

# **The Prolegomena to Pierre de Coubertin's Olympic Anthropology on the Nature of Man and the Sleeping Beauty**

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## **Introduction**

The eclectic structure of Coubertin's Olympic anthropology was inspired by the works of many philosophers throughout the centuries: from his infatuation with ancient Greek philosophy, through negative inspiration from medieval anthropology, and Renaissance references to the classical era of the Hellenic world, to the Enlightenment and its aftermath in the forms of mechanism, technocracy, materialism, and humanistic modernism. However, philosophical anthropology is the key term that helps identify Coubertin's inspiration. The flagship humanism, expressed by the philosophy of Olympism, demands an inquiry into those historical periods when people mused on the meaning of man, his existence, destiny, and the role that he was to play in the world. That is why the process of reconstructing Coubertin's reasoning requires an exploration of a significant stretch into mankind's history.

## **Naturalism**

It may be possible to categorize Pierre de Coubertin's philosophy by tracing which thinkers and works he cited in his writings. In this respect, the following names are predominant: M. MONTAIGNE, J. J. ROUSSEAU, H. SPENCER, and H. TAINE. One commonality between them (individual differences granted, of course) is naturalism – a view which gives the status of independent reality solely to material phenomena. Naturalism explains reality referring exclusively to the laws of nature, and in doing so it directs our attention to nature, as well as man and his works, drawing it closer to humanism. As a postulate, naturalism accepts no other reasons for all phenomena than material causes.

In some of its variations it may lead to the rejection of spirituality in man, as well as of all transcendence. This current reaches as far back as Stoicism in Ancient Greece. Stoics believed that the world is a whole, its nature is eternal, infinite, singular and that there is nothing beyond it. Thus, man should live in harmony with this pantheistic reality and adhere to its laws. The Middle Ages did not succumb to these views until M. Montaigne further developed the stance of naturalistic humanism. He saw man as part of the environment that cannot elevate itself above other beings. In the following centuries various forms of naturalism abounded, and during the Enlightenment it occupied an almost central position. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century it was visible through the works of the aforementioned writers, and survived until the twentieth century works of existentialists.

In one of his articles, Pierre de Coubertin wrote that Athenians had found the perfect formula for sport as a means to achieve the eurhythmics of mind and body.<sup>1</sup> He meant this as a critique against the culture of his time. Great achievements of mankind – namely the progression of science and the division of man into separate elements (such as the mind, soul, and body) – were in Coubertin’s opinion what posed the greatest danger and would become the greatest problem for mankind. He fondly recalled the equilibrium of Greece:

“The life of the (Greek) gymnasium was an admirable compromise between the two types of strength over which men fight, and that it is so difficult to bring back into balances once the equilibrium has been upset. Muscles and ideas rubbed shoulders congenially in this system. it seems that this harmony was perfect, to the point of uniting youth and old age, as well. As a rule, young ancestors were unfamiliar with the extravagances of the adolescent and the gloominess of the old man. The science of living was at its height then, and the sciences of dying derived from it quite naturally. People knew how to live without regret for an immutable city and an undisputed religion – something, alas, that we no longer know how to do.”<sup>2</sup>

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1 COUBERTIN, Pierre de: “The neo-olympism. Appeal to the people of Athens (November 16, 1894). Lecture given to the Panassus literary at Athens”, in: MÜLLER, Norbert: *Pierre de Coubertin. Olympism. Selected writings*. Lausanne 2000.

2 COUBERTIN: “The neo-olympism”, 534.

This bucolic depiction of Antiquity cannot, of course, be taken as historically accurate. Rather it is Coubertin's conscious effort to sharpen the contrast between the ancient way of life and that of his contemporaries. Later observing the problem from a more moral perspective, he proclaimed:

“Even a most cursory study of the history of this century is surprising for the kind of moral disorder that the discoveries of industrial science seem to cause. Life has been turned upside down. People feel the earth on which they stand trembling at regular intervals beneath their feet. They no longer know what to hold on to, because everything around them is moving and changing. In their disarray, as though attempting to create a counterweight to the material forces that are piling up into cyclopean walls, they look for all the bits of moral force scattered throughout the world.”<sup>3</sup>

Coubertin's call for a return to the natural state once lost, is merely an echo of M. MONTAIGNE's writings, who was one of the first to attack the civilization that disorganized other people's lives. In view of that, MONTAIGNE wrote:

“If you want man to be robust, rational, with both feet firmly on the ground – throw him into the abyss of sloth and dumbness. We need to be made dumber before we can get wiser.”<sup>4</sup>

This is how MONTAIGNE comments on mankind's faith, in the abilities of the human mind, with which it treads throughout history. Meanwhile, as B. SUCHODOLSKI writes:

“for men, real happiness, one that is at once peaceful and safe can only be achieved by living a simple life, detached from the commotion of the regular world, just the way MONTAIGNE lived – in physical and mental health, which is so much easier to preserve if you are devoid of violent passions and fanaticism triggered by mental delusions.”<sup>5</sup>

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3 COUBERTIN: “The neo-olympism”, 535.

4 MONTAIGNE, Michał: *Pisma, t. III*. Warszawa 1917, 88-89.

5 SUCHODOLSKI, Bogdan: *Narodziny nowożytnej filozofii człowieka*. Warszawa 1963, 448.

## Rousseau's Influence

Such opinions gained even more resonance during the Enlightenment due to J. J. Rousseau. In times of adoration for intellectual progress, he drew the conclusion that sciences, arts, and civilization are on the whole worthless. Furthermore, they are not only worthless, but especially harmful, because they stand in the way of morality. As Rousseau would say: "they were created out of evil, are sustained by evil, and spawn more evil." This condemnation of civilization led to adoration for nature (understood as the primary state).<sup>6</sup> It is worthwhile to take a closer look at J. J. Rousseau's views, for there is a clear correspondence between them and those of the French magnate. Since Coubertin did not try to explain the human condition with anything outside the realm of natural phenomena, he only drew upon what was available to our experience, the natural world. According to the premises of naturalism, all that is relevant to us is subject to the laws of nature, man himself included. Henceforth, whatever he is, is due to nature. Thus, the experience of inequality in terms of talents and giftedness, whether they are spiritual or physical in character, amounts merely to the conclusion that inequality is innate. That is why looking for its source is pointless, since as the very name suggests, it is a quality born of nature.<sup>7</sup> At this point it is possible to come to believe that the emerging vision of human existence is gloomy and fatalistic. Although, let us not forget that this uncompromising determinism is characteristic of the primary state. This premise was Coubertin's starting point in constructing a list of goals and tasks that should fill the life of man. Every individual is born with a unique set of capabilities, as well as with natural traits and tendencies. These elements allowed him and him alone, to fill in the blank pages of his life according to individual preferences. How is it then possible to reconcile the notion that man is diverse in form and able to create himself with the notion of innate instincts? The answer is very simple, and can be found in an ontological differentiation Coubertin made, regarding the multidimensional aspects of being a man. In accordance, whatever is natural and immutable applies only to what connects man with

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6 TATARKIEWICZ, Władysław: *Historia filozofii*, T. II. Warszawa 2007, 171.

7 COPLESTON, Frederick: *Historia filozofii*, t. VI. Warszawa 2005, 66.

nature – namely, the body. The immaterial aspect may be developed individually, and is not bound by the same rules. However, both aspects require being nurtured and shaped, with the reservation that, to naturalists, the direction of the development must be consistent with the natural tendencies of the individual.

“For nature is a precise accountant. If we demand more of it than it can give, it will compensate by subtracting from a different place. If we allow it to progress at its own course, remembering only to deliver requisite amounts of high-quality raw materials that are necessary to physical and mental development at a given age, it will eventually result in creating a specimen more or less appropriately developed.”<sup>8</sup>

Whilst this is a quote from H. SPENCER, Coubertin would certainly concur – his motto was very similar. He too, promoted the idea that it is necessary to respect children's mental and physical needs, visible in their instincts, drives and tendencies. Those, in turn, clearly indicated the need for spontaneous and unconstrained movement. In this situation, according to Coubertin, the only obligation of adults is to stay out of nature's way.

## **Influence of Science**

On the one hand, man has accepted that nature dispenses predispositions and skills without any clear rules, but on the other he has developed a tool that allows him to break free of this primordial, uncompromising natural determinism. It was science that precisely gave him the ability to correct and control his own nature.<sup>9</sup> In the book *Pedagogie sportive*, Coubertin argues that:

“even if we disregard differences established by men themselves, sport teams still exhibit variations imposed by implacable nature. Doubtless it is (and therein lies the high moral value of physical exercise), that will, persistence, and energetic, thoughtful effort can partly close the gap that nature opened, and maybe even reverse its rule. Nevertheless, the clear

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<sup>8</sup> SPENCER, Herbert: *O wychowaniu umysłowym, moralnym i fizycznym*. Wrocław 1960, 189.

<sup>9</sup> COUBERTIN, Pierre de: “The philosophic foundation of modern olympism (1935)”, in: MÜLLER, Norbert: *Pierre de Coubertin. Olympism. Selected writings*. Lausanne 2000, 580-583.

advantage and head-start that nature bestows on certain people is a testament to its stark injustice towards man. Nothing else except sport cooperation juxtaposes so closely the two elements – inequality on natural grounds against equality on social grounds. This is a lesson worth thinking over.”<sup>10</sup>

Coubertin perceived sport as something more, setting it apart from reality. In the real world, equality depends on the conflict between classes and one's struggle to exist. In sport, it is achieved naturally and without bloodshed. The game's world is specific in that without exception its players are socially equal. Coubertin understood however, that there are uncompromising differences due to nature itself. The body's qualities are inconsistently dispersed among people and unfortunately not everything can be offset by training and hard work. In this context, it sounds like Coubertin speaks of mankind's manifestation of its own creative power. He proclaimed that nature's decrees can be partially overruled, and in the same light, fate can rest in the hands of man. He is not universally determined by nature and through his own work and commitment is able to change the course of events. With this, we have moved away from naturalism and closer to what sounds like – and actually is – existentialism. Coubertin's work contains a lot of opposing romantic references that transcend postulates of the Renaissance. A reading of *Mutual respect* may give the impression that man is a measure of the world, a *specimen* that is placed in the center his own existence, mode of experience, and being.

Pierre de Coubertin portrays mankind as united in spite of everyone's individuality. Believing that if he only succeeded in accounting for all social and political discord, then the world could be given an axiological (or moral) alternative, and the idea of universalism would have a chance to flourish. The key requirement was to find a value, man's essential quality, which could serve as a basis for a new world order.

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10 COUBERTIN, Pierre de: *Moralna i społeczna rola ćwiczeń sportowych (Pedagogie Sportive, 1919)*, „Kultura Fizyczna”, 1989, no. 1-2, 30.

One does not need to be particularly observant to see that some invisible force has for centuries compelled men to play games and crowd in stadiums. This led Coubertin to the simple conclusion: Sporting performance is the first spectacle that stirs the imagination of a child and the last that claims the attention of an old man. The former sees in it a promise for the future, the latter – proof of the species' continuity. Genius in its various forms, the cult and the celebrations – all merely contribute to the spectacle's glory.<sup>11</sup> Unlike the past, to Coubertin sport became a value in itself, with its beautiful and majestic design being just a supplement. The wonder of sport does not result from its fantastic scenery. On the contrary, sport is the centerpiece, while celebration should fall into second place. What was sport then to the Ancient Greeks – a way to worship gods, or rather a pretext to celebrate the virtue of its own inherent beauty? Herein lies the wonder of sport – in sport itself. If it dies, it is only due to external circumstances or satiety. The restorer of the Olympic Games asked: “How is it possible that with such scenery and care the instinct for sport did not develop in a unique and spontaneous way?”<sup>12</sup> He answered himself:

“If it dies, it is not of exhaustion, but of satiety. Eventually, enthusiasm of the crowd gave birth to the professional – a man who devotes his entire existence to an instinctive pursuit of sport, if necessary sacrificing his health in the process. In return, he receives wealth and questionable fame. With time, he becomes a gladiator, a ruined athlete bequeathed to victorious Rome by defeated Greece.”<sup>13</sup>

This quote features the notion of instinct, a recurring theme in Coubertin's writings. Here is another quote exploring the theme:

“There is a certain instinct instrumental to sport that I would call the instinct for sport. [...] It is noticeable in the Iliad, in the description of games played by Hellenic warriors at the walls of Troy. It is also clearly visible and preserved in the arrangement of the Greek gymnasium: in its harmonious layout; its porticoes for strollers and spectators; its baths; its training areas and its

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11 COUBERTIN, Pierre de: *Sport na przestrzeni wieków (Notes sur l'Éducation Publique 1901)*, „Kultura Fizyczna”, 1989, no. 3-4, 26.

12 Ibid., 26.

13 Ibid., 26.

halls – both the ones for teaching philosophy and rhetorics, and those for playing sports.”<sup>14</sup>

Let us take a moment to consider whether this means that the inclination to sport is inherent in human nature, the way other instincts are? That man cannot break free of it? Or maybe that the inclination is only a derivative of an innate need for competition, which may be equally satisfied through other means? Or is it that the drive for competition and instinct for sport are one and the same thing? An affirmative answer would be very satisfactory, because it would enable Coubertin to gain both an Archimedes-like foothold and a starting point for Olympic anthropology.

### **The Greek Influence**

In order to corroborate this hypothesis, Coubertin resorts to analyzing the forms of physical activity characteristic with people from previous ages. His first analysis is naturally about antiquity. At this point Coubertin reveals himself not only to be an expert on the history of sport in Greece, but in general. Besides, he actually admitted that sport did not originate in Greece. Whilst presenting exercises from India and elaborating on those from Egypt, he concluded that over there,

“physical exercise was treated with utilitarianism and inconsistency. It was undertaken only to help achieve certain goals, not to find a source of everyday satisfaction and personal fulfillment.”<sup>15</sup>

Coubertin knew and supported Ancient Greece’s motives for sport. There, performing physical exercises was dictated by reasons far nobler than what was necessary at a given moment. Accompanied by Greek contemporaries of Pericles, Coubertin went even further, and saw in the everyday practice of sport a possibility for auto-creation. Later Coubertin went on to remark that the military

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14 ZUCHORA, Krzysztof & DASZKIEWICZ, Tadeusz: *Pierre de Coubertin. Etiudy olimpijskie o nadziei i pięknie*. Warszawa 2001, 21.

15 *Ibid.*, 25.



rationale behind practicing sport was obvious to all civilizations, although he was not satisfied with this statement, adding:

“This rationale is not enough to account for a phenomenon which has existed since the times of Greek athletics; which exerted significant influence on thought, art, and politics; and which largely helped unite Hellenism and facilitated its expansion. Neither passion for war nor love for beauty alone (even though the former dominated Sparta and the latter was so deeply ingrained in Athenian land) would be able to elevate sport to a comparable position and keep it there.”<sup>16</sup>

Coubertin assumed that all of the above are merely various, isolated motives for sports participation, which together are good reasons that weigh in its favor. He believed that the core foundation of sport was what he called the instinct. Greeks were the ones who lived closest to this ideal, which was alien to Ancient Rome and to other civilizations of the era. To them, the main purpose of sport was military training, so when they tried to transplant Hellenic combat into their culture, oblivious to “the instinct”, sport games started to resemble a circus:

“with all its savagery: the throng craved for blood, injury, and agony [...]. There was no collective instinct for sport any more, but throughout the ages of Roman decadence, and Byzantine decadence especially, isolated individuals exhibited ever weaker traces of the instinct. Perhaps some of its followers will succeed in triggering a temporary reaction [...].”<sup>17</sup>

Another manifestation of the instinct, according to Coubertin, were knight's tournaments. Whilst their sole purpose was for military training, they proved man's innate inclination for rivalry. Generally speaking, man may even be a creature permanently participating in competition. Requiring *agon* in every aspect of life, rivalry is a way to consecrate and validate his mere existence. From this point of view, competition is a primary motive, with external manifestation being only secondary. The instinct is extremely useful, except when employed for military reasons, but even then usually an additional factor comes into play (a religious,

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16 Ibid., 25.

17 Ibid., 25.

economical, or personal one). At any rate, the instinct for sport is not a fad. It is because:

“the impulsive force of ideas or emotions rarely survives to another generation. Instinct, on the other hand, if only sufficiently aroused and popularized, becomes invincible and resistant to all pressures.”<sup>18</sup>

### **Conclusive Statements on the Sporting Instinct**

Every man is equipped with this internal instinct, however only Greeks discovered and practiced it. Other civilizations failed to find it within themselves. Since, as Plato posits, everybody possesses an innate idea of sport, all it takes, is to discover it. The task that Coubertin undertook was not, as he saw it, to present sport as a new type of activity, but to awaken a dormant instinct. Coubertin decided to restore:

“an idea that dates back some two thousand years, an idea that stirs men’s hearts today as in days past, an idea that satisfies one of the most vital instincts and, regardless of what some may have said, one of the most noble.”<sup>19</sup>

Coubertin personally saw direct and tangible proof of its existence in the overwhelming worldwide response to his idea. Instinct for sport and the act of succumbing to it are one of the strongest and healthiest pleasures available to man, and although:

“it can and does exist by itself, it is highly reminiscent of the Sleeping Beauty. It falls asleep very easily, and once it does, slowed blood flow locks it within impenetrable walls. The thing is to break through the barrier of apathy and wake the Sleeping Beauty up.”<sup>20</sup>

Once awoken, it is invincible, as evidenced by numerous manifestations in all cultures, periods, and variations. Coubertin

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18 Ibid., 25.

19 COUBERTIN, Pierre de: “Speech at the closing banquet of the congress of Paris (1935)”, in: MÜLLER, Norbert (Ed.): *Pierre de Coubertin. Olympism. Selected writings*. Lausanne 2000, 531.

20 COUBERTIN, Pierre de: *Krucjata zwolenników* (La croisade des partageux 1910), „Kultura Fizyczna”, 1991, no. 3-4, 29.

appears to be an heir to Socrates, when he says that the truth lies within ourselves, just waiting to be found. Insofar that if we accomplish this goal, we will adhere to it. Unfortunately, the Western culture underwent periods of the instinct's dormancy. As Coubertin remarks:

“the spirit of sport would have easily developed in Medieval Europe, had the spirit of feudalism not stood in its way. Moreover, halfway through the Middle Ages, the instinct for sport encountered another foe, no less frightening than the other – the Church.”<sup>21</sup>

On the pages of his article *Sport throughout centuries*, Coubertin gives countless examples of substituting the instinct, saying that in one way or another, the drive must be satisfied. Sport makes this possible for humans to accomplish, whilst the rest, were a form of primal relief. For this reason, each of us is *in sensu largo* a sportsman (active or passive). In writing about sport, Coubertin calls it the joy of life, the addictive drug. Sport cultivates strength, lends man dynamism and opposes passiveness. People enter stadiums:

“to look for the joy of life, for this intoxication akin to the one experienced by opium smokers, but unlike theirs, one that is healthy, a combination of energy, swiftness, agility, balance, and the feeling of having experienced power.”<sup>22</sup>

The program of awakening to natural tendencies seems easy. It is sufficient to come back to ancient ideas, to this primal harmony which has been disrupted by achievements of culture and civilization. The thing we call success, on the grounds of science and culture, has become the ruin of an individual. At some point in history the individual lost his primal eurhythmics' and sedated his innate instincts. To do whatever we can to restore this harmony of mind and body – was what Coubertin proclaimed.

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21 COUBERTIN: “Sport na przestrzeni”, 26.

22 Ibid., 26.

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