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Heidegger on the Olympics

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But if, my heart, you wish to sing of contests, look no further for any star warmer than the sun, shining by day through the lonely sky, and let us not proclaim any contest greater than Olympia.

- Pindar, First Olympian Ode

In a 1943 Addendum to the Parmenides lectures, Martin Heidegger adds the following remarks. They speak of both who we are today (modern man) and why modern man cannot be Greek, despite those mock-rekindlings that may be signified by, for example, an Olympic torch relay. I quote, necessarily at length:

Modern man has a lived experience of the world and thinks the world in those terms, i.e., in terms of himself as the being that, as ground, lies at the foundation of all explanation and ordering of beings as a whole. In the language of metaphysics what lies at the foundation is subjectum. Modern man is by essence the subject. Only because he is the subject can his I or Ego become essential. And the fact that a Thou is set in opposition to the I, thereby relegating the I to its limits and raising the I-Thou relation to prominence, and the fact that the place of the individual is then taken by the community, the nation, the people, the continent, and the planet, these in no way, metaphysically speaking, cancel out the subjectivity of modern man, but in fact for the first time lead it into its unconditioned state. Anthropology, the Anglo-American form of which is sociology, is supplanting essential thought. Only when man becomes the subject do non-human beings become objects. Only within the domain of subjectivity can a dispute arise over objectivity, over its validity, its profit and its loss, and over its advantages and disadvantages in any particular case. Since the essence of man, for the Greeks, is not determined as subject, a knowledge of the historical beginning of the Occident is difficult and unsettling for modern thought, assuming that modern lived experience is not simply interpreted back into the Greek world, as if modern man enjoyed a relation of personal intimacy with Hellenism for the simple reason that he organizes Olympic games periodically in the main cities of the planet. For here only the facade of the borrowed word is Greek. This is not in any way meant to be derogatory towards the Olympics themselves; it is only censorious of the mistaken opinion that they bear any relation to the Greek essence. And we must come to know this latter if we wish to learn the quite different essence of modern history.... (165).

A way of summarising this would be to say that the modern Olympics have (merely) representational value; for the term representational carries a double sense. Firstly, it refers to modern man as subjectum: the one who represents the world to itself as mere objects - such that the subject-object distinction is, itself, grounded in the essentiality of modern man to itself as the ground of all possible grounds. Thereby, appeals to the community, the nation, the people, the continent, and the planet become no different from primary subjectivism.
Secondly, representationalism refers to the related matter of the modern Olympics being merely a facade; or to the mistaken opinion that they bear any relation to the Greek essence. For the Greek essence spoken of here is a relation to Being that is anything but representational. So when we construe the Olympics in terms of either the achievements of individuals (world records, heroic performances, personal tragedies, etc.) or in terms of their politics (the IOC, ticketing controversies, drugs, financial inducements, etc.) we are engaging in what is essentially the same form of thought. By comparison with the Greek essence, in which man-as-subjectum played no part whatsoever, the modern distinction between the noble-sporting version and the socio-political version of the Olympics becomes void. It is not a distinction but a single discourse with two minor sub-branches that merely appear antithetical within the limits of modern thought. There is then no genuine controversy between a nostalgic pro-amateurism and a late-modernist pro-commercialism. Both are equally modern in their orientation (or occidentation?) and both miss anything approximating to the Greek essence.

In pre-Socratic Greece, that is, according to Heidegger, man is merely one being among all beings, so that its position is to dis-cover (make un-concealed) the Being of those beings (including, but with no particular privilege, man itself). He puts this succinctly in Identity and Difference when he writes: Being grounds beings, and beings, as what is most of all, account for Being (p. 69). In this respect we can perhaps, if only by implication, begin to see what the essence of the original Olympics might have been. And, however we construe its details, this essence will always, definitionally, be distinct from the modern commercialisation of sport; but - and just as importantly - it will always be equally distinct from the nostalgia for amateurism, fairness, open attendance, democracy, and drug-free performance. Both of these modern ideologies, that is, are in utter contrast to the kind of being that (what we now call) sport was for the Greeks. And that utter contrast brings to light their effective complicity with each other - as a sham debate that, however it might divide or be resolved, will leave things exactly as they are with the Olympics today.

So what was it - at least by implication from Heidegger’s many remarks on ancient Greek thinking - that the Olympics were in ancient Greece? And this question, one must suspect, can never be fully answered since (as the emphasised term shows), it involves an exercise in that rarest of pursuits, historical ontology. The answer, that is, can only be glimpsed. To that end - a mere glimpse - we might, as an initial approximation on the way to but a flicker of the glimpse, begin with some (historical-empirical rather than strictly ontological) clues to be found in the second volume of Foucault’s History of Sexuality (The Use of Pleasure). Here we learn that games and other bodily exercises such as gymnastics and horse riding were, in ancient Greece, but a one element of an assemblage of asceses or exercises of the self. The assemblage as such also included dietary regimes, rules of proper sexual conduct (with boys and/or women), considerations of health, and so forth. In each case, such matters as the observance of the right amount, the right time and the right place were critical matters since they displayed a general fitness. Fitness referred, here, not only to the body and its capacity to be controlled (remarkable in itself as this was, since free men were under no external or quasi-legal pressure to observe such strictures) but also to a capacity for managing a household or a city state. In this respect, fitness to control oneself and one’s pleasures mapped
directly on to fitness to govern in what we would now think of as other spheres but which, evidently for the Greeks, were all of a piece.

After Heidegger, we may well find fault with Foucault’s account. It appears to be confined to the domain of the self and may, in this sense, anachronistically reimpose on the Greeks an unduly modern conception of the subject which, for Heidegger, the Greeks (by definition) could not have had or held. It may also be said that Foucault’s treatment of the fitness of the self as body as well as of the fitness of the self to govern others is redolent of the very I-thou relation that, as we have seen, Heidegger sees as but an effect of (and not a counter to) the dubious self-production of modern man as subjectum. Such a critique no doubt holds some water. But we also have to remember that Foucault shows the ultimate projected outcome of the various ancient Greek asceses - regardless of their sociological value - to have been nothing more or less than the attainment of truth: of the very aletheia (truth as unconcealment) that is Heidegger’s own cherished topic throughout the Parmenides lectures and elsewhere. In this sense, the sociological dimension of Foucault’s analysis could be but a stepping stone to a more fundamental question about why (to what end) the Greeks engaged the various asceses they did, including practices that we would now collect together as sports.

Two points emerge from this. The first is the possibility that one central difference between the ancient and the modern Olympics is that the latter involve an unduly strict compartmentalisation of the various practices they subsequently try to bring together as events. That is, we hear today of distinct training regimes, sports medicine, special diets, technologies of clothing and footwear, aerodynamics/aquadynamics, formulations for the proper use of sexuality and substances by athletes, and so forth. Today, we also make a clear separation between fitness to govern (administer) sports and fitness to participate in them - almost to the point whereby suitability for one extinguishes suitability for the other. For the Greeks, none of these matters - or their ancient equivalents - could be taken separately since each involved the other to the point of identity and had a single goal (necessarily absent from our modern partitioning of sports practices): the attainment of truth.

Secondly, if we pursue this consideration of truth as aletheia, we can begin to see how bodily exercises and regimes (of the sporting or other varieties) were, for the Greeks, merely among the possible ways of opening the truth of Being itself. And this opening (as un-concealment, a-letheia) could only have been undertaken by ones who considered themselves primarily as beings among other beings (Gods, rocks, sea, sky, animals...) rather than as any kind of privileged subject, let alone as man, as the one being which lies at the foundation of all explanation and ordering of beings as a whole. So instead of the exercise of the body as an opening on to un-concealment-in-general, we find today a mathematisation of the shadow, relic, vestige or trace of that pursuit. This mathematisation may take the form, on the one hand, of the economic calculation of the IOC and its regional equivalents or, on the other, of the increasing fineness and precision of timing and measurement in the various Olympic events themselves, along with the fastidious record-keeping this entails. The distinction between these two kinds of mathematisation, however, hardly matters: they are dual manifestations of the same moment of historical de-ontology; which is to say, of the same non-relation to Being lived and experienced today.
What, in short, ultimately distinguishes the ancient from the modern Olympics would then be our current blindness to (our non-thinking of) the sheer depth of our own anthropocentrism and its necessary concealment of the truth of Being. The Olympics today - whether read via an scientifico-economistic or an idealist-humanistic discourse - are tainted not by ticketing scandals or drugs or even by nostalgic desires for a (specious) lost past, but rather by the fact that the apparently diverse range of our ways of reading the Olympic is in fact utterly narrow to the point of strangulation. The problem is that, today, there is a dire scarcity of readings of what the Olympic is in its own being and that this very scarcity is created and kept in place (that is, not allowed to open) by the unconditioned and irremediable representationalism-anthropocentrism that governs and radically constricts all our thought today. And so no material effort we could make to return to the Greeks - for example by permanently returning the Olympics to Athens, reinstating the original events, or having athletes compete in the nude - will constitute a genuine return to the Greeks. Only a fundamental change in thinking (or perhaps even the beginning of fundamental thinking) could achieve that.

References