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OLYMPISM AND SPORT’S INTRINSIC VALUE

Graham McFee

An account of the intrinsic value of sport from previous work (McFee 2004; 2009) is sketched, presenting it as a ‘moral laboratory’, as well as a scholarly attribution of such an account to Pierre de Coubertin, in explanation of his view of the moral educative potential of the Olympic Games (McFee 2011a). Then aspects of that account of intrinsic value are elaborated, and its educative possibility is defended, along with the possibility of its generalising beyond the sports field or stadium: these are fundamental to its ascription to Olympism. Yet, for de Coubertin, the impact of the Olympic Games was understood primarily in terms of its participants: the modern-day Olympics, by contrast, have an immense impact through the size of their television audience. But how is that impact theorised? The paper urges that, despite key differences, some of the same resources for the ‘moral laboratory’ can be deployed by audience members, understood in terms of the narratives they construct to explain the sporting behaviour they observe. Although not strictly a consequence of the Olympic context, that context makes it more likely that – from the audience’s perspective – the actions of sports players are explicable from a morally aware viewpoint. As such, Olympism has an additional possibility of delivering a kind of moral education; although the fact that there are only observers here (not agents), and hence that there is no responsibility for actions performed, means that this possibility is relatively weak. Some features of a research agenda here are introduced; and its Wittgensteinian pedigree defended.

Resumen

Se bosqueja una explicación del valor intrínseco del deporte a partir de publicaciones anteriores (McFee 2004; 2009), presentándolo como un «laboratorio moral» así como una atribución académica de tal explicación a Pierre de Coubertin, a modo de aclaración de su entendimiento del potencial educativo moral de los juegos olímpicos (McFee 2011). Depués se elaboran ciertos aspectos de tal versión del valor intrínseco, y se defiende su potencial a la hora de educar a la par de la posibilidad de que pueda ser generalizada más allá del campo de juego o el estadio: esto son fundamentales para su adscripción al olimpismo. Mas, para Coubertin, el impacto de los juegos olímpicos fue entendido primordialmente en términos de su participante: las olimpiadas de hoy día, por otro lado, tienen un impacto inmenso a causa del tamaño de la audiencia televisiva. Pero, ¿cómo se teoriza tal impacto? El artículo urge que, a pesar de diferencias clave, algunos de los mismos recursos del «laboratorio moral» pueden ser desplegados por los miembros de la audiencia, entendidos en términos de las narraciones que construyen para explicar el comportamiento deportivo que observan. Aunque estrictamente no es una consecuencia del contexto olímpico, el contexto hace más probable que—desde la perspectiva de la audiencia—las acciones de los jugadores se puedan explicar desde un punto de vista moral consciente. Como tal, el olímpismo tiene la posibilidad adicional de propiciar cierta clase de educación moral; aunque el hecho de que aquí haya solo observadores (no agentes), y por consecuente que no haya
responsabilidad en cuanto a las acciones cometidas, significa que esta posibilidad es relativamente débil. Se introducen algunos aspectos de la agenda de investigación; y se defiende su pedigrí Wittgensteiniano.

Zusammenfassung


Résumé

Un rapport sur la valeur intrinsèque du sport est esquisse à partir de travaux antérieurs (McFee 2004; 2009), présentant celui-ci comme un «laboratoire de morale» ainsi qu’une attribution académique d’un tel rapport à Pierre de Coubertin, dans l’explication de son point de vue sur le potentiel d’éducation morale des Jeux Olympiques (McFee 2011). Ensuite, les aspects de ce rapport sur la valeur intrinsèque sont élaborés, et son potentiel éducatif est défendu, avec la possibilité de sa généralisation au-delà du terrain de sport ou du stade: ceux-ci sont fondamentaux pour son attribution à l’Olympisme. Pourtant, pour de Coubertin, l’impact des Jeux Olympiques a été compris d’abord en termes de participation: les Jeux Olympiques des temps modernes, en revanche, ont un immense impact par le biais de la taille de leur audience télévisuelle. Mais comment cet impact est-il théorisé? L’article demande instamment que, malgré les différences clés, quelques-unes des ressources pour le «laboratoire de morale» puissent être déployées par les membres du public, comprises en termes des récits qu’ils construisent pour expliquer les comportements sportifs qu’ils observent. Bien que n’étant pas strictement une conséquence du contexte olympique, il est plus probable que - du point de vue du public - les actions des sportifs sont explicables du point de vue de la conscience morale. En tant que tel, l’Olympisme dispose d’une possibilité supplémentaire de fournir une sorte d’éducation morale ; bien que le fait qu’il y ait seulement des observateurs ici (et non des agents), et donc qu’il n’y ait pas de responsabilité pour les actions accomplies, signifie que cette possibilité est relativement faible. Certaines fonctionnalités d’un programme de recherche sont introduites ici, et ses bases wittgensteiniennes défendues.
1. Introduction

I have always regarded the assumption of sport’s intrinsic value that pervades the Olympic movement as a suitable starting-point for discussions of the value of sport. For the fact of that value seemed thereby conceded to the extent that one grants that de Coubertin rightly located an educational imperative at the heart of Olympism. Then that question becomes one concerning the nature of the value of sport. But was the value of sport assumed by Olympism really intrinsic value? Elsewhere I have argued that, for Pierre de Coubertin, the value of the Olympic Games indeed depends on the intrinsic value of sport; and that this is the right view to adopt, both of Olympism and of De Coubertin.\(^1\) I have urged the correctness of this picture both through explicit contrast with the extrinsic values that many states\(^2\) claim from hosting of the Olympic Games and by investigation of de Coubertin’s writing (to illustrate his commitment to this conception of sport’s value, as it applies in Olympism). This scholarship is fundamental to seeing in the right light de Coubertin’s Olympism.

I will sketch again the scholarly basis for that argument, as well as rehearsing again considerations (McFee 2009) concerning the value of sport. The outcome sheds light both generally on the project of Olympism, and specifically on the extent to which that project draws on sport’s intrinsic value. I shall also comment both on the application of those ideas to the audience for Olympic sport, and on the implications of the whole argument for the identification – perhaps even the definition – of sport.

2. Olympism, de Coubertin and Sport’s Intrinsic Value

I shall first sketch again my argument in the consideration of de Coubertin. Initially, intrinsic value should be roughly identified by contrasting it with the extrinsic value of, say,
the soap opera: no doubt soap operas give people a lot of pleasure and enjoyment; and, relatedly, they can offer a ‘sophisticated and sensitive cultural lens’ (Beckles 1995, 1) onto social relations – either in the large or the small of that cultural space. Similar extrinsic values could be claimed for sport; and rightly so. As this case shows, these are not values that depend on the topic being sport or soap operas at all, since exactly the same claims might be made for each of them. Hence those values are not intrinsic. And governments have regularly defended hosting Olympic Games by reference to such extrinsic values. Certainly, sport plays no explicit role in the sorts of infrastructural values regularly cited as benefits of hosting the Olympic Games, such as ‘it will give the local population a better train service’, ‘it will help with urban regeneration’ or ‘... help with social inclusion’, according to their preferences and priorities.

Next, consider one of de Coubertin’s remarks about what was to become Olympism’s project. There, he wrote of his plan to ‘burnish a flabby and cramped youth ... by sport, its risks and even its excesses. I shall enlarge its vision and its hearing by showing it wide horizons ... which, in engendering mutual respect, will bring about a ferment of international peace’ [my emphasis]. In de Coubertin’s plan to ‘burnish ... by sport’, there is some special reason for the choice of sport here, rather than something else: after all, the ‘risks and excesses’ referred to above are clearly those of sport. Thus, for instance, a 16-day international music festival commanding the same sort of attention from its audience and from the media (and from commercial sponsors, were this relevant) would not do just as well. For de Coubertin, then, the topic must be sport.

Moreover, de Coubertin’s use of the term ‘excesses’ is important here: he recognised that the related commitments (within sport) to winning and to improvement could generate a certain single-mindedness – that one’s focus would be primarily on winning and striving to win. While noting the ‘imbalance’ that might arise from this commitment, and its contrast with the altruism central to much moral action, de Coubertin thought such an emphasis justified through the nature of sport, which recognised a role for winning within its rule-following character. For ‘[s]ports are a school for daring, energy, and persevering will. By their very nature, they tend towards excess’ (O, 524). The point within sports, then, was ‘to cultivate effort for its own sake, to seek out obstacles, to place obstacles in ... [one’s] own path, and always to aim a little higher than the level ... [one] must achieve’ (O, 148). So sport is ‘based on the desire for progress, capable of going to the point of risk’ (O, 272). Therefore, a commitment to sport is a commitment to excess in this sense. Or, as de Coubertin puts it, ‘[s]port ... needs the freedom of excess’ (O, 556), such that an explanation of the term ‘sportingly’ should include mention of ‘a tendency to excess’ (O, 575). Elsewhere (O, 581), he is more explicit: ‘Athletes need “freedom of excess”. That is why their motto is citius, altius, fortius: higher, faster, stronger, the motto of anyone who dares to try to beat a record.’ For ‘in order to maintain the abilities he acquires, a man would not necessarily abstain from all excess’ (O, 168): rather, athletes of all kinds need ‘the love of excess combined with the love of moderation’ (O, 44; 217; 548).

The fundamental point, though, is to recognise that his position could not simply be re-drafted for, say, some other kind of event – even another kind of event for the young. To recognise the force (from de Coubertin’s perspective) of its being sport here requires that one seize on features of sport relevant to the explanation of Olympism’s value.
To reach this conclusion as a thesis about de Coubertin requires a rational reconstruction of some of his remarks. Such rational reconstruction allows us to put aside, as irrelevant to de Coubertin’s wider vision, some of those places where he writes simply as a typical person of the times: for example, his dated views of the role of women in sport. Thus, famously, de Coubertin called for ‘solemn and periodic exaltation of male athleticism ... with the applause of women as a reward’ (Review Olympique, 1912: O, 713). This nineteenth-century thinking should be dismissed as such. In this sense, our reconstruction aims to put the best gloss on de Coubertin’s remarks. Then scholarly treatment of some of de Coubertin’s comments, especially about amateurism, illustrates his commitment to the intrinsic value of sport for the Olympics. For there he regularly stressed the fundamental place of sport performed *for its own sake* – that is, for its intrinsic value. In commenting positively on ‘those who love sports for sports’ sake, for their educational value’ (1928: O, 588 – my emphasis), de Coubertin criticises those who emphasise only winning, and thereby aim ‘to make the Olympic Games into world championships’ (1925: O, 557). Instead, what should be stressed is sports players developing ‘enough moral strength in themselves to handle a deeply-felt defeat’ (1928: O, 562). And de Coubertin was equally critical of those ‘amateurs’ who competed just for cups or glory – they fail to fit this bill of ‘sport for its own sake’ as badly as any who competed just for money: these were ‘false amateurs’ (Review Olympique, 1913: O, 650).

The Olympic movement, virtually from its beginning in the Sorbonne Congress of 1894, hijacked de Coubertin’s value-specific formulation (done *for its own sake*) as an economic prescription, to mean ‘not done for money’. From the beginning, de Coubertin worried that ‘a mercantile spirit threatened to invade sporting circles. Men did not race or fight *openly* for money, but nevertheless a tendency to a regrettable compromise had crept in’ (The Modern Olympic Games, 1896: O, 309). But, for de Coubertin (1928: O, 184), this was associated with ‘unhealthy temptations’ to fix matches and the like. So the problem resided not in receiving money (say, to pay one’s mortgage or feed one’s family) but in participating for that reason only. Instead, one of de Coubertin’s concerns was fairness: that ‘[t]he man who can devote all his time to training is bound, nine times out of ten, to beat the man who lacks this opportunity’ (Review Olympique, 1910: O, 642). Hence it would be *unfair* for professional rowers (that is, people who earned their living by rowing) to compete against those who could not, in this way, practise the sport outside of sports-participation and training. So de Coubertin objected as much to the full-time athlete – the sailor whose support from his wealthy father means he can spend all his time sailing his laser dinghy along the California coast – as to the professional (meaning paid) athlete. More importantly for de Coubertin, the possibility of participation solely for money must be combated since it precluded participation *for its own sake* – and ruled out the possibility of intrinsic value available from such participation.

Further, that hijacking of de Coubertin’s vision of sport *for its own sake* – and its replacement with a narrowly economic reading – was taken to extremes later in the history of Olympism. Thus, as Maraniss (2008, 331) records, after the Warsaw IOC session of 1937, Olympic Rule 26 read: ‘An amateur is one who participates and always has participated in sport solely for pleasure and for the physical, mental, or social benefits he derives therefrom, and to whom participation in sport is nothing more than recreation without material gain of any kind, direct or indirect.’ The term ‘indirect’
here was taken to mean that one could not benefit from one’s sporting fame, even in contexts other than sport. For instance, the runner Lee Calhoun received a one-year suspension for getting married on the *Bride and Groom* television show, which provided substantial gifts, including a honeymoon, to the couple: the argument was that Calhoun’s selection reflected, and derived from, his sporting status (Maraniss 2008, 269–71; 328). Similarly, threats were made to the amateur status of Rafer Johnson if he took a role in the film *Spartacus* (ibid., 34–5; 329). Further, Avery Brundage (president of the IOC) considered that the decision of American sprinter Ray Norton ‘to sign a professional contract with the San Francisco 49ers football team when the Olympics were done … [to be] an affront to Brundage’s strict standards of amateurism’ (ibid., 189).

De Coubertin rejected this picture of amateurism; in particular, its emphasis on the financial lacks his clear commitment to sport in the Olympic Games taking place for its own sake – since only then, de Coubertin believed (and rightly), could participation be educational; and, in particular, morally educative. In fact, de Coubertin confessed that ‘the question [of amateurism] never really bothered me’ (*Olympic Memoirs*, 1932: O, 653): he saw that the motivations of athletes were of fundamental importance to whether or not their participation in sport was potentially educative, not ‘whether an athlete had received a five franc coin’ (1932: O, 654). By contrast, such a concern with funding (even outside sport) seems precisely the issue for, say, Brundage, as reflected in the quotations and actions just recorded. Finally, as elsewhere (McFee 2004, 129–60; McFee 2009), defending the thesis that sport had indeed such an intrinsic value, as well as highlighting the conditions for its operation, requires, first, that the intrinsic value of at least some sport be located in the possibility of its functioning as a moral laboratory (where moral concepts could be ‘tried out’ in simpler cases and with less risked than normally); and then, second, to spell out the preconditions for such a moral laboratory. The need for an educative motivation required that the sport’s participation have three related characteristics:

- that the participation in sport be for a good reason (contrasting good, or normative, reasons with motivating reasons); 8
- that the good reason in question also be one’s motivating reason;
- that it be an intrinsic reason.

For only what was done for a good reason could be morally justifiable: only then would the intentional object of my action have this ethical potential. Note that, if that reason did not also bear on me (as agent), then it would not be my reason – hence my participation would not permit the required moral action. And, of course, the intrinsic connection to sport was another requirement: it would not do if the reason worked as well for the soap opera or the music festival.

### 3. More on Intrinsic Value

A great deal of this argument, as I have rehearsed it, stands in need of further expansion or supplementation: certainly a great deal more must be said about Jonathan Dancy’s contrast between normative reasons and motivating ones, for instance. Here, though, the focus on the Olympic movement initially directs particular attention to the
interrelation of two key aspects of my argument, for consideration in this paper. The first is its account of intrinsic value; for it might seem odd to characterise in that way the values of a historically specific movement. The second is its claim to go beyond sports field or stadium – to have a wider application, in moral education more generally. This second idea, fundamental to the promise of Olympism, seems to generate at least two difficulties. How exactly does moral education in general result from attention to moral possibilities within sport (to the importance, within sport, of justice or to the concrete versions of sport’s moral metaphors – the level playing field and fair play)? So its mechanism remains unclear. And that generalising possibility seems to conflict with the intrinsic character of the values: if the values are tied to sport, how can they be applied elsewhere?

Before turning to those questions, however, it is worth recalling that – in addition to the justification of an intrinsic value for some sport by reference to the ‘moral laboratory’ possibility – I also offered general argument stressing that the obligations to rule-following at the heart of all sports were, in essence, moral obligations (although the limitations of this argument were recognised). For it stressed that one’s obligations to follow the rules of the game (once one has agreed to play) were moral obligations. My exposition of this idea assigned to sport many of the conceptual characteristics familiar from, say, Suits’s definition of game (Suits 1978, 41): lusory (and hence pre-lusory) goals, rules and means of following them, and a lusory attitude. These too will be features central to any fuller elaboration of the intrinsic value of sport.

That is to say, the choice of sport here (de Coubertin’s choice, as it were) draws directly on features of sport. This was explicit in my earlier comments that sport offered a situation simpler than ‘real life’ precisely because there were explicit rules and because those rules were especially suited to the kind of ‘experimentation’ captured by talk of a moral laboratory. Why? Because the choice of how to act to apply the moral metaphors, and such like, risked less than it would in another situation: say, than when confronting the enemy soldier armed with a bayonet (McFee 2004, 142). So we can learn subtle features of decision-making. Faced with the first of these, we need only remind ourselves of the situation were morality a matter of the application of explicit or clearly formulated rules. Were this true, applying (or obeying) sporting rules might be a direct comparison. But it is not. Yet this idealisation makes plain one way in which sport clarifies or simplifies the situation in contrast to actual moral deliberations and decisions. It was precisely this combination of features that made me uncertain what other circumstances would function as moral laboratories of this sort (McFee 2004, 145). And, as noted elsewhere (McFee 2009, 22–3), this aspect of my position is easily missed, as it was missed or misunderstood in his critique by even as sensitive a reader as Leon Culbertson (2008, 308). As a result, he presented a complex moral dilemma as a candidate for a moral laboratory: but clearly, by definition, that just is part of our moral life; and hence cannot offer a simplification of our ordinary moral action or decision.

At this point, a wholly general objection to the claims of intrinsic value as they apply to the Olympic movement might be raised: such claims might simply be dismissed as appropriate only in one historical moment; or no longer viable in our ‘postmodern condition’, or some such. It is worth rehearsing some of the difficulties such a position faces. First, someone claiming that some value ascribed to Olympism (say, amateurism) was a satisfactory value at some time in the past, but isn’t now, must prove it really was satisfactory then. But, as this example shows, that is an improbable position (as the
debates at the time highlight, amateurism in its simplest versions did not convince widely even in 1896). Second, one must not get mesmerised by the words used: just as having the same value-formulation does not guarantee the same value, neither is the opposite true. So we must see what value is being urged in practice. And that will often turn on the particular treatment of examples. Further, our business in philosophy can involve the sorts of ‘rational reconstruction’ where the best is made of a particular value-formulation – perhaps, although the formulations were read in this way, they should have been read differently. Third, in this context, Alan Tomlinson (1999, 218) has written about the ‘necessary arrogation [or re-making] of Olympic values’: but arrogation is a species of persistence – a bit like replacing the wheels and engine, but it still being your car.9

These comments might seem, though, to concede the main point: that the sort of intrinsic value to which I was referring is in some way changeable – that might be taken as an indicator that it was not intrinsic after all. This is a confusion, because the sort of intrinsic value for sport for which I have been arguing is, in one way, formal: much of its specific content comes from the moral contexts in which are made concrete the ideas learned from sport. We have learned about justice or fairness; but now we learn what it means here. So we might expect there to be some changes in what such values – still intrinsic – amount to in practice.

On the other hand, I am a contextualist, in the sense that the truth of statements always depends on their context of utterance; and hence what is correct in one context need not be in a different context.10 Hence any account (say, here, of the value of sport) will typically need modification to accommodate different contexts. Such a contextualist cannot elaborate an exceptionless account of sport’s intrinsic value:11 at best, a kind of slogan of the sort offered above can be offered, combined with the thought that, in most cases, to be intrinsic is just a way to not be extrinsic – and to offer clear examples of what is extrinsically valued, as in the desire for money or for fame. And if it were granted (see below) both that sport, of its nature, offers a possibility of this kind of moral education and that this possibility was valuable – was a ‘good thing’ – nothing more need be said directly on sport’s intrinsic value.

But the connection to Olympism offers a broader set of candidate extrinsic values – although now these reflect uses to which the state might put sport (or sporting events). Here we acknowledge both the international recognition and the infrastructural improvements (the better train services, as well as better sports facilities and so on) regularly offered by governments as among the benefits of hosting the Olympic Games. Such benefits are explicitly extrinsic: although in this case they might be seen as values of sport, they could have been arrived at without sport – in this sense, the selection of sport as one’s tool is arbitrary.

The London bid to host the Olympic Games of 2012 did not neglect the rhetoric of sport’s intrinsic value. Thus the UK Government’s Department of Culture, Media and Sport claimed that, through hosting the games, it ‘aims to improve the quality of life for all through cultural and sporting activities’ (DCMS 2009), to involve ‘more people taking up sport simply for the love of sport’ (DCMS 2008: my emphasis). But it recognises the reality, in those extrinsic values: ‘Hosting the Games will … leave a legacy of new and improved sports facilities around the country, some world class, which, with careful management, will be of lasting value to sport and the wider community’ (DCMS 2003, 4). Of course, perhaps infrastructural matters of just these sorts are governments’ rightful concerns. And ‘social benefit’ is identified, alongside the economic and infrastructural – but this too
seems to be cashed out extrinsically; in terms of increased participation (see Girginov and Hills 2008), and then derivatively in terms of health. Further, modern concerns with ‘legacy’ clearly reflect that interest in the extrinsic (see MacAlloon 2008).

The state is, in effect, the agent for these new bases of extrinsic valuing: it is hard to imagine the typical athlete motivated by the desire to improve the local infrastructure. And if some athletes would respond to the desire for international recognition of the nation, it is importantly true that such international recognition would typically touch those athletes also.

This is fundamental, of course, because in de Coubertin’s vision the educative potential of Olympism for participants operated at the level of their desires and motivations: hence, at the level of individual agents. That is why it becomes so important to him that athletes have the right motivation: that they are participating in sport for its own sake. So the athletes should be seen ‘solemnly affirming that they have always been loyal and honourable in sport, and [that] it is in this spirit of loyalty and honour that they approach the Olympic contest’ (1908: O, 545). Such an oath would deal with the question of amateurism – all who so swore would be affirming their suitability to compete in the Olympics. This was ‘the only practical means to put an end to this intolerable state of affairs’ (1913: O, 645). Further, the possibility that, in making this oath, the athlete might not be true to his word needs not generate special reasons for worrying in such a case, especially in the context of a knowledge of the athlete’s past. For we can often recognise the lies of others. But any athlete found to be lying would, in virtue of lying in this context, be clearly beyond the moral pale: his/her crime (of lying on oath) would be clear. Moreover, there could be little or no ‘wiggle-room’: to swear in this way, publicly, must surely be to knowingly swear – and requires that one understand to what one was swearing. Any deviation from the truth, barring duress or coercion, would be culpable. Thus de Coubertin’s formulation (participation in sport for its own sake) must come to the same thing as mine: that one’s motivating reasons be both good reasons and intrinsic reasons. This also highlights the complexity of the condition to be met. Hence, in most cases, participation in sport – even in Olympic sport – fails to meet this condition. For example, to the degree that a particular athlete embraces the governmental rationale for participation (rooted in extrinsic values for sport), to that degree his/her motivation fails to meet the requirements for the realisation of sport’s intrinsic value.

4. A Mechanism for Moral Education

But why should the possibility of behaving in this way be morally educative? Centrally, here, actions where the conceptualisation of that action – its intentional object – is fundamental to what action is performed are contrasted with those where it is not. The second camp is readily exemplified by, say, ‘working out’ in the gym: perhaps I have been convinced to do this by a shaman, who promises it will speed my passage to Nirvana. In this fanciful case, my actions are not health-related: but there are health benefits from the kind of moderate exercise in which I thereby engage, and they will accrue to me. Here the benefit or value of the activity is independent of how it is conceptualised.

But this cannot be the case when genuine education is involved: if I come to believe something (even something true) on the basis of an injection or indoctrination, or having it beaten into me, I have not been educated into that conviction. Rather, as Peters (1965,
90) put it, "‘Education’ relates to some sorts of processes in which a desirable state of mind develops'. That is, education requires that the process be educational. That in turn requires both that it have a rational element (a change in my understanding, say) and that the ‘means’ to that change be educational. And that is another way to deny that the process is best conceived in means/ends terms: for now the ‘ends’ (in education) cannot be separated from the ‘means’, since a failure to employ educational means cannot result in education in that respect.

That returns us to the learning of moral imperatives within sport: we learn them, in typical cases, as we are taught the rules of the sports. That is, we are taught how to conceptualise the events which the constitutive rules instantiate and to which the regulative rules are to be applied. As I noted elsewhere (McFee 2004, 114–16), this is partly a matter of learning the principles (in Dworkin’s sense12) that underlie our decisions here. But then a teacher sensitive to such principles as they apply – for instance, to what the wide rule shows us about fairness between bowler (pitcher) and batter in cricket – will be teaching the principles in teaching the rules, a process some of us can (perhaps) well remember. For (in this example) one learns to see that one’s opponent must be given a fair chance to display his/her skill; not every chance, of course, but one fair in the context of this match.

Central among such principles in this sense as they apply in particular sports will be those underlying the powerful moral metaphors from sport: fair play and level playing field. As with the case above, the primary moral motivation here remains a concern with justice – either justice during play or justice as play begins. Sometimes we cannot ensure a level playing field (Lord’s cricket ground just has that slope) but we palliate any unfairness by ensuring that both teams benefit (or otherwise) to the same degree – for example, by tossing for ends at football (soccer) and by changing ends at half-time.

Since I voluntarily undertake to play the sport (in the sense of adopting the lusory attitude, or something similar), this amounts to an implicit contract between us. So I can learn about contract-meeting (and contract-breaking) in that context. And if not all concerns with fairness in sport involve appeal to such a contract – one thinks of the case of Racquetless Josie (Butcher and Schneider 2003, 157; McFee 2004, 123–4) – enough do to give this model purchase here. In fact, the prevalence of the moral metaphors from sport in the discourse of business might make one hopeful, were it not for two countervailing forces. First, we fear that, at the personal or individual level, too many people (even people studying sport) fail to see these metaphors as centrally moral. That factor is visible in Bill Morgan’s worry about his students’ ‘unwillingness or incapacity to view sports from a moral vantage point’ (Morgan 2006, xiii). Instead, they seem to think that the rules of sport should be ‘viewed and treated as egoistic devices’ (ibid.), whereas moral concerns are typically either other-regarding or neutral in this respect – that is why there can be (shareable) good reasons, as well as agents’ self-directed motivating reasons. For only when an action’s characterisation – the intentional object of the action – is appropriate can one genuinely act on what one has learned: the attitudes Morgan ascribes to his students would preclude their understanding the object of their participation in sport in this ‘good reason’ terms.

Second, the issues for the individual reflect a greater issue: again, Morgan (2006, 26: both quotes) rightly regards ‘the unfettered role that market forces play in professional sports’ in the USA as ‘the main impetus . . . behind their excessive individualistic bent’. This
would explain how the students, and others, arrived at their failure to understand sport’s moral basis – although without explaining why (except in terms of a more general culture emphasis on the power of economic forces). To the degree that this analysis is correct, the philosophically responsible courses of action must involve highlighting both how such an emphasis on the causal story behind our opinions might lead us away from the normative critique of those causal forces; and how pernicious it is to confuse prudential considerations with moral ones. And, if any part of our teaching of sport bears on the teaching of the (Dworkin-style) principles, that will be moral education to the extent that it acknowledges obligations within sport as moral obligations; and, as we saw above, this will also have implications as to the processes through which the learning can take place.

5. Intrinsic but Generalising?

Such discussions might be used, with justice, to explain why the intrinsic value of sport – the moral value considered above – is not more visible in the world of Olympism. Yet, as noted above, there might seem to be a more fundamental objection here. For how can a value intrinsic to sport operate outside of sport? How can sport’s moral value carry over to the world outside the sports field or stadium, as the claims of Olympism require of it?

De Coubertin repeatedly urged that his view of the educative potential for sport was rooted in the athleticist ideology of the British public schools. On more than 25 occasions, de Coubertin attributes these views to Thomas Arnold, headmaster of Rugby School (1828–41), with Thomas Hughes’s Tom Brown’s Schooldays as a primary source of ‘evidence’ for this view. Thus, de Coubertin speaks of Arnold as the father of modern English education’ (O, 107), ‘the greatest of modern teachers’ (O, 138), and ‘the greatest educator of modern times’ (O, 536), citing ‘the sound educational ideas expressed by the great Arnold’ (O, 81), to include the aim ‘to make the muscles the most thoroughly educated, meticulous and constant servants in the formation of character’ (O, 571), as a route to ‘true manliness’ (O, 115) through a stress on ‘principles of right conduct’ (O, 112), under which fair play was explained by ‘the spirit of chivalry’ (O, 588). As Lincoln Allison (2011, 23–4) has highlighted, there is good reason to suppose that Arnold himself did not hold such views. Nevertheless, the ideas themselves were powerful.

And one crucial part of that ideology was the transferability of what one learned from sport (and especially from team games) to the outside world – to put the point figuratively, that it provided suitable training for running India! De Coubertin, then, accepted the possibility of a more general educational benefit from sport done for its own sake. And, while I have offered him the support of my defence of sport’s intrinsic value, my own treatment of the question of generality has always been more guarded: thus, I said that there is ‘no guarantee that generalisability won’t be thwarted’ (McFee 2004, 145).

However, it is important to meet the objection raised above. For my position is only that some generalising may be difficult, not that it is impossible in principle nor inconsistent with the claim of the value to be intrinsic. Certainly discussion of the intrinsic need not go in those directions. Consider a standard intrinsic value; namely, friendship: if I claim to be your friend for some external reason (those times you lend me your car), I am not your friend at all! But what I learn about friendship from you – about how to behave towards one’s friends – is certainly not limited to my relationship with you. First, I may well
deploy it in my dealing with other friends (and putative friends). So I may well treat them in positive ways in which you, as my friend, treated me. Then these are different contexts of friendship. Moreover, for any places in my life where friendship offers a model of right treatment (as it might for some research subjects: see McFee 2010, 49 and 154–5), my understanding may well draw on what I have learned in the concrete case of real friendship – here, my friendship with you. So there is no reason to suppose that even a paradigmatic intrinsic value, like friendship, cannot apply outside the scope of the cases in which we learn it, either when still dealing with real friendship (that is, directly) or by extension – as treating one’s research subjects as friends might be to extend that concept. And the point could be elaborated further if the concept of friendship had metaphorical applications.

Certainly, my understanding of intrinsic value was never to sustain a ‘no transfer’ thesis (see McFee 2004, 141). Instead, on our model – drawn from Wittgenstein – through confronting concrete cases one learns ‘how to go on’ (PI, §151) in deploying the concepts in unfamiliar circumstances. Since there is no set of rules here, nor conditions to be accommodated in every case, we cannot say more in elaboration of the process than this. Indeed, this is one thing Wittgenstein meant in urging that ‘in the beginning was the deed’ (OC, §402; PO, 395): that one learns how to act, or how to explain one’s actions, with no more to the story than this. In particular, there is no mileage in searching for explanation of the action in causal stories of one’s psychology. Then nothing remains unexplained. Hence, nothing in our contextualism requires us to limit the impact of the moral education that participation in sport can provide. The apparent contrast here between sport and real life is misleading: in all of our lives, we learn to follow rules in particular cases. For these reasons, then, we can defend an account of sport’s intrinsic value compatible with both the educational and the generalising tendencies that de Coubertin rightly ascribed to Olympism. Is that all we have learned?

6. The Beholder’s Share

The argument laid out thus far, if sound, might show how sport has an intrinsic value for those who participate in it. That seems to be the scope of de Coubertin’s concerns: that the participants in the Olympic Games could benefit morally from their participation. But de Coubertin had not envisaged the scale of contemporary interest in the Olympics – and probably could not have envisaged the ubiquitous nature of contemporary television and associated media. So that the Olympic movement now engages vast numbers of non-participants, to different degrees. Some of these are genuine fans; others merely part of the global audience for entertainment. Does the account of sport’s intrinsic value, as it applies to Olympism, speak to their experience?

No complete answer is possible here. But a first step is to recognise that at least some of the resources from the account of sport’s participants are also open to the audience. Although the audience members cannot themselves try out the moral notions, they can at least see them being tried out. So, at best, this resembles a laboratory where one looks across at the experiments of others. That does not preclude one from learning from them.

Earlier, I had acknowledged that ‘explanations of watching and of participating should not be run together’ (McFee 2004, 155). Of course, the strategy of finding the intrinsic value of (some) sport in the possibility of its functioning as a moral laboratory
does nothing to undermine this point. For even the similarities here leave us with significant differences. First, the content of this value, in practical terms, will vary in line with the particular moral concepts deployed. As we have seen, these can involve actions in a variety of contexts, although most turn in some way on the concept of justice. Second, the fact that spectators too might learn something about the application of moral concepts – especially justice – from their interactions with sport does not mean that there are no differences between that case and the one for participants in sport. For the participants learn how to apply such concepts with the sporting context: they learn to do this for themselves.

Of course, the audience is watching the event: it has no explicit agency in respect of that event. (Any changes to what happens will be through the players.) Hence the distinction, fundamental for participants, between good reasons for an action and (one’s) normative reasons for that action has no application. In that sense, the audience for sport functions as an audience for moral behaviour; as audience (rather than ‘experimenter’) to the moral laboratory. To understand that sporting behaviour, the audience members must construct explanatory narratives – ‘He did such-and-such for so-and-so reason’. So there are, in effect, two key differences being stressed here: while, for the agent, his action is the outcome of his role, the audience has an explanatory narrative; and while the agent explores his/her own motivation – often after the fact – the audience must ascribe such a motivation on the basis of the action, in the context of what it knows of the agent. These explanatory narratives will doubtless make reference to the rules of the sport, as well as to the context within which the action took place. Since the motivation was not viewed causally even for the agent, the sportsplayer too might be thought to construct an explanatory narrative of his/her action. To that degree, then, parallels with the ‘self-narrative’ from the performers perspective might be recognised. For instance, given the rules of basketball and the ethos within which it is played in the upper reaches of the NBA, and the situation both of this particular game (for example, it is crucial in the play-offs) and within this game (for instance, the Lakers lead by a small margin), the right thing to do on balance would be to stand my ground to draw the foul. (Of course, this chain of reasoning might only be ‘reconstructed’ after the fact, when I come to explain my action.) As a participant, that might count as a good reason to behave as I did (certainly, it is one my contemporaries would readily grasp – so let us specify that, here, it is such a good reason); and it is certainly intrinsic – it only makes the exact sense it does in the basketball-based context given above. Even when similar contexts might realise similar points, they too would be basketball-based. Further, it is obviously my reason: that is, it is my motivating reason; and I offer it as such. The sporting opportunity offers me a moral laboratory: that is, a chance to try out for myself the relevant application of fair play. So, in considering its fairness (or otherwise), I can come to understand something about fairness here, and hence about fairness more generally.

Now the narrative of my audience may also resemble this one: of course, the audience members are obliged to ascribe the reasons to me on the basis of what they know of me (as well as the other factors mentioned above). They recognise that, say, a good reason for the relevant behaviour could be found, and that is was an intrinsic reason. But was it my motivating reason? No doubt the answer they give will reflect the way I am generally viewed as a player – perhaps if I have a bad reputation, a reputation for unfair behaviour, the audience members will not credit me with the ‘good reason’ as a
motivating reason. Were my reputation as a player more mixed, they may or may not give me the benefit of the doubt in this respect. Even here though, the audience is thinking closely about moral matters in this context (‘what constitutes moral behaviour here?’), given the rules of this sport. Further, they are doing so in a context where the consideration of hypothetical examples is a tool for moral education – but here the case is not hypothetical, but concrete: what should one do in this situation. And its very concreteness leaves less room for details to be filled in by those involved in the discussion. So, if I know I have committed hand ball (in soccer), but the referee may not have seen it, ought I to inform him? Should I be (rightly) criticised if I do not? (And does the importance of the particular soccer match have a bearing on the right answer here?) As the player, I must confront the situation in reality; but the audience for the match, and more globally, can construct narratives in either direction. Those narratives concern not only what I should do (or should have done) but what one ought to do or have done. Hence something like the distinction, fundamental for participants, between good reasons for an action and (one’s) normative reasons for that action has an application applied to a knowledgeable audience: in seeing actions done for good, intrinsic reasons (which are also the agent’s motivating reasons), an audience can conceptualise events as if they were such agents: that is, they can ‘reconstruct in imagination’ the intentional objects of the genuine agents. To the extent that this is true, the account of sport’s intrinsic value offered for its audience can fairly closely parallel that offered for practitioners. Moreover, this capacity – to see the motivations of others – is not a mysterious capacity; nor is some special sense of the term ‘imagination’ being invoked (and certainly not one implying mental imagining). Instead, we are familiar with our (human) capacity to make sense of the thoughts and feelings of others. For we use it whenever we decide that a friend is faking, rather than genuinely ill or hurt. And it no doubt has some role in our making sense of the thoughts and feelings of characters in novels or plays. Yet, crucially, it is not, or not necessarily, experiential – we do not feel what the person feels. But neither does our understanding of others require this.

So our account of the values from viewing sport can approximate that offered above for participation in sport: in favoured cases, we can see the motivations of others; and this can function as approximating to some degree the concern with our own motivations when we are the agents, the athletes or sportsplayers. So there is a parallel concern with reasons. Further, both should count as intrinsic values, since they depend centrally on the features of sport. For, as we saw, sport is a rule-governed activity with less risked than normally: in that sense, ‘it’s only a game’. So we can see the outcomes of our actions and decisions without the dire consequences that could accrue in ‘real life’. Moreover, these specific judgements of the rightness (the justice) of the activity can be conceptualised only once that activity is recognised as sport; and hence its justification too resides in its sporting character. If the reasons offered are not sporting reasons, any justification could equally justify some other set of activities. Thus, we recognise that the activities of the participants in sport could be morally justified; but, like de Coubertin, we see that this requires participation in sport for its own sake.

No doubt, the audience members are ascribing certain reasons to me, rather than (as I am) seeking them in my understanding of my behaviour. But this is exactly the right standard here. For, in making sense of my behaviour, they ascribe intentions to me; and, as elsewhere (for instance with legal or political intentions), such ascriptions relate to the intentions-embodied-in-the-action, as Dworkin (1985, 154–8) notes in drawing a comparison
between intention in the law and artistic intention. 19 Three features in particular should be recognised. First, claims as to what was intended must be answerable to the actual detail of the event – that I did such-and-such indicates that I intended to (it was not an accident), unless I recognise that things did not go as I intended. Second, to mention ‘intention’ here is not to invoke something ‘in the head’ of the agent, at best causally connected with the outcome. Rather, that would be the mistaken view to be contrasted with seeing the intention-as-embodied in the action. Third, the idea of capturing all the features here, or of generating a complete account, must be rejected. That conception of completeness mistakenly assumes that there is a finite totality of properties to be considered here. We cannot have ‘a complete grasp’ or ‘a full knowledge’ partly because of our practical limitations in knowing for sure the motivations of others, even when we know them well. But, more importantly, the constraint is partly conceptual: there is no ‘all’ to be known, no ‘complete’ to be achieved, because there is no finite totality of conditions here – such that we might know them all-but-two, then all-but-one and finally all! Still, this ascription is sufficient to recognise an intention embodied within the action. So narratives that make sense of my behaving as I did (in the sporting context) offer a way in which that behaviour could make sense, whether or not it is accurately ascribed to me. The audience for my action has an explanation that can be scrutinised for its connection to the intrinsic, and to good reasons for the action. And, after all, I do not have a guaranteed and authoritative access to my motivations: sometimes my intentions are not what I thought they were (compare Anscombe 1957, 40–5).

The picture above may strike many readers as unduly rationalistic: that it treats in too cerebral a manner a bunch of fans watching football (soccer) or basketball. But that view misconceives what is being offered. My point throughout is that the reasons under discussion are those that might be offered, after the fact, to explain what has gone on. That is how we approach the reasoning of our sportsplayers in this context; and the same applies to the audience for sport.

7. Watching the Games Go By

Seen one way, the context of the Olympic Games adds nothing new to this sort of explanation of an intrinsic value (as a possibility) from the viewing of sport. In so far as it works, it applies to Olympic spectators as to others. But, in reality, the Olympic context introduces at least three further features, although none is strictly a conceptual point from Olympism. First, there may be an expectation of better motivation in Olympic events, compared with regular leagues and such like. Or, at least, this might be an assumption widespread in the Olympic audience. For the mixed motives of much sport (say, that involving the National Basketball Association or National Football League in the USA, or the Football Association or England and Wales Cricket Board in the UK) are easily discovered. Most of the participants are professionals: and, as de Coubertin saw, that opens the door to various kinds of match-fixing – such as that witnessed recently in cricket. 20 Now, most sports performers are not involved in such activities: on many occasions, they could ‘sign up’ to de Coubertin’s vision of sport for its own sake. But the Olympic context imposes just this sort of commitment onto their performance: so performers recognise that, here, some of their usual motivations can be set aside. In that respect, they recognise good reasons and intrinsic reasons for participation whatever their usual (motivating) reasons. Or, at least, the audience can easily take their motivations this
way. In this sense, and as compared with, say, national championships, the Olympic Games are more easily viewed as a moral laboratory by knowledgeable spectators (if, as above, one where the experiments of others are looked over – a procedure which can easily generate insight). A fuller discussion would elaborate the point with reference, say, to the USA basketball ‘Dream Team’ at the 1992 Olympics in Barcelona. If key players from basketball’s NBA are not playing for money (that is, if they have donated their services to the national team – ignoring any positive impact on their endorsement contracts) at least one potential extrinsic motivation, the financial one, has disappeared. This might seem to militate against, say, match-fixing. Certainly that was one of de Coubertin’s hopes, in railing against ‘the madness of gaming, the madness of the bet’ (1908: O, 588). Moreover, we might hope that this was an outcome of the commitment to participate in sport for its own sake, a commitment implicit in the Olympic oath for athletes. And, again, de Coubertin hoped to generalise the impact of such an oath, as noted above (1908: O, 545).

Then, second, a typical Olympic Games features competition between major competitors: as Christopher Hill (1992, 239–40) puts it, Olympic dominance requires that, for most Olympic sports, being Olympic champion is recognised as the pinnacle of achievement (as it is not, in say, soccer). But the typical Games also includes competitors with no realistic chance against serious candidates for the Olympic championship (and hence whose participation is outside considerations of Olympic dominance). So an Olympic event which includes technical discussion about what kinds of swimwear (more exactly, swim suits) are permissible for top-class swimmers can also find space for someone (‘Eric the Eel’) barely a swimmer at all. Thus questions of equity intersect with questions of fairness in ways typically not posed by world-class swim meets. Then the Olympic context means that both audience and participants may consider new options, new issues.

Third, the scope of Olympic television should not be underestimated. If we hope that the Olympics could be a force for good, then a contemporary theorist should turn to the impact of the audience. Clearly, this was not de Coubertin’s perspective: he focused on the benefits of participation. But a proper understanding of the intrinsic value of sport – as it has been sketched here – has the potential to transform his vision, by acknowledging that (in some sense) the major impact of the contemporary Olympic Games is on its audience, not its participants.

Of course, such an outcome, if transformative in terms of scale, would also be transformative in terms of the precise nature of the impact. For, as we have seen (and unsurprisingly), the intrinsic value of sport viewed differs from that value as it is realised (when it is) for participants.

Does this account clearly find a place for sports spectating in our account of sport’s intrinsic value? One might think that, in too many places, the argument here draws on approximate parallels rather than exact congruences. Then, while nothing is proved here uncontentiously, there is reason to grant a weaker intrinsic value available, under favoured circumstance, from the viewing of sport.

Odd as it may sound, one might even be (slightly) more optimistic about the likelihood of such intrinsic value being realised for the audience for sport. Participants in sport (one might think) are easily misdirected: they can readily participate primarily or even exclusively for extrinsic reasons (money, fame); and, even if they recognise good and intrinsic reasons, there is no seamless passage from that recognition to actually acting on such reasons. The audience faces no such barrier, since no (relevant) action is required.
Rather, audience members have merely to elaborate their ‘narratives’ of the action in terms of good, intrinsic reasons (as well as right actions) – in that way, to attribute such reasons to the sportsplayer as agent. One might at least think this easier – although there are, no doubt, many sportsplayers whose reputation either precludes elaboration of such a positive narrative or makes it exceedingly difficult.

On the other hand, the educative potential of the audience’s perspective – of being an audience to the moral laboratory, as I put it above – seems less powerful. That is, there is a likely difference in the impact of the moral engagement: engaging with one’s narrative only (as the audience does) is typically not as pervasive in one’s life as engaging with actions for which one is ultimately responsible. After all, there is no corresponding personal commitment, no sense of this person investing himself (or herself) in the action. To that degree, then, the event has a lesser claim to be morally educative – and hence as lesser claim to intrinsic value.

However, we recognise that fans can invest themselves into the outcomes of preferred sports matches. Here, there are certainly narratives to consider: their explanatory possibility draws on shared experiences and shared valuing. There may be little more that can be said on such topics in the abstract, given the diversity which might be expected between cases.

8. Conclusion: The Boundaries of Sport

This paper undertook to rehearse both my arguments for the intrinsic value of sport, and my scholarly defence of the ascription, to de Coubertin, of a project for the Olympic movement trading on such an intrinsic value. The outcome reconstructs a position for de Coubertin, setting aside some of his other views (as neither required for, nor defensible in terms of, this one). Further, I have given some reasons why, were this correct, we would still not expect to find in practice many of the goals for which de Coubertin hoped: sportsplayers too often do not operate in the contexts, or for the reasons, which might have made that possible.

Here, though, I have considered in particular the place of the audience: it might seem that, for de Coubertin, the primary impact of sport was to be on the performers, the young people who, in his version, are ‘burnished by sport’ (see original quotation). By contrast, I have argued that a parallel argument can suggest that, for the audience too, there is some possibility of engagement with a ‘moral laboratory’ – although, of course, the audience’s role as audience (as literally spectators of the actions) must be recognised. In this way, I have compared the agent’s own narrative of his or her sporting behaviour with that a well-positioned, attentive and knowledgeable audience might reconstruct. To the extent that this parallel holds good, considerations similar to those that apply to the athlete should hold for the audience too.

These ideas, not fully worked through here, represent an agenda for future research. I have been at pains to stress that the ‘moral laboratory’ applies only to some sports: in effect, I have been discussing those to which it does apply; and my only explanation here as to how these might be identified has been by reference to Suits’s account of games. Should I not say more to identify to which sports my claims apply? And do I not owe readers a fuller account of what are, and what are not, genuine sports; or of the boundaries of the extension of the concept ‘sport’? In urging that I should not and do not (respectively), I would draw on an obvious point – one pertaining to all demands for (strict)
definitions—namely, that we clearly understand such terms prior to receiving the
definition. Thus, suppose Suits’s putative definition of the term ‘game’ worked (suppose it
did give a concise yet comprehensive characterisation of games, having an ‘exact fit’ such
that it included all and only games): still, someone who had not read Suits would not fail to
understand (much less to identify) games! And his games with his children would be
neither better nor worse for his not knowing that definition. And that, rather than the
wholesale rejection of the possibility of definition, 22 is the major philosophical insight from

It will come as no surprise to those who know my other writing (especially McFee 2004)
to find that the framework here is provided by ideas from Wittgenstein. But the exact import
of that realisation is widely misunderstood in the philosophy of sport. There seem two major
kinds of misunderstanding. On one hand there are those who associate Wittgenstein’s
thought with various kinds of conventionalism – as might seem implied by Wittgenstein’s
remarking ‘this language-game is played’ (PI, §65423); or those who take Lyotard’s word that the
‘language games’ Wittgenstein deployed are in any way game-like (a part of agonistics:
Lyotard 1984, 10). They will find puzzling my wholesale rejection of relativism, and my
ascription of that rejection to Wittgenstein. But Wittgenstein was never even a fellow-traveller
of such truth-denial. On the other hand, my claims about intrinsic value might seem to imply
something timeless and unchanging – that might seem essentialist. Yet, while Wittgenstein’s
work stresses the contextual and person-specific character of philosophical puzzlement, it
recognises that, in this context, such-and-such is typically the truth of the matter – at least
once we acknowledge that the context bears on what ‘the matter’ is! So nothing here suggests
an unchanging or immutable ‘essence’ to sport; and recognising an intrinsic value to sport
should also not mistake the centrality of the value with the kinds of non-contextual
determinacy that Wittgenstein was at pains to deny.

Notes

1. This is a companion-piece to my ‘The Promise of Olympism’ (McFee 2011a), and also to
McFee, 2009. As well as sharing ideas and quotations, some paragraphs of each have been
recycled here, although usually rewritten.

2. Throughout, de Coubertin 2000 is cited as ‘O’ followed by page number. The desire to
demonstrate scholarly accuracy here has meant that there are perhaps more short
quotations than is consistent with the demands of style.

3. Strictly, the IOC awards the Olympic Games to cities, not states: but, in the contemporary
economic climate, the reality is that no city could be successful without the support of the
national government. Further, national Olympic committees play a role in putting forward
the candidate host cities. Moreover, the recognition of infrastructural benefits (and the
desire to distribute them) has meant that the impact of the games has been felt outside the
host city, narrowly conceived. (In perhaps the most extreme case, the Albertville Winter
Games of 1992 were actually viewed by local organisers as awarded to the region –
Savoie – rather than [just] the city.) For discussion, see Beacom 2012.

1966, 58) is ‘Manuscrits inédits’ – unpublished writings. (The term ‘burnish’ [‘rebronzer’]
suggests an early, educational writing of de Coubertin.)

5. De Coubertin rightly takes the athlete, or sportsplayer, to be a special case, when one
applies a sophisticated account of Aristotle’s doctrine of the mean (see Urmson 1988,
The role of athlete sets a higher standard for one’s commitment either to winning or to aiming at (or preparing for) winning. It is excess; but, of course, a part of its justification is precisely that this is only a part of one’s life. Here too, one can learn to feel what the situation requires: the right emotion, towards the right object, on the right occasion and to the right degree.

6. In ‘The Philosphic Foundations of Modern Olympism’ (1935: O, 583) he comments: ‘At the Olympic Games, … [women’s] role should be above all to crown the victors, as was the case in the ancient tournaments.

7. As de Coubertin (O, 195) put it, athletic progress depends chiefly on factors ‘concentrated within the individual’ (O, 195). Hence ‘the individual view … [is] best and most desirable’ (1908: O, 543), since the benefits concern such individuals: it is their moral, educational development, in response to their motives, and such like. Compare also McFee 2002 on the potentials of this individual focus.


10. Compare Austin 1962, 110–11: ‘It seems fairly generally realized nowadays that, if you take a bunch of sentences (or propositions …) impeccably formulated in some language or other, there can be no question of sorting them into those that are true and those that are false; for … the question of truth and falsity does not turn only on what a sentence is, nor yet what it means, but on, speaking very broadly, the circumstances in which it is uttered. Sentences are not as such either true or false.’ Austin may be unduly optimistic; but the position he sketches is assumed here.

11. On the (lack of) connection of contextualism to exceptionlessness, see McFee 2010, 177–93.

12. See Dworkin 1986, 15–20: just as legal principles give the spirit of the law, principles embedded in sports provide the spirit of that sport. The clearest example of the potential conflict between rules and principles comes from Elmer the grandfather killer (see McFee 2004, 105): the rule would have allowed him to inherit, but the underlying principle (that one cannot benefit from one’s crimes) precludes this. For more on principles in sport, see McFee 2011d.


14. As McNamee (2008, 40–2) suggests, simply because value inheres in an activity such as sport does not entail that does it does so exclusively: such activities are not hermetically sealed off from the (rest of) the human world.

15. I set aside pitch-invasion or other occasions where the audience intervenes but outside the rules of the sport.


17. This is the upshot of the discussion of the nursery rhyme ‘Jack and Jill’: McFee 2004, 142–3.

18. On the variety of ways of understanding others, including the idea of the matching psychological states as a satisfaction condition for empathy, compare McFee 2011c, 190–208.

19. See in particular the discussion and defence of hypothetical intentionalism in McFee, 2011b, 89–95.

20. See, for example, Radford 2011; and also Wilde 2001, for the longer view.

21. For examples of such narratives (applied to soccer), see Eagleton 2007, 26; Lyas 1999, 94.
22. Wittgenstein (2005, 56) did write: ‘We don’t believe that only someone who can provide a
definition of the concept “game” really understands a game.’

23. This idea is widely misunderstood, partly because it is often taken out of its argumentative
context. Compare also PI §71: ‘… this is how we play the game.’

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