

Loland, S. (2012). A well balanced life based on 'the joy of effort': olympic hype or a meaningful ideal?. *Sport, Ethics and Philosophy*, 6, 155-165.

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A well balanced life based on 'the joy of effort': Olympic hype or a meaningful ideal?

Abstract

A key goal in the Olympic value system of Olympism is the all-round cultivation of the individual. According to its so-called 'fundamental principles', Olympism is a 'philosophy of life' with ideals of 'exalting and combining in a balanced whole the qualities of body, will, and mind' and creating 'a way of life based on the joy of effort'. These goals are to be reached by blending sport with culture and education. Olympism is often criticized for idealism and lack of impact in real life. At the same time Olympic ideals are intuitively appealing and have rhetorical force. The Olympic athlete stands at the very centre of the ideology. This paper examines the possibility of critical examination of Olympic ideals in terms of three different understandings of the athlete. A dualist understanding sees the athlete as divided between body and mind and with the body as a means towards the cultivation of the mind. Within this understanding Olympic ideals make little sense. A phenomenological approach attempts to overcome a dualist scheme with an understanding of the athlete as 'embodied intentionality'. This seems fertile in an examination of Olympic ideals but can be criticised for lack of contextual sensitivity. A third perspective points towards the athlete as a social construction who can be fully understood only by examining the more extensive socio-cultural context of which the athlete is a part. The contextual understanding adds critical force to Olympic analyses but seems to lack conceptual tools to examine the vision of athletes as responsible moral agents. In conclusion the complementary functions of the three perspectives are emphasized for a proper study of Olympic ideals.

Key words: Olympic studies; dualism; phenomenology

Introduction

The birth of the modern Olympic Movement in late 19th century incorporated the development of a particular system of norms and values by the founding father of the International Olympic Committee (IOC), the French baron Pierre de Coubertin. The system of Olympism was influenced by many sources; values of the French aristocracy and school system; English public school ideals of 'Muscular Christianity' and the idea of sport building moral character; reports from excavations of ancient Olympia exposing the ritual and religious framework of sport; and the contemporary peace movement with its strong belief in historical progress (Loland 1995). A distillation of Coubertin's ideas is found in the 'fundamental principles' of the Olympic Movement as defined in the Olympic Charter. The first principle goes as follows:

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.

http://multimedia.olympic.org/pdf/en_report_122.pdf

The Olympic Games, staged every fourth year, are to be paradigmatic expressions of these ideals, and the Olympic athlete is to be a role model and a key exponent of Olympism.

A core premise of Olympic ideology is the presumed power of sport with regard to the cultivation of the individual. From a critical point of view, however, this premise seems simplistic. Sport can be interpreted and practiced in many ways, including destructive ones. It is sufficient to point to the political exploitation of the Olympic Games, its doping problems, and incidents of cheating, corruption and general mismanagement. Indeed, sport is not necessarily a cultivating force.

Defenders of Olympic ideals may accept these facts but point out that negative aspects are results of the rejection of Olympic ideals and a cynical attitude in which sport is considered nothing but a means towards prestige and profit. What then is a sound interpretation of Olympism? And what are the relevance and practical possibilities of Olympism in modern elite sport?

In what follows I will critically discuss the Olympic premise that practising elite sport can transform and cultivate the individual. More specifically, I will examine and compare three understandings of the Olympic athlete and examine their potential in critical studies of Olympic ideals.

The Olympic athlete as body and mind

A commonsense understanding of an Olympic athlete in action is that the mind controls the body. The body is something a person 'has'; an instrument at one's disposal in the numerous activities of life. Sporting experiences may originate in the body but are interpreted and understood by the mind.

According to Olympism, sport has a strong potential in cultivating positive human qualities. Within a dualist scheme this can be understood in terms of the sporting body being directed and controlled in processes that develop and cultivate the mind. Imagine an elite soccer player practising penalty kicks. She places the ball on the penalty mark, decides what corner to go for, runs, and shoots. Technically the task is simple, and the player usually scores. Skills are often talked about in machinelike ways; the penalty shot is 'conditioned' or even 'automaticized'. In sport the mind learns to control the body.

The dualist explanatory scheme is long-rooted in the religious and intellectual history of Western culture (Stricker 1970). Classic Cartesian dualism considers the world as consisting in two substances; *res extensa* or extended substance, and *res cogito* or thinking substance. The body belongs to the real of extended substances, or the natural world, and follows deterministic causal laws. The mind is thinking substance with no extension and is independent of deterministic nature. In the mind creativity, rationality and reflection are to be found.

Dualism is firmly anchored in everyday language. Distinctions are made between 'fact' and 'value' and between 'practice' and 'theory'. The term 'physical activity' (as distinct from 'intellectual activity') is a standard example of dualism.

As a working hypothesis in a search for knowledge of the natural world, a mechanistic approach has proved powerful. William Harvey's (1578 - 1657) description of the mechanisms of the cardio-vascular system made a profound impression on Descartes, who saw Harvey's work as an empirical confirmation of his own theories. The development of modern Western medicine ever since provides countless examples of significant insights with powerful practical applications.

The dualistic paradigm has also been strong in the development of sport science research. Sport physiology deals with clear descriptions and mechanistic explanations of the effects of exercise. Analyses of movement techniques are made mainly within a biomechanical framework. One key question in sport medicine concerns the purported causal relationship between exercise and health.

The explanatory power of dualism however is limited when it comes to human experience and agency. Imagine again a penalty kick situation, this time in the last minute of the final game of an Olympic tournament. The score is equal and the penalty kick is of decisive importance. The task is still technically simple but the context is radically different. The player may experience the situation as threatening, she has anxiety regarding her potential failure, and her movements are stiff and uncoordinated. The player misses the goal and her team loses the match. In other words: the mind does not always control the body. Classical dualism is not capable of grasping the full complexity of human agency and experience, meaning and value. A study of the possibility in Olympic sport of 'joy of effort' and of body, will and mind as 'a balanced whole' requires different tools.

Coubertin himself gives some clues as to how this challenge can be met. In a speech in 1894, the founding year of the IOC, he said the following:

... since the middle ages a sort of discredit has hovered over bodily qualities and they have been isolated from qualities of the mind. Recently the first have been admitted to serve the second, but they are still treated as slaves and made every day to feel their dependence and inferiority. This was an immense error whose scientific and social consequences it is almost impossible to calculate. After all, gentlemen, there are not two parts of a man – body and soul: there are three – body, soul and character, character is not formed by the mind, but primarily by the body. (Coubertin (1894) 1967, pp. 6-7)

These ideas are actually refreshingly modern, in particular with the emphasis on the key role of the body in socialization and learning of norms and values. A study of the potential of Olympic sport in cultivating the individual has to

move from the distanced and narrowly mechanistic understanding of dualism to what we may call the understanding from within; to how athletes experience and search for meaning and value in sport.

The Olympic athlete as embodied intentionality

Let us approach an alternative understanding with an example. The first uphill stretch of an Olympic marathon can be strenuous. Competitors gasp for air, the muscles balance on the verge of anaerobic energy conversion. Running is a struggle. After entering an easier part of the course the stride becomes more loose and relaxed, the runner finds a good running and breathing rhythm, the discomfort is gone, attention is directed elsewhere. The runner may think of the strategy of the race or perhaps just observe the environment through which he runs. Distinctions between body, mind and the environment seem to disappear. The runner and the running 'become one'.

The example indicates a phenomenological understanding of the athlete. Phenomenology is concerned with the nature of human consciousness as basically intentional (i. e. as always directed towards objects) and in a constant and interactive process of constructing meaning in the world (Zaner and Ihde 1973). The phenomenological tradition includes philosophers such as Edmund Husserl (1859 - 1938), Jean-Paul Sartre (1905 - 80) and Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908 - 61). Phenomenologists are critical of traditional views of a dualistic universe that are said to let the world as experienced and lived, or the 'life-world' (*Lebenswelt*), slip through its fingers. Studies of Olympic ideals should depart from what is given to us through experience. Marcel (1979) emphasizes a counterpoint to dualism in stating that we do not 'have' a body; we 'are' our bodies in a fundamental sense of the phrase. We exist in the world as embodied and meaning-searching intentionalities.

The example of the experience of running a marathon easily brings a focus on the individual athlete. In most sports however social interaction plays a significant role. Players of a good soccer team are able to interact at a deep level. At their best they move almost like an organic unity; as one rhythmic, unified whole. The experience of the individual seems to transcend into the experience of the group. The philosopher Levinas (2006) describes the encounter with 'the Other' as the constitutive elements of ethics. Meaningful human interaction is not a question of treating others as a means only but of identification, empathy and community; of searching for what we have and are in common.

These ideas fit well within the normative framework of Olympism. In an Olympic soccer game players share a deep engagement in the sport. Within the team there is deep interaction. The two teams try to outperform each other and thereby enhance each others' game within a framework of common rules. With Hyland (1990) we may talk of competition as a sphere for developing genuine friendship. 'Contest' (from the Latin *con testare*) originally refers to a striving together towards a common goal; the good game. At its best Olympic ball games satisfy Huizinga's classic definition of play as an activity of pure intrinsic value (Huizinga 1950). Csikszentmihalyi (1975) describes

experiences of a totality of this type with the term 'deep flow'. Philosophers argue that experiences of play, whether in work, love or sport, are among the most valuable experiences we can have. Play has a constitutive role in the development of our humanity (Meier 1980, Hyland 1990); in play we express 'the humanity of movement' (Anderson 2002).

As compared to dualism, a phenomenological understanding of the Olympic athlete introduces a more extensive picture. Researchers (no less than reflective participants) must come to see the athlete in constant, intentional and embodied interaction with the environment; with the 'life world'. Under such an aspect, Olympic phrases such as 'the joy found in effort' and the experience of a balanced whole of 'body, soul and character' make sense.

As with dualism the phenomenological approach has its critics. From the perspective of traditional experimental science it may seem speculative. It does not build upon 'objective facts' and empirically testable and falsifiable hypotheses. Phenomenological descriptions may be well received but are of value more as fiction than facts.

One response is that such a critique is launched on wrong premises. Phenomenological perspectives are parts of what is often called the hermeneutic, interpretative tradition and builds on different philosophical and methodological premises than the natural sciences (von Wright 1971). The aim is not objective and mechanistic explanations but inter-subjective understanding of human meaning and value.

Another and perhaps more striking critique is launched by representatives of the hermeneutical tradition itself. Phenomenological analyses appear as idealist and to a certain extent naive. As such they can in fact generate serious misunderstandings and produce false ideologies concealing the driving forces of human life and society, or in this context of Olympic sport. For instance, even if soccer players from the outset may have internal motivation for their game, the high pay offs in terms of profit and prestige tend to lead to instrumental attitudes. Different from play, the argument goes, elite sport is best described as a battlefield with participants willing to do whatever it takes to win. Olympic athletes live in a brutal world of 'survival of the fittest'.

Phenomenology in itself may not extend the relational perspective far enough. Individuals are shaped and reshaped by the social and cultural contexts in which they find themselves. Any serious study of the possibility of the well-balanced athlete practicing sport with 'joy of effort' has to include insights into the socio-cultural context and the power-relations within which the athlete finds him- or herself.

The Olympic athlete as social construction

The example of the penalty shot and the marathon demonstrate the possibility of athletes switching between dualist and holistic experiences of sporting activity. Technically, penalty kicks are relatively easy to perform and are executed in almost 'mindless' ways. The body performs in a machine-like

manner. In stressful situations, however, even the best athletes can lose control. Under these circumstances the body seems separated from the mind. Part of a marathon race might be painful, and the body experienced as distinct and alien. Nevertheless, the next part of the race can be one of aerobic 'steady state' and a good and unifying running rhythm.

These experiences are situated in particular contexts. Further reflection draws out theoretical ideas about how experience and meaning are shaped and reshaped in the socio-cultural context of which we are parts.

Imagine again a marathon runner in 'steady-state'. The runner suddenly passes a shop window and sees his own reflected image. As with a *Gestalt* switch he may turn from the subject-experience of running rhythm to a distanced relationship to his image. The runner may expose himself to critical evaluation according to criteria originating from socio-cultural norms and values. The elite runner may be looking for a technically well executed and efficient rhythmic stride. Runners concerned with appearance may check their body posture and clothing based on aesthetic concerns. In both cases, runners look at themselves with 'the gaze of the other'.

All known human societies have more or less strict norms for appearance. In modern Western culture these norms are prominent. Print and other forms of electronic mass media expose the public to ever-increasing numbers of visual impressions and body and appearance ideals. This development has caught the interest of social scientists. Originating in anthropological work such as that of Marcel Mauss (1872-1950) and developed further by scholars such as Norbert Elias (1897 - 1990) and Michel Foucault (1926 - 84), theories of the body have emerged in which bodily appearance and movement are understood as primarily social constructions (Schilling 1993, Sault 1994, Cole 2000).

The 'image industry', i.e. the fashion business, the cosmetic industry and parts of the exercise and fitness field, are powerful constructors and communicators of ideals. One key message is the value of individualism and self-creation (Featherstone 1991). Bodily appearance is considered to have strong symbolic power and has become a core means in modern identity construction (Synnott 1993). This, however, can be fully understood neither in terms of the mechanistic body of the dualistic scheme, nor by the idea of embodied intentionality of the phenomenologist. Social constructivists expand the picture and see the embodied self in context and as contested terrain.

The social constructivist approach adds a critical dimension to the understanding of the Olympic athlete. Marathon runners are socialized into normative schemes of efficient running technique, and of coping with discomfort, pain, and exhaustion. Gymnasts are disciplined within strict movement patterns and with high requirements on specific techniques and aesthetics. Sporting norms are connected to larger social and cultural systems of bodily change and perfection. A sportive, fit and disciplined body indicates energy, mobility, vitality and ambition; important values in an individualistic, market-oriented society (Wachter 1985). Grupe (1990) notes

how popular culture is invaded by sports values; it is 'sporticized'. The Olympic, athletic body has gained the status of a socio-cultural ideal.

This acquired status is, however, not necessarily a good thing. In society at large the image industry creates a 'logic of discontent' (Johansson 1998). Most people experience themselves as distant from the athletic ideal. Although they may approach the norm, there is always room for improvement.

The image industry provides means and methods in this respect. By various techniques the body can be altered, manipulated, slimmed, built, and bronzed. Striving towards virtually unattainable ideals easily turns into a process of repression and/or coercion. To many, life becomes a constant battle against biological processes. Surveys from typically Western societies show that a majority of the adult population is dissatisfied with their own weight and appearance with women clearly more dissatisfied than their male counterparts (Breivik et al 2009). Some may even argue that we are moving towards total bodily alienation.

A similar 'logic of discontent' can be found in elite sport. Many Olympic athletes struggle towards the unattainable: the perfect performance. The Olympic motto *citius, altius, fortius* can lead towards admirable expressions of human excellence but also towards excess and hazardous use of extreme biotechnological means. The logic of the record performance is that 'enough is never enough' (Loland 2005). The problem of eating disorders in some sports and the history of doping are vivid illustrations. In other words, from a critical, social-constructivist point of view the idealization of the Olympic athlete is seen to have negative implications.

Others are more optimistic. The critics' view is, they say, one-sided. Record-breaking demonstrates the transcending nature of the human spirit. Exercise science and pharmaceutical and bio-technological innovations carry with them the promise of freedom from biological limitations and the possibility of constructing ourselves in our own image (Tamburrini 2000, Savulescu 2007). Olympic sport is somehow the frontline of the possibilities of an improved and enhanced life.

Constructivist perspectives have their critics. One line of critique comes from biologically anchored behavioural science. Constructivists seem to reject the biological basis of human agency. In the classic nature versus nurture debate, hardcore constructivists place all emphasis on nurture. New insights within socio-biology and evolutionary psychology cannot be ignored. Human beings live and develop in the intersection between nature, nurture and culture and must be understood accordingly.

Another line of critique is directed towards what seems to be a kind of socio-cultural determinism. There seems to be little room in social constructivism for seeing athletes as potentially free and responsible moral agents, which again is a key issue in Olympism.

Concluding comments

My initial question concerned whether Olympic ideals of the cultivation of the athlete through sport make sense, and whether and in what way this can be examined critically and systematically from a research point of view. How can ideals of 'exalting and combining in a balanced whole the qualities of body, will, and mind', and creating 'a way of life based on the joy of effort' be critically assessed and understood? In a rather sketchy and ideal-typical way I have discussed three apparently different understandings of the athlete in this respect.

A dualistic understanding has strengths as a working hypothesis in biomedical research but does not provide a conceptual framework within which to analyse human ideals and values. A phenomenological approach searches for a non-dualistic understanding of human experience but can be criticized for idealism and a lack of contextual understanding. A constructivist approach links the athlete to socio-cultural context and adds a critical dimension but tends to reduce athletes more or less to the mere products of their environment. In spite of their shortcomings, however, all three perspectives seem useful. Can they be connected and combined, and if so, how?

In a study of Olympic ideals there is a need for perspectives that can grasp human experience, meaning and value. This points towards phenomenological and social constructivist schemes. The dualist understanding builds on completely different philosophical premises but may provide important background facts related for instance to physical effort and the ideal of a balanced life. A tentative conclusion is that Olympic studies have to be multi-disciplinary with an emphasis on social science and the humanities and with bio-medical science as support when relevant.

The discussion above has dealt with various perspectives in the study of Olympic ideals and has included several practical examples. The examples indicate the clear possibility of violation of Olympic ideals but also of deep experiences in sport of meaning and value; of 'joy of effort' and of 'a balanced whole of body, will and mind'. Hence Olympic ideals should be neither rejected nor accepted at face value. If practised in sound and responsible ways, Olympic sport can be an exponent of admirable forms of human excellence with validity not only in sport but in society at large.

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