

# OLYMPIC ETHICAL DILEMMAS: ETHICAL STANDARDS IN THE GOVERNANCE OF A GLOBAL CULTURAL INSTITUTION

Author:  
Ian Henry

email:  
I.P.Henry@lboro.ac.uk

Co-authors:  
Ling-Mei Ko

need of reform. However its role in political discourse is not something which most commentators would be prepared to abandon. Similarly the role of the Olympic movement in cultural discourse is one which in principle at least can generate significant benefits such that our cultural lives might be diminished were it to cease to operate.

In this paper we argue that the Olympic movement provides in cultural terms an arena of communicative action in Habermas's terms, one in which cultural action can be subject to the development of cultural consensus or compromise in ways related to Habermasian notions of discourse ethics (Habermas, 1990, Habermas, 1995). We use two examples – promotion of gender equity and of sport for development – to illustrate ways in which progressive outcomes (though not lacking in controversy) can claim to be fostered through intercultural communication in the context of the activities of the Olympic movement. A consideration of these issues points the way to ethical governance processes and outcomes for the movement and its prime organisation, the IOC

## Abstract

The IOC lays claim to moral leadership in the world of sport by defining itself in the Olympic Charter as a body with a moral rather than simply a sporting mission. The fundamental principles of Olympism as expressed in the opening section of the Charter for example include the following statements

1. Olympism is a philosophy of life? Olympism seeks to create a way of life based on the joy of effort, the educational value of good example and respect for universal fundamental ethical principles.
2. The goal of Olympism is to place sport at the service of the harmonious development of man (sic) ?.

(International Olympic Committee, 2010: p. 10)

Thus the IOC, and the Games as a competition, are markedly different from, for example, FIFA and the Football World Cup or the IAAF and its Athletics World Championship. These organisations may lay claim to providing major benefits but their *raison d'être* or their founding principles are not themselves bound to a moral project in the same manner.

Nevertheless despite its founding moral agenda the IOC and the movement has been subject to a range of critiques which are said to undermine its claims for moral status. These include not only cases of corruption on the part of individuals but also criticisms along cultural, economic, political, social, environmental and sporting dimensions. We have addressed these critiques elsewhere (Henry, 2011) and have argued that while evident shortcomings exist (and have to be dealt with) the value of the movement and the Games is its ability to provide a forum for intercultural dialogue in which positive outcomes can be fostered (though their achievement is by no means guaranteed).

The United Nations, like the Olympic movement has been subject to allegations of corruption, abuses of power, has on occasions generated negative outcomes, and may be in

References:

- HABERMAS, J. 1990. *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press.
- HABERMAS, J. 1995. Reconciliation through the Public Use of Reason: Remarks on John Rawls's Political Liberalism. *Journal of Philosophy*, XCII.
- HENRY, I. 2011. The Olympics: why we should value them. In: LENSKYJ, H. & WAGG, S. (eds.) *A Handbook of Olympic Studies*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- INTERNATIONAL OLYMPIC COMMITTEE 2010. *Olympic Charter*. Lausanne: International Olympic Committee.