

ATHLETIC COMPETITION AS SOCRATIC PHILOSOPHY

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It is not surprising to claim that athletic competition and Socratic philosophy both aim at virtue, human excellence, or aretē. But a closer look reveals that their similarities run much deeper than that. In this paper I argue that athletic competition and Socratic philosophy, as demonstrated in Plato's early dialogues, are ideally akin. To support this thesis, I offer five points of comparison. First, both agōn and elenchos are fundamentally knowledge-seeking activities aimed at the acquisition of truth and understanding. Second, both are characterized by questions that seek understanding of moral concepts on personal, general, and ideal levels. Third, both activities require an admission of fallibility and risk of failure, which motivates the desire to learn, train, and succeed. Fourth, both require the active testing of oneself. And finally, both include an obligation to challenge others.

Keywords: Socrates, Plato, agon, athletics, competition, philosophy, Socratic method.

INTRODUCTION

To many, athletics and philosophy seem to be diametrically opposed. And, admittedly, Plato and Socrates have contributed to the mind/body split that motivates such opinions. But athletes know that performance in sport is as much a matter of soul as sinew. To compete athletically is to struggle for a kind of perfection that encompasses the whole person; it is, in Greek terminology, agōn. No doubt athletic success can be gained through physical skill, just as social success can be gained through practical skills or technai. True athletic agōn, however, like true Socratic philosophy, aims at virtue, human excellence, aretē.

In this paper I will argue that athletic competition (agōn) and Socratic philosophy, as demonstrated in Plato's early dialogues (elenchos), are ideally akin. To support this thesis, I offer five points of comparison. First, both agōn and elenchos are fundamentally knowledge-seeking activities aimed at the acquisition of truth and understanding. Second, both are characterized by questions that seek understanding of moral concepts on personal, general, and ideal levels. Third, both activities require an admission of fallibility and risk of failure, which motivates the desire to learn, train, and succeed. Fourth, both require the active testing of oneself. And finally, both include an obligation to challenge others.

COMPETITION & EPISTEMOLOGY

The first step toward realizing the connection between athletic competition and Socratic philosophy is to understand athletic agōn in epistemological terms. That

is, we must first recognize the underlying goal of athletic competition as knowledge and truth. Athletes and spectators alike are drawn to competition by the prospect of learning or proving something. The athletes want to learn about themselves and their competitors, the spectators want to learn what will happen when men and women challenge themselves and each other on the field of competition. As with all knowledge-seeking activities, the start of any athletic competition is characterized by uncertainty – we don't know what will happen (despite all our efforts at statistical prognostication) so we are intrigued to find out. Likewise, the end or result of competition is valued as a kind of knowledge; a resolution (if only temporary) of the initial uncertainty.

It is also important to note that the wisdom sought through sport is not just knowledge of some future event, such as who won and who lost, but an understanding of the reasons for that result. Knowing who crossed the finish line first is an important fact, but it is much less meaningful than understanding why this runner won and the other one lost. Think about Homer's account of the footrace at Patroclus' funeral games in the *Iliad* (XXIII, 823–880). It is certainly not enough just to know that Odysseus won and Ajax lost. The action of putting a ball in a goal or crossing a line scratched in the sand is, in itself, meaningless. The rules of the game may give it meaning within the particular sport, but to find its social meaning we must look beyond the game. The human story behind the victory is ultimately more interesting and important than the bare results. The meaning and worth of the drama in the *Iliad*'s footrace is contained entirely in the story of how and why Odysseus' victory was obtained and, most important, what that drama says about the competitors as human beings.

So athletic competition, like philosophy, is wisdom-loving and knowledge-seeking; an activity that aims not just for information but also for understanding.

QUESTIONING

Questioning is characteristic of Socrates in particular and philosophy in general. A close look reveals that athletic competition is also characterized by questions. Typically, Socratic dialogue centers on a “what is” (τίς ἐστιν) question such as: “What is piety?”, “What is courage?”, “What is self-control?” Socratic questions tend to concern morality and are widely viewed as attempts to define “parts” of *aretē* or virtue (although the evidence suggests that these “parts” derive from a single source so one cannot truly have courage, for example, without also having self-control). Beyond that theoretical discussion, however, Plato’s Socratic dialogues explore moral questions on another level by presenting characters who manifest different levels of the virtue in question. So in the dialogue *Euthyphro*, for example, the theoretical question “What is piety?” is complemented by such unspoken questions as: “Is Socrates pious?” (after all, he is about to go on trial for impiety) and “Is Euthyphro pious?” (Or as pious as his reputation and self-conception make him out to be?) A third dimension of moral questioning often overlooked in the dialogues is the self-exploration that takes place on the personal level by the participants in the dialogue (and, in most of our cases, by the reader of the dialogue).

Athletic competition is also characterized by questioning. There are overriding theoretical questions such as: “What does it take to win a championship?”. This is at least partly a question about moral virtues. Those who doubt the ethical relevance of athletic competition should remember that among the most common questions asked in sport is “Did the best man win?” The spectacle of athletic competition also explores questions of virtue as embodied in the competitors. We ask: “Will Odysseus’ courage and guile be enough to defeat the younger and swifter Ajax?” Finally, for the athlete in competition, the questions experienced are personal. To toe the starting line of a race, to prepare for a vault in gymnastics, to hear the whistle blow at the beginning of a match is to ask oneself: “Am I up to the challenge?” Or, to rephrase it in more ethical terms: “Am I the kind of person who can meet this challenge?” or “Do I have the virtue necessary to meet this challenge?” Of course, most athletes imagine this question in terms of winning and losing rather than morality, but victory is valued ultimately for the virtues associated with it (Reid, 1999). The crossing of the finish line is meaningless in and of itself, what’s desired is to be the kind of person who can achieve that goal.

Athletes understand that questions can be *experienced* spiritually and not just asked verbally. In this sense, the beginning of every competition is a kind of question. It is also important to notice when comparing athletic performance to philosophical questioning, that Socratic dialogue is active and interactive. In Plato’s *Euthyphro*, piety is practiced by Euthyphro and by Socrates, not just discussed. Euthyphro’s prosecution of his father and Socrates’ questioning of Euthyphro are activities – ethical performances – that are at least as instructive as the theoretical discussion. We seek to learn from what they do, not just from what they say. Furthermore, Plato took great pains (and was remarkably successful) to help his readers experience Socratic dialogue and not just read it from a distance. Readers are drawn into the dialogue and invited to question themselves: “Am I pious, courageous, self-controlled?” In the end these are the most important questions since one must examine one’s life as Socrates did and not just study what Socrates said in order to develop the virtues Socrates had. And so we can see that both athletic *agōn* and Socratic *elenchos* are characterized by questions. They pose questions about the nature of virtue, about who has that kind of virtue to the highest degree, and also (for the participant), about whether “I” have that kind of virtue.

ADMISSION OF FALLIBILITY

Embodied in the sincere asking of any question is the allowance on the part of the questioner that he or she does not know the answer. It is an admission of fallibility, a kind of humility that is characteristic of Socrates, and the object of his *elenchos*. Despite his unparalleled dedication to knowledge, Socrates was so sure of his ignorance that the oracle’s declaration that no one was wiser than he threw him for a loop. He knew that the oracle must be true, but he knew just as surely that he wasn’t wise at all. Next came the question “What could this mean?” Eventually he solved the puzzle by understanding wisdom just to be the admission of ignorance and he struck out to “help the god” by demonstrating others’ ignorance to them (*Apology* 23b ff). This activity didn’t make him popular and it is hard to see how it could be of any service until you start to think about what admitting ignorance does: it prepares you for learning. As long as I think I know the truth, I am not motivated to seek it. Socrates’ habit of reducing interlocutors to *aporia* (being at a loss) is benevolent in that it eliminates the illusion of knowledge and prepares them to learn. Of course admitting ignorance destroys one’s reputation for wisdom, so public experts such as Euthyphro and Ion are particularly reluctant to be interviewed by Socrates – but the truth of your ignorance can set you free to search for knowledge.

Sport requires a similar admission of fallibility. To enter into competition is to risk one's public reputation and even one's own self-conception. Athletes with perfect records or long winning streaks know this all too well. One bad day in an important competition, such as the Olympic Games, could seemingly erase a career-long winning streak. Even on a personal level, one's self-image can be destroyed. You can convince yourself that you can run a marathon as much as you'd like – there may be no doubt in your mind that you will win the race. But once the starting gun fires, those beliefs are at risk. Athletes always risk failure. They risk finding out something about themselves that they do not want to know. Because athletic *agōn* pursues the truth, it often destroys comfortable illusions about ourselves and others. On the other hand, we may discover virtues in ourselves that we never thought we had. But winning is only possible if you are able to risk losing, just as wisdom is only possible if you are able to admit ignorance.

To enter into a Socratic *elenchos*, you must be willing to accept questions from Socrates and to "say what you believe". You must offer truthful answers and take the chance that they won't survive exposure to the light of reason. So too in sport, you must offer your best performance and risk that it won't survive exposure to the competition. Socrates challenges the "performance" of his interlocutors as athletes challenge their competitors. But this constant risk, this admission of fallibility, creates the desire to learn, to train, to improve. From the recognition that we lack something, comes the desire to obtain it. Just as Lysis and Menexenus are committed to discovering the truth about friendship once Socrates reveals to them their ignorance of it, so too the defeated athlete returns to the gymnasium motivated to improve. Both *agōn* and philosophy are driven by the admission of imperfection.

TESTING OF ONESELF

In time the athlete and the philosopher become accustomed to confrontation with their own imperfection. Once the comfortable illusions are gone and the reality of our imperfection is fully realized, the focus shifts to improvement – to actively testing and improving oneself through competition and conversation. Socrates' willingness to talk with experts, his denial of being a teacher, and his insistence on asking the simplest questions all speak to his commitment to constantly test himself and his knowledge. It is not unlike a great tennis player constantly working on fundamentals. Such activities would not be necessary were he a god and therefore automatically wise. But Socrates simultaneously recognizes his imperfection and his potential for near-perfection, so he actively engages in the struggle to at least approximate the ideal of wisdom.

So too the athlete struggles to approximate the perfection of the gods. These images of the athlete's struggle against mortality, the gods' approval of this struggle, and the opportunity to achieve a kind of immortality through athletic victory are fairly common in ancient Greek culture. The struggles of modern athletes are not dissimilar. They enter into competition and discover their weaknesses, they then work on those weaknesses in training and return to competition to gauge their progress in the struggle for perfection. That philosophy should represent a similar kind of struggle is only apparent when we look at it closely. *Agōn* is a struggle not just against the competition; it is symbolic of the more general struggle against the human imperfection that pervades life itself. We strive to approach the divine ideal and the testing helps us to rise above ourselves.

OBLIGATION TO CHALLENGE OTHERS

In Plato's famous allegory of the cave (Republic 514a–617a), we discover that the philosopher who so valiantly releases himself from the shackles of his senses, who turns from the fire, claws his way up to the mouth of the cave, whose eyes finally adjust to the bright rays of the real sun so that he may see at last the world of ideas as it is – that this philosopher has an obligation to descend back into the darkness and help others up the same path. And since Socrates is the closest thing to an example of this person that Plato offers, we might conclude that this obligatory service takes the form of questioning others. Socrates called himself "a gadfly" sent by god to stir up the lazy horse of Athens – to incite them to improve, to seek wisdom and *aretē*. He views his practice of questioning and revealing the ignorance of others as a mission that actually "helps the god" (Apolo-*gy* 23b ff).

So too, athletes, even once they have become champions, are expected to challenge others in competition – they must continue to struggle to improve themselves and goad others to do the same. "Resting on your laurels" is a derogatory concept in sport. Yet it would seem that if winning were everything in sport, an athlete would never descend back into the darkness of competition – where the victory could be erased by a defeat. The champion would never accept the challenge of underlings, since his or her status is so very fragile and age is the enemy of athletic performance. At first glance, this aspect of the ethos of sport and the ethos of philosophy is equally inexplicable in either practice. The obligation to challenge others and to continue to challenge yourself after such important goals have been met seems strange... Unless the real goal is something bigger than ourselves. How can the retired world record holder so heartily applaud the upstart who improves on his mark? How can the aging professor coax brilliance from her struggling doctoral

student? Is it because the love of wisdom and the love of athletic competition are ultimately a love for excellence itself – not just as manifest in ourselves as individuals, but excellence in general in all its manifestations?

CONCLUSION

In this essay, I have tried to argue that athletic competition, when approached properly, has the potential to be experienced as Socratic philosophy. I have shown at least five similarities between the two practices: both are (1) knowledge-seeking, (2) characterized by questioning, (3) require an admission of fallibility, (4) encourage the constant and active testing of oneself, and (5) include an obligation to challenge others. Based on this last observation, I suggested that *agōn* and *elenchos* have a fundamental connection based on the shared value of excellence.

I must admit, however, that the connection between athletics and philosophy is anything but automatic. You can read a Socratic dialogue, perhaps even meet Socrates in person, and learn little from the experience. Recall Euthyphro's hurry to prosecute his father for impiety, just at the point when it becomes clear that he has no consistent idea of what piety is. On the other hand, you can learn volumes about yourself and about virtue from the same experience. The short dialogue Euthyphro has done more good for the millions of college students who read it than it seems to have done for its namesake.

Likewise, many athletes have grandly successful careers seemingly untainted by reflection about virtue or excellence. On the contrary, lives of athletes seem to be characterized by vice and excess. Even Plato criticized their lack of moderation (Republic 410cff). But just as the sophists struggled to distinguish *technē* and *aretē* in a world that rewards practical skill more than virtue, athletes tend to lose sight of virtue when strength, skill, and sometimes chemical aids form a shorter path to victory. In both sports and life, *technē* may bring success, but *aretē* is the real and lasting prize. The obligation is on teachers, coaches, but especially athletes and philosophers themselves to communicate this difference to others, while rendering their own lives and activities "examined" and therefore, in the words of Socrates, worthwhile.

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ATLETICKÉ SOUTĚŽENÍ JAKO SOKRATOVSKÁ FILOSOFIE (Souhrn anglického textu)

Není překvapivé tvrdit, že cílem jak atletického soutěžení, tak i sokratovské filosofie je dosáhnout ctnosti, lidské dokonalosti či *areté*. Podrobnější pohled však ukazuje, že jejich podobnost je ještě mnohem hlubší. V tomto příspěvku ukazují, že atletické soutěžení a sokratovská filosofie, tak jak ji známe z Platónových raných dialogů, jsou ideálně podobné. Pro podporu této teze nabízím pět bodů srovnání. Především jak *agōn*, tak i *elenchos* jsou v zásadě aktivitami hledání poznání, jejichž cílem je nalézt pravdu a porozumění. Zadruhé se obě vyznačují otázkami, které se snaží nalézt pochopení morálních pojmů na osobní, obecné a ideální úrovni. Zatřetí vyžadují obě činnosti přijetí omylnosti a rizika selhání, což motivuje touhu učit se, cvičit se a dosahovat úspěchu. Začtvrté obě vyžadují aktivní sebeověřování. Konečně obě zahrnují povinnost vyzývat ostatní.

Klíčová slova: Sokrates, Platón, agon, atletika, soutěžení, filosofie, sokratovská metoda.

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