

Book Review



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REID HL. OLYMPIC PHILOSOPHY: THE IDEAS AND IDEALS BEHIND THE ANCIENT AND MODERN OLYMPIC GAMES. SIOUX CITY (USA): PARNASSOS PRESS - FONTE ARETUSA; 2020. ISBN 9781942495345.

This book review aims to offer a critical overview of the most recent book by philosopher Heather L. Reid, 'Olympic philosophy: the ideas and ideals behind the ancient and modern Olympic Games'. Published earlier this year, the book is a collection of essays produced by Reid in over twenty years of dedication to ancient philosophy and athletics, and offers precious philosophical discussions around many relevant topics in Olympic studies, including but not limited to multiculturalism, the ethics of excellence and the heroic heritage of the Olympic Games.

In her most recent book, ‘Olympic philosophy: the ideas and ideals behind the ancient and modern Olympic Games’, philosopher Heather L. Reid collects essays she produced during more than twenty years dedicated to studying ancient Greek philosophy and athletics. Condensing twenty years of work by a highly accomplished scholar in just over 400 pages is a major undertaking, and conveying the magnitude and amplitude of Reid’s mastery of the ideas and ideals that fundament the Olympic Movement in a book review also feels daunting.

Reid traces the ideas and ideals behind the Olympic Games back to ancient Greek philosophy, but the field of Olympic philosophy itself is rather new. In that sense, Reid demonstrates a deep awareness of the skepticism that often surrounds Olympism as a philosophy: the book is pervaded by arguments which solidify the ground for one concept before moving on to the next, shielding her approach from ever being considered naïve, or merely self-serving. The very title of the book is put to scrutiny in one of the chapters, making it clear that every aspect of Olympism as a philosophy of sport has been carefully and thoroughly reflected upon. Reid taps into ancient philosophy classics, but also brings a wealth of references from very recent publications in areas beyond sport philosophy, which makes her arguments additionally compelling and relevant - particularly when discussing matters pertaining to the Modern Olympic Games.

The book is divided into eight sections, which contain solid philosophical grounds for many aspects of Olympism that have been incorporated into the Olympic Movement’s rhetoric to such a point that they are hardly questioned - or, more worrisomely, they are seldom actually understood. The section about peace and world community, for instance, provides the philosophical grounds on which flourished the notion that the Olympic Games and the promotion of peace are inherently connected. The section about Modern Olympism also provides a refreshing approach to the inauguration of the modern Olympic Movement that goes beyond the founding myth anchored on Pierre de Coubertin’s vision alone. It is a welcome invitation to rethink the Olympic Movement based on its mythical, philosophical roots, not only through the narratives of pioneering that can be directly associated with particular individuals.

In that sense, Reid offers a human approach to Olympic philosophy, making it clear that she cares deeply for the matter at hand and wants to make the discussion open, attractive and accessible to more readers. Reid’s writing is thorough without being dry,

and deep without being alienating for those who are not themselves philosophy scholars. Another unassuming token of her solicitude to make the arguments present in the book more accessible is the offering of a Guide to Olympic Studies Topics, which presents some popular topics in the field (such as commercialism, women in sport, globalization, and peace/politics) and which chapters refer to each one.

While this collection of essays is somewhat unique in itself, for presenting in one book the consistent work by a contemporary scholar who grew within a new field while at the same time expanding it, it is important to highlight one particular section that sets it apart from many publications about Olympic philosophy. In Section VIII, Reid delves into eastern philosophy to help analyze phenomena that are most commonly only associated with (and informed by) western ancient philosophy. In that regard, Reid demonstrates an acute awareness and writes candidly about being an American trying to understand Olympism also through the lens of Chinese philosophy. This particular section is a lesson on how different perspectives can be accepted in order to universalize a phenomenon, making it clear that universalization does not have to come at the cost of homogenization.

This piece is also very timely, as the Olympic Movement faces unprecedented challenges with the covid-19 crisis and the expectedly dramatic social changes deriving from it, which are arguably inevitable but still unknown at the moment. The exposure of the many systemic failures in most countries battling the coronavirus pandemic put into perspective some of modern society's arguably most crystalized paradigms - many of which inform the way sport is perceived and practiced. It is also wondrously opportune that Reid closes the book by questioning what she called the "efficiency ethos", as the obsession with efficiency was one of the most widely criticized aspects of modern life put to the test by the effects of the pandemic. In Reid's words, which could have well applied to a variety of issues,

The problem with the prevailing Efficiency Ethos is that it narrows down the goals and values of sport to the point of dehumanizing the practice. The Olympic Ethos counterbalances the Efficiency Ethos by reintegrating a historically humanistic philosophy of sport into the goods to be preserved and exalted within sporting communities¹ (p. 416).

It may well be the case that the answers to help guide the future of the Olympic Movement can be found in its distant past. And the epilogue, which could also have functioned as an introduction, encapsulates the question that the book itself answers masterfully: why Olympic philosophy matters.

References

1 Reid HL. *Olympic philosophy: the ideas and ideals behind the ancient and modern Olympic Games*. Sioux city (USA): Parnassos Press - Fonte Aretusa; 2020.