

Cosmopolitanism, Olympism, and Nationalism: A Critical Interpretation of Coubertin's Ideal of International Sporting Life

William J. Morgan*

In a recent illuminating essay, John Hargreaves sketched out the three standard views of the relation between nationalism and Olympism.¹ The first view, championed by friends of the Olympic Games, concedes the pervasive influence of nationalism on the Olympics, decries its presence, and strives to eradicate it to further the international aims of the Games. The second view, offered up by left-wing foes of the games, likewise concedes the nationalistic bent of the Games, but takes this as definitive proof of its bogus internationalism. On this rendering, Olympism is just an ideological cover for execrable nationalistic displays, in particular, for the subordination of non-western nations by Western ones. The third view, advanced by proponents of so-called real-politik, further concedes that the Games are presently dominated by nationalistic interests, but thinks this is nothing to get worked up about, and certainly nothing to warrant either concerted reform or wholesale condemnation of the Olympic project. Instead, they suggest that we had better accept and adapt to this upsurge of nationalism and put off our aspirations for international good-will and greater intercultural contact until these local stirrings play themselves out. To seek anything more, they confidently assert, is to invite disappointment and disillusionment.

What these three views share in common, of course, notwithstanding their obvious differences, is the presumption that nationalism and Olympism stand in an antithetical relation to one another, that, in other words, the particularist aims and commitments of the former contravene the universalist aims and commitments of the latter. What is wrong with this view of nationalism and Olympism, Hargreaves opines, is that it treats both terms of this relation, not to mention the relation itself, in a taken-for-granted manner. And he is right as far as he goes. For boosters of Olympism, on the one hand, pretend that it can be rescued by simply abstracting its unique brand of internationalism from the prevailing social and political context, taking for granted in the process that it suffers no distortion when it is decontextualized in this way (the notion, for example, that Olympism has nothing whatever to do with political engagement when, in fact, it has everything to do with such engagement). Leftist foes and realist observers of Olympism, on the other hand, pretend that it can be discredited or effectively nullified by reducing it to this same

* William J. Morgan is Professor of Sport Studies, University of Tennessee-Knoxville, Knoxville, Tennessee, U.S.A.

context, taking for granted in the process not only that its ideal of intercultural exchange has no force when so contextualized but additionally that its moral meaning and force is plainly transparent, not to mention plainly offensive, when so contextualized (the notion, for example, that Olympism is merely an ideological tool of hegemonic Western nations).

Hargreaves thinks he has a remedy for this taken-for-granted, unsatisfactory rendering of Olympism and nationalism, to be exact, a two step remedy. First, he urges, unsurprisingly, that Olympism and nationalism be treated in a more rigorous fashion, which, he astutely notes, requires that they be regarded as autonomous cultural forms rather than crass ideological devices of repression. Second, he argues, at least implicitly, that such a rigorous treatment demands a turn away from normative theory, which deals with values from the standpoint of the ideal world, to theoretical-empirical inquiry, which deals with causal relations from the standpoint of the ideal world, to theoretical-empirical inquiry, which deals with causal relations from the standpoint of the real world that purport to “explain why circumstances are as they are.”² Hargreaves’ first idea has merit, and my reason for thinking so is precisely why I think his second idea, that we delete the normative out of our more rigorous conceptions of nationalism and Olympism, is a manifestly bad idea. Let me explain.

Another way, perhaps even a better way, of explaining the problem with the taken-for-granted manner of the standard views of the relation between nationalism and Olympism has to do with their inarticulacy. I mean two things by this. First, that their presumption that this is, and must necessarily be, a hostile relation flies in the face of, and is radically disconnected from the articulation of the Olympic ideal of internationalism as propounded, among others, by Coubertin himself. The second thing I mean is that such views of the Olympism-Nationalism relation either misconstrue or fail to realize that the substance of this relation and the ideal that under-pins it is itself a normative one, that is, a morally angled and reasoned appeal to treat sport as a form of moral pedagogy and political engagement, the purpose of which is to better acquaint the diverse peoples and cultures of the world with one another so that they might develop a healthier mutual respect. Thus understood, it is not hard to see why Hargreaves’ solution that we drop the normative out of Olympism (and by implication nationalism) in order to correct the standard views of this notion is not a solution at all since it increases rather than diminishes the inarticulacy of these standard views.

I should make it clear that in rejecting the theoretical-empirical turn that Hargreaves recommends we take here, I am not denying that there are important causal influences that shape ideals like Olympism and nationalism, and that need, therefore, to be accounted for as we take stock of this relation. The fact, for example, that no African nation to date has hosted an Olympic games is a significant one, and its explanation can be readily rendered in the causal logic of the market; these nations, we are told, simply lack the necessary financial resources.³ But my point is not that such facts or explanations are unimportant, that they play no role in our understanding of Olympism and its complicated relation to nationalism, but rather that they miss the point and thereby skew our understanding of both terms of this relation. That is because, as Charles Taylor aptly puts it, “the normal fashion of

social science explanation” is to give short shrift to moral ideals in favor of harder, so-called real-world factors (like the economic reality just cited) in accounting for major cultural events and transformations.⁴ And in giving short shrift to the moral dimensions of these events, it glosses over the qualitatively different sense in which they shape and give meaning to our lives. That explains why the fact that no African nation has yet hosted an Olympic games looks more worrisome, and possibly even menacing, when viewed from a moral angle rather than an economic one, when we consider, that is, that the games belong, or are supposed to belong, as much to the African continent as the European or North American.⁵ This moral discomfiture speaks to the normative side of Olympism, a side that belies expression in the causal (non-moral) language of the market. And it is this latter inarticulacy, indeed inexplicability, that proves to be the undoing of Hargreaves’ theoretical-empirical prescription to correct the standard views of the Olympism-nationalism relation, because it further obscures the fact that getting the relation between them right is inescapably a normative rather than an empirical matter.

But it is just as clear that not just any normative account will do here. For what is required to get this relation right is not a kind of moral cheerleading, an uncritical promotion of Olympic ideals poorly understood and framed, nor morally grounded root-and-branch condemnations that more often than not attack debased forms of the ideals in question, nor, finally, a moral calculation of the good and bad consequences of dimly held ideals. Rather, what is required is what Taylor refers to as a work of critical retrieval, submitting the ideals of Olympism and nationalism to the scalpel of critical reflection. And the point of this retrieval, this attempt at critical articulation, he explains, is not just to correct “what may be wrong views but also [to make] the force of an ideal that people are already living by more palpable, more vivid for them; and by making it more vivid, empowering them to live up to it in a fuller and more integral fashion.”⁶

In the present case of the Olympism-nationalism relation, that means pursuing two related lines of argument, both of which derive from Coubertin’s writings but also depart from them in significant ways.⁷ The fast line of argument implicates Coubertin’s important distinction between cosmopolitanism, which he broke down into two different varieties, and what he called a “sincere” internationalism. Coubertin tried to steer Olympism away from the first and toward the second, arguing that bringing the relation between Olympism and nationalism into proper perspective demands that we not confuse the former with cosmopolitanism. I think he was right to do so and I try to strengthen his argument by showing that the notion of cosmopolitanism, in both of its varieties, is a bankrupt one because it reduces either to a manifest absurdity or a crude ethnocentrism. The second line of argument builds from Coubertin’s thesis that a “sincere” internationalism is premised on a no less “sincere” nationalism, indeed that internationalism enjoins not the expulsion of nationalist sentiments and expressions but rather their encapsulation. I attempt to flesh out Coubertin’s conception of “sincere” internationalism by offering a provisional, and admittedly sketchy (a complete answer, after all, would require a paper in its own right), answer to the question what the relation between Olympism and nationalism might look like when it is no longer seen from the skewed perspective of cosmopolitanism.

Nomadic Cosmopolitanism

The first cosmopolitan variant of insincere internationalism that Coubertin targeted was a favorite of the European leisured aristocracy, and increasingly the favorite of men (and presumably at least some women) of letters, artists, and scientists of his time (and, I conjecture, a favorite of the privileged jet-setters and not-so-privileged middle class travelling buffs of our time).⁸ All of these types, Coubertin is persuaded, have given themselves over to the travelling urge, have become, in effect, modern-day nomads wandering all over the globe in search of adventure and pleasure. But Coubertin actually has two sorts of nomadic cosmopolitans in mind here. The first sort makes sure that their provincial habits and tastes are not upset by their gallivanting in foreign lands by setting up what amount to enclaves (hotels, restaurants, places of amusement) in those lands that cater to, indeed replicate down to the smallest details, familiar habits and tastes. This provides, Coubertin sarcastically remarks, the comfortable illusion of having visited a distant country without having left one's own country. The second sort insulates their native beliefs and values from those of the cultures visited by sampling only the daily details and conventions of those cultures. Although this sort of cosmopolitan wanderer learns more about the countries visited than the first sort (discovering, for example, where the locals gather to quench their thirsts and sate their appetites for food and entertainment), what is learned is hardly revelatory of the core beliefs and values of these cultures. After all, Coubertin sardonically asks, "what connection can possibly exist between the fact that Americans drink iced water and eat fried oysters and their methods of government and education?"⁹

But it is what these two sorts of cosmopolitan travellers share in common that catches Coubertin's critical eye. And perhaps the most important thing they share in common is the predilection to stay on the surface of the cultures they come into contact with, this contentment to gaze at and mingle with others but not to study or engage them in any substantive way. It is this evident indisposition to do anything more demanding or telling, to do little more than accumulate a storehouse of pleasant memories of places visited, that calls to mind Baudelaire's *flâneur*, whose "spectator's" pose captures well the manner of these restless cosmopolitans.¹⁰ But in calling Baudelaire's *flâneur* to mind I mean not just to round out Coubertin's unflattering portrait of these particular cosmopolitan types, but to set up his decisive rebuff of them -- which, I think, needs no updating nor strengthening because it is completely persuasive as it stands. For what he finds repellent about them and the brands of cosmopolitanism they trade in is precisely what links them to the ideal and strolling manner of the *flâneur*: their unwillingness, nay apparent incapacity, to do anything more than skim the surface of the cultures they come in contact with, an unwillingness and/or incapacity that gives rise, Coubertin avers, to "all kinds of dangerous misunderstandings and illusions."¹¹ In the first case, those misunderstandings and illusions are owed to the cosmopolitans' almost complete ignorance of what is going on outside their well-sealed enclaves; in the second, they are owed to the cosmopolitan's failure to break the crust of the everyday conventions that enshroud the cultural life of the peoples they observe. In neither case, Coubertin

sharply retorts, is anything of real worth learned about these cultures nor is any ground established for a friendly and significant relation with them.

These are the main reasons, then, why Coubertin thinks both variants of this version of nomadic cosmopolitanism fall woefully short as examples of “sincere” internationalism, and why, therefore, their half-hearted forays into other lands subvert the delicate interplay between nationalist sentiments and aims and internationalist ones that are the mark of a true, and “sincere” internationalism.

Enlightenment Cosmopolitanism

But we have yet to contend with Coubertin’s second version of cosmopolitanism, which further complicates the effort to explicate the relation between Olympism and nationalism. In his *Notes sur L’Education*, Coubertin remarked that a second way, and an even more widespread and influential way, to think of internationalism is as a “gigantic egalitarianism” in which the “civilized world” is conceived as “a state without borders and barriers.”¹² This longing for an open-ended, boundless world, a world unmarked by national and other cultural differences, he remarked further, was a favored world among socialist, revolutionary, religious, theoretical, and utopian types. It was a favorite among such types because this brand of Enlightenment cosmopolitanism is best suited to “people who have no country,”¹³ and all of the types mentioned above can be effectively categorized as “countryless” since they only feel at home in larger, cosmopolitan settings, and, therefore, always feel hemmed in and estranged in smaller, parochial ones. More strongly, they regard all particular settings as insufferable and scandalous limitations, as obstacles to be overcome not to be borne -- and never to be borne cheerfully, that is, without valiant struggle and resistance.

I want to spend more time unfolding this second notion of cosmopolitanism because Coubertin did not give it the attention it deserves, especially in light of its wide currency in certain international circles and its prominence as well in the epistemological and moral traditions of the West. I also want to spend more time criticizing it because Coubertin’s dismissal of it as a naive and childish wish for an unrealizable *fraternité*, as a form of utopianism gone bad, is right as far as it goes, but it does not go nearly far enough.

The ideal that underpins Enlightenment cosmopolitanism is simple enough to come to terms with even if its actual realization proves elusive at best. That ideal is “objectivity,” and what it asserts is that peoples and cultures, to include, of course, one’s own, can be seen in their true light and given their just due only if they are seen in an undistorted way. Since on this view the source of all error and distortion comes from local, situated perspectives, which is one prominent reason why these cosmopolitans regard particular perspectives not just as limited ones but as scandalously limited ones, it follows that true and just accounts of peoples and cultures must necessarily be universal, unsituated ones. By a single deft stroke, then, particularity is made out to be a synonym for distortion and errancy, and universality to be a synonym for truth and justice. All that remains to complete this impeachment of cultural particularism is the simple step of linking universality to objectivity.

But this identification of cosmopolitanism with objectivity needs some qualification since there are a range of objective standpoints that one might take up in looking at the world and evaluating the peoples that make it up. Generally speaking, when one view or standpoint is more objective than another the further removed it is from the particular views and defining traditions of the people that occupy that culture. Seen in this light, it is clear that the objectivity that Enlightenment cosmopolitans seek is a radically detached one, that is, one that is purged of all particular points of view, whether they be the views of one's peers, or neighbors, or simple strangers. We can be sure we have a firm and clear grasp of ourselves and others on this radical reading of objectivity, therefore, only when we have succeeded in nullifying all local points of view and horizons of significance, when, in Dworkin's forceful words, we have successfully resisted all "the impulses that drag us back into our own [and other] culture[s]."14

So when cosmopolitans of this objective stripe speak of truth and justice, what they mean is that which reveals itself as true and right when considered from a universal, God's-eye standpoint. Nagel has cogently described this standpoint as the point of view from nowhere. To view the world in this way, he argues, is not to view it "from a place within it, or from the vantage point of a special kind of life or awareness, but from nowhere in particular and no form of life in particular at all. The object is to discount for the features of our pre-reflective outlook that make things appear as they do, and thereby to reach an understanding of things as they really are."¹⁵ Phrased in Nagel's language, then, what such cosmopolitans are telling us is that true knowledge of ourselves and others can only be had when we manage to view the world from nowhere in particular. And what they are further telling us is that this radically decontextualized view of the world will be recognizable to, and binding on, all "rational" persons who view it from the same objective standpoint.

This last feature of Enlightenment cosmopolitanism, the sameness of its vision and of its obligatory force, suggests yet another important feature of its objective outlook. And that is its monological character. For the objective knowledge of human beings that such cosmopolitans seek is a knowledge of what they are like when stripped of all cultural attachments, when they no longer appear to us as Canadians, or Italians, or Indonesians, but simply as human beings. Indeed, the whole point of viewing human agents from nowhere in particular is to put us in touch with their core humanity, with their core selves -- which turn up everywhere to be the same precisely because they are not subject to the deformations of history and culture. So Mauss is entirely in the right for characterizing (and castigating) this cosmopolitan ideal as a "theory of the monadic human being who is everywhere identical."¹⁶ He is entirely in the right because this cosmopolitan ideal tells us that who we are has nothing essential to do with our particular cultural identity, and so, too, with our intracultural and intercultural dealings with others that partly constitute that identity. He is entirely in the right further because this ideal makes out internationalism to be a matter of locating sameness rather than encapsulating difference, of decontextualizing beliefs and values rather than contextualizing them in ever richer ways.

When cosmopolitans of this universal bent accuse the rest of us, then, of being too narrow or too parochial for our own good, they are claiming that we have closed our ears to a universal voice that speaks to all of us because it emanates from a

rational source deep within us (that is, a source beneath our socialization), and one that, as Rorty puts it, issues “commands which none of us can claim ignorance.”¹⁷ The surest proof we have that this is a monological notion through and through is that in telling us to listen to our own inner core selves it is telling us in no uncertain terms to turn a deaf ear to the voices of our cultural peers and rivals, voices, it hardly needs to be said, that often tell us things that we do not want to hear.

What are we to make of this second rendition of cosmopolitanism? Not very much, I am afraid. As I said, Coubertin’s rebuff of it as a naive and wistful utopianism is not wrong, just incomplete. What needs to be shown further is that it is a futile, and, ultimately, unintelligible notion.

It is a futile notion for the simple reason that no one as yet has been able to spin out a completely detached account of themselves nor, for that matter, of anybody else who has ever lived on the planet. That is because, as Gadamer tells us, we are always “more being than consciousness,” which means that every time we succeed in reflectively putting into question some feature(s) of ourselves or of others, we ineluctably take some other feature(s) of ourselves or others for granted. So we are unable to get a critical view of the world in which we and others live without drawing on some other feature of that world as a backdrop. If this is the case, if indeed there is no way to break out of this hermeneutic circle, then we have good reason to reject the idea of a privileged point of view from nowhere because there are no good grounds for believing that such a vantage point even exists. To put the point in MacIntyrean terms, the best reason for holding that there is no such cosmopolitan perspective, and so that efforts to achieve it are futile at best, is of the same type as the best reason we have for holding that there are no witches or that there are no unicorns: every attempt to give good reasons for believing there are such things has failed.¹⁸

But, as I have suggested, it cuts deeper than this. For Enlightenment cosmopolitanism also proves to be an unworkable ideal because it is at bottom an unintelligible ideal. It proves to be such because in its quest to garner objective knowledge of what human beings are like when uprooted from their cultural contexts it succeeds only in making human beings and their various practices inscrutable; that is because the abstract notion of humanity that cosmopolitans strive for, always unsuccessfully if I am right, is too threadbare to be of any help in disclosing who we are, not to mention who others are. As Walzer duly reminds us, “Humanity,” [in contrast to societies and cultures] has “no memory, and so it has no history and no culture, no customary practices no familiar life-ways, no festivals, no shared understandings of social goods.”¹⁹ When we try to view human agents, then, from a place outside of their culture and history, all we manage to do is link them to an abstract, amorphous community (one co-extensive with the human species itself), a community so non-descript that it provides no telling clues as to who these individuals are, let alone what conditions give their lives meaning and their actions intelligibility.

Enlightenment cosmopolitanism is unintelligible, therefore, because in trying to screen out from our view of the world everything but what reveals itself to us from a point outside of it, it “dissolves the field of human action into meaningless motion.”²⁰ Searle provides a powerful illustration of this using the example of American football. Imagine, he asks, how such a game might appear to an uninformed cultural

outsider -- from what we know of the cosmopolitan outlook in question here, of course, he could have just as easily asked how it appears to an unreconstructed cosmopolitan.²¹ To such a detached observer, Searle reasons, football appears to instantiate the "law of periodical clustering," in which "at statistically regular intervals organisms in like-coloured shirts cluster together in a roughly circular fashion (the huddle). Furthermore, at equally regular intervals, circular clustering is followed by linear clustering (the teams line up for the play), and linear clustering is followed by ... linear interpenetration." Now while everything Searle's detached (cosmopolitan) observer says about football is true enough, for it is indeed a game that calls for various kinds of circular and linear "clustering" reenacted in some sort of patterned sequence, nothing his observer says is perspicuous. What I mean by this is that nothing the cultural outsider says about football comes anywhere close to capturing the point or the ethos of the game, nor, of course, the sense and meaning of the people playing it and those knowledgeable fans watching it. The reason why the description lacks perspicuity, is unintelligible, is the very same reason why the cosmopolitan outlook lacks perspicuity, is unintelligible, it eliminates from our view those very things (beliefs, values, rules, conventions) that we need to make sense of ourselves and others.

Hence, the moral of this story is that Enlightenment cosmopolitanism is a deeply flawed notion of internationalism, one that deserves our reproach rather than our approbation. And the importance of making this reproach is that in giving lie to the notion that international solidarity is an introspective matter of getting in touch with our core selves, and so our core (shared) humanity, which, of course, makes nationalism out to be the arch enemy of Olympism, it eliminates one obstacle in the way of articulating, in a clearer and more forceful normative manner, the integral relation between nationalism and Olympism.

Cosmopolitanism and Ethnocentrism

But a critic might rejoin at this point that in exposing the cosmopolitan ideal to be the paradoxical notion that it is, what we have accomplished is not the rapprochement of Olympism and nationalism we promised but a spurious reconciliation of the two -- what amounts, in effect, to a reduction of the former to the latter. The critic might reason so because in arguing as forcefully as we have, that there is no breaking out of the hermeneutic circle, we have managed not only to discredit the cosmopolitan point of view from nowhere as a meaningless fiction but the very idea of "sincere" internationalism as well -- to include, of course, Olympism. That is because if there is, in fact, no escaping our socialization (the beliefs, values, and traditions of our home culture), then it is just as foolhardy for internationalists to go around urging the peoples of the world to have more to do with one another in order to broaden their outlook as it is for cosmopolitans to go around exhorting these same peoples to emulate the gods, to try to see as far and as wide as they do, in order to enlarge their perspective.

The message our hypothetical critic leaves us with, then, is the sobering one that we are all imprisoned by our ethnocentrism, that our socialization irrevocably determines the limits of our self-(and other-)understanding, and, therefore, who we

are and who we might yet hope and aspire to become. What is especially damning about this message to enthusiasts of international movements like Olympism is that it means that these movements are not bona fide international movements after all, that standing behind their lofty and far-flung programs and agendas are the local and narrow programs and agendas of select nations. So any talk of internationalism here is just that, mere talk, or to be more exact, mere nationalist talk trying to pass itself off as something larger and grander in order to legitimate its sectarian ambitions.

This criticism is forceful if for no other reason than the ideals and aims that inform and enliven international movements like Olympism are intelligible to a great many people. This contrasts with Searle's detached observer's view of sport and the larger world where ideals and aims of international movements are just about unintelligible and meaningless to everybody. What we are intended to make of this contrast, evidently, is two things: first, that Olympism, unlike universal cosmopolitanism, gives voice to beliefs and values that emanate from somewhere rather than nowhere within this world; and second that, as our ethnocentric outlook entails, that somewhere is somewhere within the folds of our own culture. This would appear to confirm our critic's central contention that nationalism is the real driving force of Olympism, as it must be for every internationally ordered movement and program.²² Moreover, it would confirm the further fact that disguising nationalist interests and aims as international ones is a favorite ploy of empire-builders (cultural imperialists), and one heavily and readily used by rich Western nations to widen their sphere of influence.²³

But while this objection has force it is not, finally, persuasive. It is not persuasive because it rests on a skewed interpretation of what constraints and burdens our ethnocentrism places upon us, and so misconstrues what follows when we dispose of the comforting, but false, notion that we can simply shed those constraints and burdens by taking refuge in a privileged point of view from nowhere. For what is entailed by the fact that we must always view and interpret the world and the peoples that make it up from somewhere rather than nowhere is not that we are forever locked within these vantage points, and so forever estranged from those who occupy other vantage points, but rather that we are forever consigned to speak in particular tongues rather than in a universal one -- that Esperanto is just not an option, or at very least not an intelligible option, for any of us. But that we must speak in particular tongues does not mean that we are permanently fated to speak in the same tongues, that we are incapable of learning new ones, and so of speaking in more nuanced and capacious ways. So while ethnocentrism makes for a certain incommensurability between and among cultures and their expressive languages (broadly conceived), it does not make for an obdurate incomprehensibility -- rendering all other languages, save our own, unlearnable. This suggests that the lesson to be drawn from our ethnocentric circumstance is not to make a fetish out of incommensurability, as our hypothetical critic was wont to do, but to recognize that incommensurability need not be an insuperable obstacle to getting to know others if we genuinely make the effort to know them rather than consigning them to an unknowable alterity, if, that is, we try to pick up their languages rather than stubbornly insisting that they learn ours or that their languages be first translated into ours. In short, what we require here, to stay with the language metaphor for a moment longer, are not translation manuals but

comparative guides that enable each of us to interpret the other in a non-distortive way.

That our ethnocentrism need not be a barrier to understanding others, and so to broadening the purview of our home cultures, brings us much closer, I believe, to what Coubertin envisaged a true or sincere internationalism to be, and, therefore, to what he envisaged a proper relation between Olympism and nationalism to be. For the mark of a sincere internationalism is that it is premised on nationalism without being reducible to it. It is premised on nationalism in the sense that there is nothing beyond nations, and the various kinds of cultural communities that make them up, which could serve as a placeholder for internationalism. At the same time, it is not reducible to nationalism in the sense that it is an admixture of different nations and their characteristic forms of life, an admixture which by blending these different strands of national life together creates an international, cross-cultural language that is, strictly speaking, neither ours nor theirs. So while there is no way to get beyond ethnocentrism as such, there is a way of getting beyond some of its more myopic and distorting forms, the kinds that always yield deflationary, depreciatory stories of others and inflationary, self-congratulatory stories of ourselves. This is, I believe, what Charles Taylor meant when he argued that the way to understand others in non-distortive ways is to “fuse” horizons of meaning, not to escape them.²⁴ And if I have interpreted Coubertin’s notion of “sincere” internationalism correctly, this is precisely what he had in mind in calling the nations of the world together to compete in international games so that they might learn more about one another and in the process develop a greater respect for one another.

Conclusion

To sum up then, I think that what nineteenth-century liberals like Coubertin intended by placing real live people and their corresponding nations in international settings, be they devoted to athletic, or political, or other social endeavours, is very much the same sort of thing that modern-day liberals like Richard Rorty intended by placing familiar books that describe all too familiar peoples in with unfamiliar ones that described (from our familiar vantage point at any rate) strange and quirky peoples: namely, to soften, but, per impossible, not nullify, their ethnocentrism by enlarging their range of acquaintance.²⁵ If this is a correct reading of Coubertin’s coupling of Olympism and nationalism, then Olympism turns out to be just another name, a genuine international name, for enlarging the acquaintance of nations, for stretching, without, of course, breaking, their respective hermeneutic circles so that they might intersect in novel and interesting ways. This is, I believe, what Coubertin further meant when he wrote that “nationalism is by no means detrimental. However, it would quite easily develop in that direction unless corrected by a sincere internationalism.”²⁶ What needs correcting here, as I interpret Coubertin, is not the built-in ethnocentrism of nations, their investment in particular forms of life and batches of beliefs, but their refusal to do and be more than this, to acknowledge the ethnocentrism of others, and so the different, and often conflicting, forms of life and batches of beliefs that they bring to the table. And the best, if not only, way to get nations to see themselves in these larger and richer terms, Coubertin seems to be

saying, is to get them to stop seeing others merely as the “transgressors” of their limits, or to put the same point differently, to get them to see that their cherished beliefs and ways of life are only one among many other such beliefs and ways of life.²⁷ Hence the point of luring them into international arenas.

This, I believe, is the central moral message to glean from Coubertin’s linkage of Olympism and nationalism. And it is this moral message, this exhortation to enlarge our range of acquaintance by meshing, as best we can, different national perspectives and visions, I conclude, that should form the point of departure for our renewed efforts to articulate the ideal of Olympism in ever more powerful ways. Not just to rescue it from those friends and foes alike who continue to insist on seeing nationalism as the undoing of Olympism, nor to those equally misguided parties who insist on seeing Olympism reductively as just another clever, and ideologically suspect, name for nationalism, but, more importantly, to bring its message to bear on a larger world that seems hell-bent on its own self-destruction. The brutalization of communities and nations by other communities and nations that presently defines and demeans that larger world -- the Balkan and Baltic nations come quickly to mind here, but so do, sadly, Northern Ireland, Spain, the Ivory Coast, and (stateless) Kurdistan, not to mention the aboriginal communities of North America and Australia, in which a narrow and ruthless tribalization is allowed to pass unchallenged under the guise of communitarianism and nationalism, and in which any sense of international (cross-cultural) decorum has all but disappeared, is badly in need of the sort of moral example that Olympism, at its best, and rightly articulated, can offer. This is a cause and struggle well worth joining, and all I have tried to do in this essay is to show how proponents of Olympism might begin to take it up once the intimate connection of Olympism to nationalist aims and interests has been laid bare.

Notes

1. John Hargreaves, “Olympism and Nationalism: Some Preliminary Considerations,” *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 27, 1992, pp. 119-34.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 120.

3. That does not mean, of course, that economic conditions in these countries will always be unfavorable to their hosting of an Olympic Games. Indeed, as I was finishing the penultimate draft of this manuscript, I was told by someone who had recently visited South Africa that Capetown had forwarded, or was soon about to do so, a bid to host the 2004 Games. If this report proves true, then my rendering of this causal relation needs updating. But that my rendering might require updating does not undercut the larger point I am trying to make here; which is that causal accounts cannot accommodate moral ones, and so, cannot accommodate, not without distortion, that is, the moral force of international ideals like Olympism.

4. Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1992, p. 19.

5. As is often the case, however, the moral claims of Olympism must reckon with other, competing moral claims. The principal one the IOC must reckon with in this case is whether abjectly poor nations should divert any of their meagre resources

away from the basic and massive needs of its members in order to stage an international athletic festival.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 22.

7. While it makes sense to start with Coubertin's own conception of Olympism in trying to explicate its complex and often vexing relation to nationalism, Coubertin is not, after all, an incidental figure here, it is risky business indeed to simply stand pat with his conception. For, as has often been noted, Coubertin frequently proved to be neither an articulate expositor nor a consistent defender of Olympic ideals.

8. Pierre de Coubertin, "Does Cosmopolitan Life Lead to International Friendliness?," *The American Monthly Review of Reviews*, 4, 1898, p. 431.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 431.

10. On this point see Michel Foucault's important essay "What is Enlightenment?," in *The Foucault Reader* (P. Rainbow ed.), New York: Pantheon Books, 1984, pp. 32-50.

11. Pierre de Coubertin, *Memories Olympiques*, p. 108, as quoted in John Hoberman, *The Olympic Crisis: Sport, Politics and the Moral Order*, New Rochelle, New York: Aristide D. Caratzas, 1986, p. 51.

12. As quoted in Dietrich Quanz, "Civic Pacifism and Sports-Based Internationalism: Framework for the Founding of the International Olympic Committee," *Olympika: The International Journal of Olympic Studies*, Vol. II, 1993, p. 18.

13. Pierre de Coubertin, "Does Cosmopolitan Life Lead to International Friendliness?" p. 434.

14. Ronald Dworkin, "To Each His Own," *New York Review of Books*, April 14, 1993, p. 6.

15. Thomas Nagel, *Mortal Questions*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979, p. 208.

16. As quoted in John Hoberman, "Toward a Theory of Olympic Internationalism," *Journal of Sport History*, Vol. 22, 1995, p. 8.

17. Richard Rorty, "Untruth and Consequences," *The New Republic*, Vol. 216, 1995, p. 32.

18. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984, p. 69.

19. Michael Walzer, *Thick and Thin: Moral Argument at Home and Abroad*, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994, p. 8.

20. Charles Taylor, "Comparison, History, Truth," in *Myth and Philosophy* (F. Reynolds, D. Tracy, eds.), 1990, p. 40.

21. John Searle, *Speech Acts*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969, p. 52. We need not be concerned here that Searle's example is offered not from a point of view from nowhere but from a point of view from somewhere -- albeit somewhere outside of our own culture. We need not be so concerned because, as has already been argued, no one has ever occupied such an exalted vantage point because no such vantage point exists. That said, Searle's example is useful because it demonstrates

that even culturally-detached descriptions of football prove to be self-defeating ones; and showing that is more than enough, I contend, to undercut the cosmopolitan ideal.

22. To cite an example outside of the Olympic Games and international sports, Hoberman noted the case of “Wagnerian” internationalism, which, he argued, was not an international movement at all but a thinly veiled ethnocentric one rooted in “ideas of national grandeur.” See his, “Toward a Theory of Olympic Internationalism,” p. 8.

23. We meet up here again with the New Left critique of Olympism. But I should note that even sympathetic critics of Olympism worry that its Western roots compromise its international goals. Thus, Guttman argued “that modern sports, like the universalistic political ideals institutionalized in the Olympic Games, are themselves a product of Western civilization. Paradoxically, the success of the Baron’s dream is one of the things that prevents the dream’s full and complete realization.” See Allen Guttman, *The Olympics: A History of the Modern Games*, Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1992, p. 172.

24. Charles Taylor, “Comparison, History, Truth,” p. 42.

25. See Richard Rorty, *Contingency Irony, and Solidarity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989, p. 80.

26. As quoted in Quanz, “Civic Pacifism and Sports-Based Internationalism,” p. 18.

27. Taylor explores some of these notions in depth in his “Comparison, History, Truth” essay.