

THE AESTHETIC OLYMPIC VISIONS OF BARON PIERRE DE COUBERTIN

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Abstract

This article discusses the Olympic aesthetic visions of the founder of the modern Olympic movement, Baron Pierre de Coubertin. The purpose of this paper is to both question Coubertin's concept of beauty as well as to identify and elucidate some of the philosophical ideas that served as historical precedents to this highly idiosyncratic formulation. During such a process, we hope to further analyze and dissect Coubertin's particular aesthetic Olympic imperative, an axiology well understood to have stemmed from Coubertin's reverence for the aesthetic vision of ancient Hellenism, but one that also ran through the idealist thinking of a wide variety of philosophers ranging from Shaftsbury to Goethe, from Leibniz to Humboldt, and from Weiland to Schiller. Of particular significance were the ideas of British theoretician of aesthetics John Ruskin, whose ideology inspired Coubertin to seek to beautify the entire Olympic edifice, to accomplish what Kruger calls "a noble *Gesamtkunstwerk*."¹ Grounded in the history of ideas, we argue that despite Coubertin's attempt to develop a cultural theory of sport which would complement his ideology of the Olympic Games, ultimately his moral reform agenda floundered not only because it was, as Brown rightly notes, "masculinist, paternalistic and conservative . . . a bourgeois discourse of art and culture where the pleasure of physical activity was necessarily abstracted to the level of the intellectual perception of beauty,"² but also because the very notions of 'moral beauty,' or 'moral progress,' or the 'beautiful soul,' lost favor in European thought because they tended toward exclusivity, elitism, and the atomization of self.

Introduction

Quite remarkably, the modern Olympic Games owe their genesis largely to the industry of one man, the French aristocrat, Pierre de Coubertin. Celebrated for the first time in Athens in 1896, the Olympic Games have since evolved from a *fin-de-siècle* curiosity of the late nineteenth century into an early twenty-first century spectacle of truly global magnitude. As the chief architect of the modern Olympic Movement, Coubertin established the Games as an expression of his profound belief in the enduring educational values inherent in competitive sport, what he called *la pedagogie sportive*. Committed to the ideal of sport as a social and moral endeavor, Coubertin conceived of the Olympic Movement as a broad-based humanitarian project and he enlisted the services of the games in the pursuit of international harmony, peace, and goodwill. He called his idiosyncratic ideology Olympism, the underpinnings of which, as Cook puts it, were “religion first, then peace, and finally beauty.”³ It is Coubertin’s aesthetic ideology, his fascination with the relationship between beauty and sport, that serves as the focus of this paper.

Coubertin’s lexicon is littered with the term beauty. He talks of the “radiant beauty” of the Empress Eudoxia,⁴ the “beauty” of gymnastics,⁵ the “beauty” of a World’s Fair,⁶ and of course, the “beauty” of sport itself.⁷ Places are similarly described – the “majestic beauty of the Parthenon,”⁸ the “beauty” of Antwerp,⁹ and the “beauty of a facility:”¹⁰ he even talks of the “beauty of great spaces.”¹¹ The idea of beauty is also linked with other concepts in provocative and instructive ways: he talks of “beauty and moral strength,”¹² “physical beauty and health,”¹³ “moral beauty,”¹⁴ “beauty and perfection,”¹⁵ describing the Olympics as “festivals of youth, beauty, and strength.”¹⁶ In other words, Coubertin uses the term beauty in interestingly different, sometimes incongruent, and often unlikely ways. And, as any linguist knows, such imprecise and

variable uses of the same term invariably signal the presence of something deeper in the thinking of the writer.

So widespread is Coubertin's deployment of the word beauty that it is applied equally to the descriptive and evocative – to the purely adjectival – as it is to the metaphysical and ontological. Ultimately, Coubertin's multifarious conceptualization of beauty serves as the cornerstone of a cultural aesthetic of sport grounded in the Enlightenment promise of social progress and the imagined perfectibility of the individual and of society. The purpose of this paper is to both interrogate Coubertin's concept of beauty as well as to discover and examine some of the philosophical ideas that served as historical precedents to this highly idiosyncratic formulation. In so doing, we hope to further explore and unpack Coubertin's particular aesthetic Olympic imperative, an axiology well understood to have stemmed from Coubertin's reverence for the aesthetic vision of ancient Hellenism, but one that was also apparent in the idealist thinking of a wide variety of philosophers ranging from Shaftsbury to Goethe, from Leibniz to Humboldt, and from Weiland to Schiller. Of particular significance were the ideas of British theoretician of aesthetics John Ruskin, whose ideology inspired Coubertin to seek to beautify the entire Olympic edifice, to accomplish what Kruger calls "a noble *Gesamtkunstwerk*."¹⁷ Grounded in the history of ideas, we argue that despite Coubertin's attempt to develop a cultural theory of sport which would complement his ideology of the Olympic Games, ultimately his moral reform agenda floundered not only because it was, as Brown rightly notes, "masculinist, paternalistic and conservative . . . a bourgeois discourse of art and culture where the pleasure of physical activity was necessarily abstracted to the level of the intellectual perception of beauty,"¹⁸ but also because the very notions of 'moral beauty,' or 'moral progress,' or the

'beautiful soul,' lost favor in European thought because they tended toward exclusivity, elitism, and the atomization of self.

Beauty and Olympism

From the very beginning of his Olympic odyssey, Coubertin waxed lyrical about the beauty of ancient Greece, the "majestic beauty" and "tranquil serenity" of the Parthenon,¹⁹ and most especially the beauty of Olympia, "the cradle of a view of life strictly Hellenic in form."²⁰ Profoundly enamored by the "holy city of ancient athletics," "the capital of ancient sport,"²¹ he dwelt on Olympia's Edenic qualities, its "serene beauty and its tranquil majesty,"²² on "the beauty of the surrounding countryside,"²³ "the beauty" of the "giant plane trees, olive trees and silver poplars,"²⁴ and on the beauty of the entire environment: "Cool, pure air, fragrant with the scent of the fields, wafted from the banks of the Alpheus," he wrote during his visit to the site in 1927. "For a moment the moon lit up a vaporous landscape, then the starry night fell on the two thousand years I had come to recapture."²⁵ "I therefore invite you," he later wrote in 1929, "to . . . come and sit on the wooden slopes Mount Kronion at the hour when beyond the Alpheus the rising sun begins to touch the swelling hills with gold and to lighten the green meadows at their feet."²⁶ Olympia, as a literary topos, served as Coubertin's secular *locus amoenus*.

Inevitably, given Coubertin's trenchant romanticism and Hellenic zealotry, Olympia assumed a thematic significance well beyond a matter of simple geography and climate. Coubertin specifically praised the Greeks' aesthetic ingenuity when creating "dominant silhouettes that integrated man, architecture, and countryside and produced an impression of beauty that appealed to the masses, even the least refined."²⁷ Just as Julie's garden in Jean-Jacques Rousseau's book *Julie* becomes symbolic of the "beautiful soul,"²⁸ so in Coubertin's

allegorical rhetoric, Olympia becomes the incarnation of what lurked at the heart of his aesthetic ideology, his notion of eurythmy. Echoing themes that were to continually infuse his thinking, he wrote that:

It was the immortal glory of Hellenism to imagine the codification of the pursuit of balance and to make it into a prescription for social greatness. Here – at Olympia – we are on the ruins of the first capital of the kingdom of eurythmy, for eurythmy does not belong to the art-world alone; there is also a eurythmy of life.²⁹

The eurythmy of place applies equally in Coubertin's prose to both the ancient and modern worlds: Of Olympia he wrote that "the wealth of the art objects, the astonishing jumble of buildings, the high standing of the pageants, the intensity of patriotic rivalries – all worked together to make Olympia one of the most moving and grandiose centers of ancient civilization,"³⁰ and in similar language, he described the "wonderful harmony" of modern Olympic city of Antwerp, the host to the 1924 Olympic Games, as "revealed . . . in both its harbor, its public squares and parks, its institutions, the element of life itself – all this seems to contain such strength and equilibrium, energy and beauty."³¹

It was Coubertin's preoccupation with the beauty of Olympia – the beauty of Olympia in all its geographical, ceremonial, architectural, religious, artistic and athletic dimensions – that led him to conceive of his modern creation as something more than simple athletic competitions, as mere world championships, but as an institutionalized internationalism dedicated to a public good and grounded in "beauty." As he wrote in 1908:

Anyone who studies the ancient Games will perceive that their deep significance was due to two principal elements: beauty and reverence. If the modern Games are to exercise the influence I desire for them they must in turn show beauty and reverence – a beauty and a reverence infinitely surpassing anything hitherto realized in the most important athletic contests of our day. The grandeur and dignity of processions and attitudes, the impressive splendor of ceremonies, the concurrence of all the arts, popular emotion and generous sentiment, must all in some sort collaborate together.³²

And so, Coubertin sought to beautify the games, to honor and embellish them not only in keeping with the ancient Hellenic model but also but also in keeping with the aesthetics of John Ruskin, the British aesthete whose organic theory of art and beauty deeply impacted Coubertin. In a fitting tribute to Ruskin, Coubertin wrote that to “awaken the sense of beauty in young minds is to work at beautifying the life of the individual and at perfecting the life of society,”³³ and in seeking to Ruskianize his modern Olympic edifice, to distinguishing the Games from all other contemporary athletic competitions, he intentionally considered the role of rituals and ceremonies, decorations and architecture. In particular, he put great stock in the oath taking ceremony:

I see the athletes of the future taking the oath before the Games, each upon the flag of their own country, and in the presence of the flags of the other lands solemnly affirming that they have always been loyal and honourable in sport, and that it is in the spirit of loyalty and honor they approach the Olympic contests. Would not this provide a scene of dignified beauty fit to inspire actors and spectators alike with the most noble and generous emotions?³⁴

But he also thought about stadium construction, “the symbolic beauty of the parade,”³⁵ flags, garlands, emblems, music, and even seemingly mundane topics such as trophies, diplomas, poster design, and medals.³⁶ The decorative arts were also vital to his agenda of beautification.³⁷ In the ultimate expression of his Ruskian eurythmy, he argued that the Games should exhibit unity between athlete, spectator, environment, decoration, landscape, and ceremony.³⁸

Perhaps not surprisingly Coubertin also referred to sport itself as “Beauty,” not just to the beauty of sport – in particular, he recommended gymnastics as “a sight most pleasing in its physical strength and beauty,”³⁹ and he also extolled the “beauty” of the exercises of winter sports⁴⁰ – but to sport *as* “Beauty.” “O Sport,” he intoned in his *Ode to Sport*, “you are Beauty! You – the architect of this house, the human body, which may become object or sublime according to whether it is defiled by base passions or cherished with wholesome endeavour.”⁴¹

He eulogized the beauty of the human form, the quest for “physical beauty,”⁴² a quest that not only energized his own particular appreciation of sport but one that clearly reflected his allegiance to a Greek heritage that proselytized the world to the beauty of the human body in motion – he considered movement as “living beauty”⁴³ and the athlete as “living sculpture”⁴⁴ – and the worth of the drive toward personal and social excellence and perfection.

But no body cultist was Coubertin: ontologically, his admiration for physical beauty was, like his admiration for most things, couched in the context of balance, equilibrium and proportion, ultimately, with an eye toward harmony. “There can be no beauty,” he wrote in the same stanza of his *Ode to Sport* in which he lauded the beauty of sport, “without poise and proportion, and you [the body] are the incomparable master of both, for you create harmony, you fill movement with rhythm, you make strength gracious, and you lend power to supply things.”⁴⁵ To Coubertin, proportion implied not only beauty but also order and the possibility of perfection and human happiness – what he called “eurythmy,” a “term” that evoked “the idea of the beautiful, the perfect.” “Everything that is properly proportioned is eurythmic,” he wrote. “It was Hellenism, above all else, that advocated measure and proper proportion, co-creators of beauty, grace and strength.”⁴⁶ Conscripting his aesthetic ideology into the service of “the general welfare and to the betterment of humanity,”⁴⁷ he advocated a return to the eurythmic Greek cultural model to offset what he judged to be the appalling ugliness of the industrial age.

But as much as Coubertin’s notion of eurythmy owed to an ancient Greek conception, the idea of proportion, order and beauty also played out in the aesthetic musings of European philosophers who along with classical thinkers were equally influential in the construction of the Victorian culture that nurtured Coubertin idiosyncratic version of international sport. Like Coubertin, Shaftesbury too voiced a philosophical concern for balance: “Nothing surely is more

strongly imprinted on our Minds or more closely interwoven with our Souls than the Idea or Sense of *Order* and *Proportion*.”⁴⁸ Moreover, the recurring notions of order, proportion and harmony in Shaftesbury are very closely aligned, if not identical, with his concept of beauty. Like Shaftesbury, Leibniz too argued that a perfected state of human fulfillment resided in a form of harmony or a unity in variety that presumed beauty: “We see,” Leibniz wrote, “that happiness, pleasure, love, perfection, being, power, freedom, harmony, order, and beauty are all tied to each other, a truth which is rightly perceived by few.”⁴⁹ Or as Marcus Aurelius more pithily put it: to perfect oneself is to become a “totally rounded orb, rejoicing in its own rotundity.”⁵⁰

What distinguished Coubertin from Shaftesbury and Leibniz, as well as from other philosophers who embraced the notion of balance and harmony, including for example Addison and Hutchinson, was that he embraced the physical as part of an ordered human balance. In fact, not only did he attribute a significant role to the body in the generation of balance and proportion but he ascribed an essential role to it: “After all, Gentlemen,” he once wrote, “there are not two parts to a man – body and soul: there are three – body, mind, and character; character is not formed by the mind, but primarily by the body. The men of antiquity knew this, and we are painfully re-learning it.”⁵¹

And so, abiding a philosophical tradition that inspired ancient Olympism and ran through the work of countless idealists - one that presumed an ontological relationship between balance, order, and happiness - Coubertin embraced the basic derivative of the fundamental metaphysical imperative, *mens sana in corpore sano*, “the search for physical beauty and health through a happy balance of mind and body,”⁵² the “work of balance and beauty,”⁵³ as he would later refer to the work of the International Olympic Committee (IOC). Acknowledging the excess of sport – “that healthy drunkenness of the blood which is nowhere so intense and so exquisite as in bodily

exercise”⁵⁴ – he actually preferred the epitaph *mens fervida in corpore lacertoso*;⁵⁵ but in either case he presumed that the best formula for sport lay in the “harmony of the human machine, for the smooth equilibrium of mind and body, for the joy of feeling oneself more intensely alive.”⁵⁶ In particular, he was drawn to the injunction of his friend, the French poet, Paul Bourget, who stated that, “If only you knew how fruitful the marriage of vigorous physical exercise and intellectual culture is in terms of virile splendours.”⁵⁷ Coubertin institutionalized his aesthetic idea in the form of the Arts Competitions, the Pentathlon of the Muses, which in conjunction with the Games created a marriage of “Muscle and Mind,” or better yet, a “rapprochement of the marital partners”⁵⁸ art and sport, as he put it, that sought to recapture the beauty of ancient Olympia: “It was not by accident that the writers and artists of old assembled at Olympia around the ancient sports,” Coubertin wrote; “it was from this incomparable coalescence that the prestige sprang which for so long characterized the institution.”⁵⁹

By including the arts in the Olympic games, the entire Modern Olympic edifice was conceived and constructed by Coubertin to glorify beauty.⁶⁰ Specifically, he hoped to ennoble and dignify sport – “*pour en beneficier et les sports ennoblir*” – and to give enduring “life” to the beauty, grace, power, and dignity of what he considered not a transient, inconsequential human pastime but one pregnant with human possibilities, namely, sport. To Coubertin, art was a harmonizing force for sport, “a force promoting harmony by reconciling opposites; it must spiritualize and ennoble the clash of muscular strength by relating it to a high vision of humanity.”⁶¹ At the same time, he averred, sport could serve as the wellspring for artistic creativity: “Are we going to be held back,” he rhetorically inquired, “by that unfounded and antiquated prejudice which alleges that certain professions are incompatible with sport?”⁶² Despite the problematic nature of the arts competitions, Coubertin never failed to advocate for his

vision, hoping that “the final dedication of the value of inspiration offered by the Games, and will tempt young athletes to combine artistic taste with physical hardihood.”⁶³ Ultimately, he defined Olympism as “a state of mind borne of the twofold cult of effort and eurythmy . . . the love of excess and the love of harmony, which though of contrasting aspect are yet at the root of all true manhood!”⁶⁴

Eurythmy came to signify Coubertin’s aesthetic imperative for the Games, most especially as eurythmy spoke to the goal of harmony and just proportion, not only in the form of “the future alliance between athletes, artists, and spectators,”⁶⁵ but as a larger, transcendent goal for life that, as Rioux puts it, connoted “an accord between oneself and the world, an accord that is a euphoric unity.”⁶⁶ Arguing that “civilization had gone astray,” Coubertin maintained that “only the “return to eurythmy” would put it back on the right path again.”⁶⁷ Eurythmy was a conservative and neo-classical construction and it encoded both an internal and external, what Brown interprets as both an objective and subjective, state of beauty.⁶⁸ The “eurythmic sense” was, to Coubertin, “Proportion, the base of exterior eurythmie – Surroundings and groupings – Harmonious accord between circumstances, the period, the movement, the sounds, the colors – Balance, the base of interior eurythmie and contentment.”⁶⁹ Sympathetic with and sensitive to Coubertin’s classical humanism and romantic idealism, Malter argues that Coubertin’s notion of eurythmy expresses and instantiates his idea of beauty: “the eurythmie of life,” Malter writes, “constituted the true physical experience of harmony between body and spirit, the experience of terrestrial beauty, a paganism that is never void of humanity because it represents an ideal manifestation of human existence and beauty.”⁷⁰ Lowe simply defines it as “beautiful, perfect harmony of the forms of life and expression.”⁷¹

Just how much Coubertin wanted eurythmy to pervade the Olympic stadium can be gleaned from his memories of the 1936 Berlin Games:

Those memories will be of beauty, first and foremost. Since the time I called the Conference on Arts, Literature, and Sports thirty years ago in Paris to establish a permanent connection between the restored Olympics and expressions of the mind, bold efforts from Stockholm to Los Angeles have helped make this ideal a reality.⁷²

It was on the basis of this most comprehensive sense, the aesthetic – indeed eurythmic – harmony of life, sport, and art, that he defined “beauty” as one of the foundations of modern Olympism “beauty, the involvement of the arts and the mind in the Games. Indeed,” he asked, “can one celebrate the festival of human springtime without inviting the mind to take part?”⁷³

While Coubertin saw the incorporation of arts and literature into the Olympics as restoring the Games to their original Hellenic “beauty” and offering artists the opportunity, long lost, to rediscover “forgotten sources of majesty and beauty,”⁷⁴ his aesthetic idea did not in fact represent a specific theory of beauty in art, or beauty in sport, nature, or life.⁷⁵ But it did have a purpose. Grounded in Victor Cousin’s metaphysical eclecticism, Coubertin’s idea of beauty was inextricably linked to notions of moral truth. As Brown puts it, “This was a theory of aesthetic perception that tried to unite sensual experience (sport) with the intellectual and moral faculties of the mind.”⁷⁶ In other words, for Coubertin, art was associated with moral development and social reform, and beauty became the accolade that celebrated the moral constitution of the ideal amateur Olympian. Coubertin generated an applied theory of art that in keeping with the promise of the Enlightenment sought to enhance the moral lives of individuals and contribute to the moral progress of society.

Not surprisingly, then, Coubertin rejected the art-for-art’s sake model and he eschewed the ideas of those artists whose work did not speak to the goal of progressive moral education. While he admired Isadora Duncan’s effort to use dance as a way to augment the subjective

appreciation of beauty in bodily movement, he saw it as insufficient as a moral progressivism. “Art and singing,” he disparagingly wrote, “come only after work. And it is not by ‘joyously following one’s instinct’ that one develops work habits.”⁷⁷ He saved his most vehement invective for the *avant-garde* modernist aesthetics movements that defined the early decades of the 20th century, most especially the Futurists, who, in his view, trampled the value of history and summarily dismissed the goals of moral education and social progress:

To sum up, there exists in this so-called “futuristic” school nothing new and nothing powerful. We find instead traces of this worried morbidity, this mental disarray which serves to harm young talent by preventing a journey down the one and only path which can lead to a pure and peaceful humanity.⁷⁸

In contrast, however, he embraced Jacques-Dalcroze’s theory of rhythm as a central human experience and as a moralizing force that contributed to an enhanced intellectual comprehension of self and life.⁷⁹

According to Coubertin’s aesthetics, art – and sport – were yoked to the goal of moral education and social progress, and, as Brown notes, “at the root of his philosophical understanding of the perception of beauty was the imperative intellectual link with moral knowledge.”⁸⁰ In Cousin, Coubertin saw the interdependence between goodness, truth, and beauty – the unity between Kantian foundations of epistemology, ethics, and aesthetics – and while he evinced a nuanced appreciation of Platonic doctrine,⁸¹ he nonetheless grounded his aesthetics in what Nord describes as a “belief in the transcendent ideals of truth and beauty that can be grasped through reason.”⁸² In the end, reading Cousin’s work on morals and aesthetics lead Coubertin to the conclusion as expressed by Zeldin that “art was justifiable only if it expressed moral beauty,”⁸³ and nowhere within Coubertin’s vision could moral beauty be more publicly expressed than in the heroic and noble endeavors of the iconic Olympic athlete, at the heart of whose quest, was, or at least to Coubertin should be, the drive “to know, to govern, and

to master oneself.” This was the “eternal beauty of sport;” this for Coubertin was the “fundamental aspiration of the true sportsman and the prerequisite for his success;” “*Athletae proprium est se ipsum noscere, ducere, et vincere,*” as he liked to put it.⁸⁴

Within Coubertin’s idealizations, and particularly within the conceptual framework of his *pedagogie sportive*, the specific traits that sport inculcated included “the development of the will, courage and self-confidence and undoubtedly also intellectual progress by the creation of calm and mental order.”⁸⁵ Sport contributed to moral progress and the cultivation of moral beauty because it accrued to the virtues of initiative, daring, decisiveness, self-reliance and responsibility.⁸⁶ Iterating his admiration for the qualities he most admired in the Arnoldian public schools of England, he wrote:

All of whom I questioned on the subject were unanimous in their answers; they have only to rejoice in the state of school morality, and they loudly declare that sport is the cause of it; that its role lies in pacifying the senses and calming the imagination, stopping corruption by cutting it off at the root and preventing it from being shown off, and, finally, in arming nature for the struggle.⁸⁷

As the “perfect terrain for social education,”⁸⁸ sport, to Coubertin, served as a “physical discipline sustained by the enthusiastic addiction to unnecessary effort. Daring for the sake of daring, and without real necessity—it is in this way that our body rises above its animal nature.” This is sport’s “nobility, and even its poetry . . . its essence, its object, and the secret of its moral worth,”⁸⁹ and even though critics, such as George Hébert, would rise up and condemn the Olympic Games as “an international muscular fair without educational value,”⁹⁰ Coubertin forever proselytized the world to the “manly beauty” of athletics, advocating that “moral strength” stemmed from the ability of the athlete to “handle a deeply-felt defeat, without any apparent bitterness, and to shake the winner’s hand with heartfelt warmth.”⁹¹

At the heart of Coubertin's Olympism was "a sort of moral Altis,"⁹² a "sanctuary reserved for the consecrated, purified athlete."⁹³ The Olympic oath ceremonial in particular was to serve as a sort of sacred rite, a pseudo-religious sacrament dedicated to the pursuit of moral beauty and instantiative of the Olympic program of moral purification:

The true religion of the athlete of antiquity did not consist in sacrificing solemnly before the altar of Zeus; this was no more than a traditional gesture. It consisted in talking an oath of honor and disinterest, and above all in striving to keep it strictly. A participant in the Games must be in some manner purified by the profession and practice of such virtues. Thus was revealed the moral beauty and the profound scope of physical culture.⁹⁴

According to Coubertin, restoring the Olympic oath would introduce into sports "the spirit of gay candour, the spirit of sincere disinterestedness which will revitalize them and make them collective muscular exercise a true school of moral perfection."⁹⁵ Even the spirit of chivalry – "*honneur sportif*" as Coubertin called it – was invoked as a bulwark against "the dangers of vulgarity, mercantilism, book makers, the instinct to self-promote and *arrivistes*" in the quest for moral reform and moral perfection.⁹⁶ "The Olympic Games," Coubertin contended, will become "more and more grandiose, not by the amount spent on them or by the mass of spectators assembled but by increasing their artistic and moral value," the moral constituent depicted as an obligation to "find within the spirit of chivalry an equivalent to the religious system that brought moral and noble quality to the Games of ancient Greece."⁹⁷ As it was for Leibniz, so also was it for Coubertin: the quest for moral perfection possessed an eminently aesthetic quality.⁹⁸

Ultimately, Coubertin conflated secular and sacred metaphors and rhetoric in the celebration of his universal Olympic agenda touched even upon the Enlightenment concept of the beautiful soul, a cardinal ethical principle that powered the moralistic idealism of a variety of thinkers before Coubertin from Shaftesbury to Lütkekmann, from Mendelssohn to Hegel. The Olympic Games, Coubertin wrote,

are the temple of muscular activity in the most widely varied forms possible, though there is no need to assign degrees within some hierarchy of beauty and nobility. What is beautiful is noble, not one sport or another in and of itself, but the way in which it is played, the spirit that drives it, the soul that man brings to it. There can be nothing Olympic outside the contact and cooperation of the various branches of sport, united on a footing of total equality for the improvement of humanity.⁹⁹

Coubertin's agenda was no small quest. Rather, his Olympic odyssey was driven by an unremitting desire, as he himself put it, "to rediscover all the elements of scattered moral force in the world,"¹⁰⁰ to endow his refurbished Olympic Games with the means to help bring about nothing less than the transformation of modern society: "Gentleman," he wrote,

this is the order of ideas from which I intend to draw the elements of moral strength that must guide and protect the renaissance of athletics. Healthy democracy and wise and peaceful internationalism will make their way into the new stadium. There they will glorify the honor and selflessness that will enable athletics to carry out its task of moral betterment and social peace, as well as physical development.¹⁰¹

Within the milieu of the *fin de siècle*, Coubertin's pursuit of moral and social reform melded well with the ambitions of the politicians and ideologues of the Third Republic who were committed to a practical and civic education that still retained a strong allegiance to moral training. The Republican adherence to the social, political, and moral utility of art clearly emerges in Coubertin's entire *oeuvre* as he overtly espouses a normative theory of art and sport dedicated to the moral education of both individual citizens and societal collectives. Not surprisingly, concepts of democracy, liberty, individualism, and internationalism abound within Coubertin's own brand of didactic bourgeois liberalism as he weaves the analogous themes of individual development and social progress into his ideology of aesthetic Olympism. Reflecting an even deeper 19th century anxiety that neither science nor spirituality could fill the moral void of the industrial age, Coubertin advocated an organic conceptualization of society and a correspondingly subjective and ephemeral idea of beauty that evinced harmony and balance as the portal toward a moral life. As a social activist, Coubertin, like his mentor Le Play, preferred

social and cultural rather than political or theological solutions to France's problems. Consequently, while government officials like Jules Simon and Antonia Proust applied the theory that secular culture could provide modern society with the tools to advance the search for moral truths and social progress that neither empiricism nor religion could and committed their public lives to establishing government-funded art education programs, Coubertin focused his energies on sport as a morally didactic social practice and labored to establish the Olympic Movement as a monument to the moral beauty cultivated by the athletic enterprise.

From an even larger historical perspective, Coubertin's secular moral aesthetic recapitulated an even older intellectual effort to disentangle ethics from theology, to find an alternative to the established ethical system of the Christian religion, an alternative located in capacities and potentials inherent in human nature itself; in other words, to sustain a moral theory in the absence of transcendent commands and invocations. In a very real sense, Coubertin's Olympism was a rationalized athletic theology that in France sought to combat an entrenched and well-fortified state religion that in Coubertin's estimation had stultified individual moral and social progress. In fact, his references to moral beauty, moral virtue, and moral perfection specifically invoked a modern philosophical struggle that had long wrestled with nothing less than the Platonic quest for inner beauty, which itself is identified with perfect virtue. In this regard, Coubertin's aesthetic ruminations are no different than the musings of other philosophers who since the late 17th and early 18th centuries, when the first explicit formulations of the modern idea of moral beauty took hold in British thought, had contemplated the nature of moral goodness.

Even by using the term moral beauty, Coubertin tapped into the thinking of a whole stream of European philosophers for whom accession to moral beauty served as a sort of moral

imperative. Kant, for example, argued that the symbiotic achievement of morality and beauty was the most important and meaningful goal of human striving,¹⁰² and Schiller wrote that “the maximum of perfection in the character of a human being is moral beauty.”¹⁰³ For Weiland too, moral beauty, or *Völlkommenheit*, represented the ultimate in human effort and the concept of moral beauty remained at the center of his philosophy: “But if we recognize in someone the virtue . . . in its full beauty,” Weiland wrote, “then we have to admit that human nature is capable of great excellence.”¹⁰⁴ For Shaftesbury, moral beauty was beauty of soul; those who were morally beautiful were those who, like Coubertin’s Olympic athletes, had forged their will to the formation of their characters. It is in the “united structure and fabric” of will and character, the “beauty of the soul,” that for Shaftesbury the happiness which is synonymous with virtue consisted.¹⁰⁵

The idea that moral beauty depended on balance – an idea central to Coubertin’s aesthetic ideology – also reverberated throughout the ages lending pedigree to Coubertin’s idiosyncratic formulation of Olympism. The success of Shaftesbury’s notions about moral beauty was contingent upon his efforts to achieve a balanced interrogation of affective and rational elements in his conception of ethical knowledge and action. As Norton notes, for both Hume and Shaftesbury, moral beauty “seemed to be an elegant bridge over the chasm separating mind and body,” performing a “subtle negotiation between rigid formalism and formless sensualism.”¹⁰⁶ Like Coubertin, Weiland, too, drew authority for his educational reform agenda by citing the model of the ancient Greeks, arguing that a disciplined education of both physical and mental abilities were essential to attaining the happy life: “The goal of their education was to form or cultivate (*bilden*) their young citizens into that which they termed *kalokagathia* . . . it encompassed all the qualities and talents that elevate and beautify a person and make one fit to

fulfill a noble role in life.”¹⁰⁷ For both Weiland and Coubertin, educational and moral instruction were inseparable and moral betterment required the cultivation of both mind, body, and soul.

While the cultivation of moral beauty was the goal, the means adopted were often diverse. For Coubertin, the quest for moral beauty was served through the discipline of sport, and in the ultimate internationalized form of his ideal, through the Olympic Games. For Weiland and Rousseau, the novel served to present a set of metaphysical notions around the notion of moral beauty. In Weiland’s novel, *Geschichte des Agathon*, for example, both Danae and Agathon seek to assimilate themselves to the ideal of moral beauty. As the narrator declares: “The love of virtue, the desire to re-form [*umbilden*] oneself after this divine ideal of moral beauty, takes possession of all our inclinations; it becomes a passion.”¹⁰⁸ Similarly, the poet Klopstock could write: “The final purpose of higher poetry, and at the same time the true mark of its value, is moral beauty.”¹⁰⁹ In each case, the philosophical and ethical ideal of moral beauty, or the beautiful soul, presupposed a didactic program. Foreshadowing Coubertin’s lofty and optimistic moral sentiments at least a century earlier, Weiland’s protagonist, Agathon, learns to see “that *true Enlightenment toward moral improvement* is the only thing on which the hope is founded for better times, that is, for better human beings.”¹¹⁰

Although the ideal of moral beauty, or the encryption of moral beauty in the figure of the beautiful soul, occupied the center of European cultural consciousness for over a century as the supreme expression of consummate virtue, deciding precisely what the benefits of such an evanescent construct were ultimately eluded even its most dedicated and eloquent supporters. As long ago as the early 18th century, Balguy warned “how small a Proportion of Mankind are capable of discerning, in any considerable Degree, the inward Beauty and Excellence of Virtue,”¹¹¹ and Schiller acknowledged that moral beauty was something of a chimera, that “this

beauty of character, the most mature fruit of humanity, is merely an idea, to which one strives to conform with continuous vigilance, but which even with the greatest determination, one can never entirely achieve.”¹¹² In an even more virulent attack, Goethe discerned in the idea of moral beauty what Norton calls “an inherent tendency toward the vacant aestheticization of the self.”¹¹³ . . . the effete and sterile pursuit of solipsistic self-gratification.”¹¹⁴ Referring specifically to its “pure abstraction,” Hegel described the beautiful soul as “an empty nothingness . . . disordered to the point of madness,”¹¹⁵ and Nietzsche vilified it as the personification of a “pale, sickly, idiotically enthusiastic creature.”¹¹⁶ Perhaps even more devastating from the perspective of Coubertin was the denigration of the idea of moral beauty or the quest for moral cultivation – what Humboldt called “*moralische Bildung*”¹¹⁷ – as the catalyst for social reform. The idea that a better society would emerge out of a process of emulation – a process whereby those who had already attained moral beauty would inspire others to reproduce the same conditions within themselves – suffered a severe critique from the likes of Schiller, Hegel and Goethe, all of whom were forced to concede that such a society cultivated exclusivity, implicitly consigning those who lacked the will and drive to achieve moral beauty to a position of inferiority.

Consequently, while Coubertin’s ideal of moral beauty and moral progress may well have retained resonance among a late 19th and early 20th century audience who embraced the conviction of the Enlightenment project, certainly among the social elite who championed amateur sport and supported Coubertin’s Olympic project, the truth is that these concepts had long since suffered the obliterating invective of philosophers like Hegel, Goethe, and Nietzsche. Given the remarkable success of the Olympic Movement throughout the course of the 20th century, it is perhaps ironic to imagine that by invoking the ideal of moral beauty, and intimating

at the concept of the beautiful soul, Coubertin in fact consigned himself to the ranks of second rate thinkers, of whom Norton writes:

Like provincials who begin to adopt some fashion, just as it has become passé in the capital, those later writers self-consciously adorned their thought with the mantle of moral beauty without realizing that to an informed and judicious observer, they had thereby made themselves more than a little ridiculous.¹¹⁸

Conclusion

The discriminating dialectician, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, realizing that a yearning for moral probity was itself a symptom of its absence, once wrote: “It is in the most depraved that one cherishes the lessons of the most perfect morality.” Consequently, while Coubertin clearly uses the term beauty in interestingly different, sometimes incongruent, and invariably non-discriminating ways, at the heart of his Olympic aesthetic was a conviction that cultivating an appreciation for the beauty of sport would provide a moral bulwark against the challenging conditions of a 19th century modernity, that through sport athletes and spectators could constitute themselves aesthetically, morally, and socially.¹¹⁹ However, although Coubertin’s aesthetic discursive articulation may well have served as a persuasive ideological scheme for social progress – one that certainly appealed to the late 19th century romantic ideologues and benefactors who supported Coubertin’s Hellenic model of educational sport – it was, as Brown rightly notes, in the end theoretically and practically fraught with limitations: not only was it constrained by the historical realities of a bourgeois, capitalist, and masculinist *fin de siecle* culture – realities that also constrained the world of sport – but it was also grounded in a theory of sport spectatorship that failed to apply itself equally coherently to the lived experience of the athlete.¹²⁰ Or as Brown more eloquently puts it, “the discourse of Olympism contained an

aesthetic imperative that emphasized the observable cultural performance that engulfed sport rather than the experience of actively participating.”¹²¹

Ultimately, Coubertin’s musings about beauty are the manifestation of a fundamental dialectic between art and sport, beauty and morality, artists and athletes, performance and spectatorship, and mind and body, all loosely grounded in abstract ideals derivative not only from historical interpretations of the ancient Olympic festival but also from modern and contemporary thinkers who embraced moral progress as a worthy and realizable goal. It is perhaps ironic though that the very century that would debunk the Enlightenment project and discredit the values and ambitions that animated Coubertin’s aestheticism would at the same time nurture the elevation of the Olympic project to the level of a global ritual and the IOC to the level of an economic and organizational mega-power. Coubertin may well have been a second rate thinker, but he was also as Krüger rightly notes “an economic genius,”¹²² one of the very first entrepreneurs to market sport, invest heavily in its future profit, and see the value of commodifying the Games on the basis of a corporate, and indeed mythologized, identity. Even if his ambitions for the moral beautification of society failed, his plans for the commodity beautification of the Games most certainly did not.

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