My interpretations of Olympism are shaped by my experiences, my socio-ecological environment, my epistemological beliefs, my upbringing, my culture and my history, the same as it was for Coubertin. Pierre de Coubertin's understanding of Olympism was not so much about an epistemological set of regulations, conversely an *ontological positioning* that *he* embodied. The way we replicate this, cannot



necessarily reproduce and manufacture an Olympism that looks the same as his. What is possible, is conversation on how Olympism is ontologically experienced. Not just how Pierre de Coubertin experienced Olympism, but rather those who wish to understand Olympism and make personal meaning from it. This paper has used enfolded human flourishing and peace as an example of an alternate understanding of Olympism. If we continue to marginalize the 'Other' conceptions of Olympism, we minimize opportunities for personal meaning, learning and growth. I suggest, (and of course this is based entirely on my ontological structures of understanding) that this may not have been Coubertin's intent for Olympism.

## References

- Arnold, P. J. (1996). Olympism, Sport and Education. *Quest*, 48, 93 - 101.
- Bale, J., & Christensen, M. (Eds.). (2004). *Post-Olympism: Questioning sport in the twenty-first century*. Oxford, England: Berg.
- Binder, D. (2001). "Olympism" revisited as context for global education: Implications for physical education. *Quest*, 53(1), 14-34.
- Booth, D. (2003). *The IOC, Olympism and Olympic gifts*. Unpublished manuscript, Wellington.
- Booth, D. (2004). Post-Olympism? Questioning Olympic historiography. In J. Bale & M. Christensen (Eds.), *Post-Olympism? Questioning sport in the twenty-first century*. Oxford: Berg.
- Brownell, S. (2004). China and Olympism. In J. Bale & M. Christensen (Eds.), *Post-Olympism? Questioning sport in the twenty-first century*. Oxford: Berg.
- Carrington, B. (2004). Cosmopolitan Olympism, humanism and the spectacle of 'race'. In J. Bale & M. Christensen (Eds.), *Post-Olympism: Questioning sport in the twenty-first century* (pp. 81-96). Oxford: Berg.
- Chatziefstathiou, D. (2007). The history of marketing an idea: The example of baron Pierre de Coubertin as a social marketer. *European Sport Management Quarterly*, 7(1), 55-80.
- Chatziefstathiou, D. (2012). Olympic education and beyond: Olympism and value legacies from the Olympic and Paralympic Games. *Educational Review*, 64(3), 385-400.
- CNOSF. (1994). *For a humanism of sport*. Paris: IOC Centennial Congress.
- Coakley, J., Hallinan, C., Jackson, S., & Mewett, P. (2009). *Sports in society*. NSW, Australia: McGraw-Hill.
- Comite International Pierre de Coubertin. (1998). *Coubertin and Olympism questions for the future*. Lausanne: Comite International Pierre de Coubertin (CIPC).
- Crawford, R. (1980). Healthism and the medicalization of everyday life. *International Journal of Health Services*, 10(3), 365-388.
- Culpan, I. (2007). *Olympic education within physical education: Changing the pedagogy*. Paper presented at the International forum on the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games; Education and the all round development of people, Beijing.

Culpan, I., & Wigmore, S. (2010). The delivery of Olympism education within a physical education context drawing on critical pedagogy. *International Journal of Sport and Health Science online*, 8, 67-76. doi:<http://doi.org/10.5432/ijshs.20090028>

Culpan, I., Bruce, J., & Galvan, H. (2008). Toward a bicultural view of Olympism within New Zealand Physical Education: An emerging journey. In H. Ren, L. Da Costa, & A. Miragaya (Eds.), *Olympic Studies Reader* (1). Beijing: Beijing Sport University Press.

Czula, R. (1975). Pierre de Coubertin and modern Olympism. *Quest*, 24, 10-18.

Da Costa, L. (2006). A never-ending story: The philosophical controversy over Olympism. *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*, 33(2), 157-173.

Dagkas, S., & Quarmby, T. (2012). Young people's embodiment of physical activity: The role of the 'pedagogized' family. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 29(2), 210-226.

Damkjaer, S. (2004). Post-Olympism and the aestheticization of sport. In J. Bale & M. Christensen (Eds.), *Post-Olympism? Questioning sport in the twenty-first century*. Oxford: Berg.

Eichberg, H. (2004). The Global, the popular and the inter-popular: Olympic sport between market, state and civil society In J. Bale & M. Christensen (Eds.), *Post-Olympism? Questioning sport in the twenty-first century*. Oxford: Berg.

Evans, J. (2014). Neoliberalism and the future for a socio-educative physical education. *Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy*, 19(5), 545-558. doi:[10.1080/17408989.2013.817010](https://doi.org/10.1080/17408989.2013.817010)

Evans, J., & Davies, B. (2014). Physical Education, privatisation and social justice. Special issue: Neoliberalism, privatisation and the future of physical education. *Sport, Education and Society*, 20(1), 1-9.

Filho, A. (2008). Olympism today from a philosophical perspective. *Academia*, 42(38).

Gadamer, H. G. (1989). *Truth and Method* (J. Weinsheimer & G. D. Marshall, Trans.). London, England Sheed & Ward.

Gadamer, H. G. (2002). *Truth and method* (J. Weinsheimer & G. D. Marshall, Trans. 2nd revised ed.). New York, NY: The Continuum Publishing Company.

Gadamer, H. G. (2014). *Truth and Method* (J. Weinsheimer & D. G. Marshall, Trans. revised 2nd ed.). London, England Bloomsbury.

Georgiadis, K., & Syrigos, A. (Eds.). (2009). *Olympic truce; Sport as a platform for peace*. Athens: The International Olympic Truce Centre.

Heidegger, M. (1962). *Being and Time* (J. Macquarrie & E. Robinson, Trans.). New York, NY: W.W.Norton.

Hoberman, J. (2004). Sportive nationalism and globalisation. In J. Bale & M. Christensen (Eds.), *Post-Olympism? Questioning sport in the twenty-first century*. Oxford, England: Berg.

Hokowhitu, B. (2004). Tackling Māori masculinity: A colonial genealogy of savagery and sport. *The Contemporary Pacific*, 16(2), 259-284.

Horton, P. (1998). Olympism in the Asia-Pacific region: A question on naivety or pragmatism? *Culture, Sport and Society*, 1(1), 169-184.

Hsu, L. (2000). *Olympism: A dead ideal and a western product?* Paper presented at the Bridging Three Centuries: Intellectual crossroads and the modern Olympic Movement. Fifth International Symposium for Olympic Research.

International Olympic Committee. (2016). *Olympic charter*. Lausanne, Switzerland: International Olympic Committee Retrieved from <https://www.olympic.org/olympic-studies-centre/collections/official-publications/olympic-charters>.

Kerdeman, D. (1998). Hermeneutics and education: Understanding, control and agency. *Educational Theory*, 48(2), 241-266.

Kidd, B. (1996). Olympic Education within physical education: Changing the pedagogy. *Quest*, 48(1), 82-92.

Kinsella, E. (2006). Hermeneutics and critical hermeneutics: Exploring possibilities within the art of interpretation. *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 7(3), 1-47.

Kirk, D., & Colquhoun, D. (1989). Healthism and physical education. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 10(4), 417-434.

Kohe, G. (2010). Disrupting the rhetoric of the rings: A critique of olympic idealism in physical education. *Sport, Education and Society*, 15(4), 479-494.

Kruger, A. (2004). What's the difference between propaganda for tourism or for a political regime? Was the 1936 Olympics the first postmodern spectacle? In J. Bale & M. Christensen (Eds.), *Post-Olympism? Questioning sport in the twenty-first century*. Oxford: Berg.

Lenskyj, H. (2000). *Inside the Olympic industry: Power, politics and activism*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.

Lenskyj, H. (2012a). Olympic Education and Olympism: Still colonizing children's minds. *Educational Review*, 64(3), 265-274.

Lenskyj, H. (2012b). The Olympic industry and women: An alternative perspective *The Palgrave handbook of Olympic Studies*. London, England: Palgrave Macmillan.

Lenskyj, H. (2013). *Gender politics and the Olympic industry*. London, England: Palgrave Macmillan.

Loland, S. (1995). Coubertin's ideology of Olympism from the perspective of the history of ideas. *The International Journal of Olympic Studies*, IV, 49-78.

MacAloon, J. (2008). *This great symbol: Pierre de Coubertin and the origins of the modern Olympic Games*. Oxon, England: Routledge.

McNamee, M. (2006). Olympism, eurocentricity, and transcultural virtues. *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*, 33(2), 174-187.

Müller, N. (Ed.) (2000). *Pierre de Coubertin 1863-1937; Olympism selected writings*. Lausanne, Switzerland: International Olympic Committee.

New Zealand Olympic Committee. (2001). *Understanding Olympism*. Wellington: New Zealand Olympic Committee.

Nussbaum, M. (2000). *Women and human development: The capabilities approach*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.

Nussbaum, M. (2011). *Creating capabilities: The human development approach*. London, England The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

Oatley, K. (1997). Emotions and human flourishing. *Cognition and Emotion*, 11(3), 307-330.

Olssen, M. (2004). Neoliberalism, globalisation, democracy: Challenges for education. *Globalisation Societies and Education*, 2(2), 231-275.

Parry, J. (2003). *Olympism for the 21st century*. Paper presented at the Centre d'Estudis Olímpics, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona.

Parry, J. (2006). Sport and Olympism: Universals and multiculturalism. *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*, 33(2), 188-204.

Parry, J. (2007). The religio athletae, Olympism and peace. In J. Parry, E. Robinson, N. Watson, & M. Nesti (Eds.), *Sport and spirituality, an introduction*. London, England: Routledge.

Parry, J., Robinson, E., Watson, N., & Nesti, M. (Eds.). (2007). *Sport and spirituality, an introduction*. London, England: Routledge.

Patsantaras, N. (2008). Olympic Messages: Olympic ideology and Olympic social reality. *Sport Management International Journal*, 4(1), 45-55.

Peters, M., & Burbules, N. (2004). *Poststructuralism and educational research*. New York, NY: Rowman & Littlefield.

Ramberg, B., & Gjesdal, K. (2014). Hermeneutics. In E. N. Zalta (Ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Online Winter 2014 ed.).

Stevens, S. (2011). *Olympism practised through sport: An insight from youth*. (Master of Education), University of Canterbury, Christchurch, New Zealand.

Swain, S. (2010). *The marginalization of dissent and criticism: Herman & Chomsky's propaganda model*. Paper presented at the International Symposium for Olympic Research.

Syndor, S. (2004). Essence of post-Olympism: A prolegomena of study. In J. Bale & M. Christensen (Eds.), *Post-Olympism? Questioning sport in the twenty-first century*. Oxford: Berg.

Tomlinson, A. (2004). The Disneyfication of the Olympics? Theme parks and freak-shows of the body. In J. Bale & M. Christensen (Eds.), *Post-Olympism? Questioning sport in the twenty-first century*. Oxford: Berg.

Wamsley, K. (2004). Laying Olympism to rest. In J. Bale & M. Christensen (Eds.), *Post-Olympism: Questioning sport in the twenty-first century* (pp. 231-242). Oxford: Berg.

Whitehead, M. (Ed.) (2010). *Physical Literacy: Through the life-course. International studies in physical education and youth sport*. London, England: Routledge.

Woodward, K. (2009). *Embodied sporting practices; Regulating and regulatory bodies*. London, England Palgrave Macmillan.

Woodward, K. (2016). Bodies in the zone. In I. Wellard (Ed.), *Researching embodied sport; Exploring movement cultures*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Young, D. C. (2004). *A brief history of the Olympic Games*. Cornwall, England: Blackwell Publishing.

## Author

**Susannah Stevens** (Susie) has just submitted her PhD and is a contract tutor at the University of Canterbury in Christchurch, Aotearoa New Zealand. She is the lead national subject advisor for Physical Education New Zealand (PENZ) and is a member of the New Zealand Centre for Olympic Studies. Susie received an international scholar award from the IOA for her paper *Education and the Olympic Movement* and was awarded first class honours for her Master of Education thesis *Olympism practised through sport: An insight from youth*.