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**Plato's Gymnastic Dialogues<sup>2</sup>**

It is not mere coincidence that several of Plato's dialogues are set in gymnasia and *palaistrai* (wrestling schools), employ the gymnastic language of stripping, wrestling, tripping, even helping opponents to their feet, and imitate in argumentative form the athletic contests (*agōnes*) commonly associated with that place. The main explanation for this is, of course, historical. Sophists, orators, and intellectuals of all stripes, including the historical Socrates, really did frequent Athens' gymnasia and *palaistrai* in search of ready audiences and potential students.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps they were following the example of Pythagoras, who may have been a boxing coach (*gymnastēs*) and was, in any case, associated with the extraordinary Olympic success of athletes from his adopted Croton—success so great it generated the saying that the last of the Crotonites was the first among all other Greeks.<sup>4</sup> After his visit to Western Greece, Plato famously established his school in or

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<sup>2</sup> This paper was originally presented to the Society for Ancient Greek Philosophy in 2015. I thank Mark Ralkowski for suggestions on this revision.

<sup>3</sup> For an overview of philosophers' activity in Athens gymnasia, see John Patrick Lynch, *Aristotle's School* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972).

<sup>4</sup> Strabo (*Geog.* 6.1.12) reports the relationship in a story recounting the origin of the proverb. Stephen G. Miller discusses Croton's athletic success in *Ancient Greek Athletics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 233 ff. Additional details on the link between philosophy and athletics in Croton can be found in Nigel Spivey, "Pythagoras and the Origins of Olympic Ideology," in Barbara Goff and Michael Simpson, eds. *Thinking the Olympics* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011) 21-39, and J-M Roubineau, *Milon de Croton ou l'invention de sport* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2016).

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adjacent to the Academy gymnasium in Athens, and he may have held the public office of Gymnasiarch there.<sup>5</sup> In this essay, I would like to argue that there are also symbolic reasons for Plato setting some of his dialogues in gymnasia. These dialogues *function* as virtual gymnasia in which readers are coached by the character of Socrates toward an innovative ideal of *aretē* (virtue, excellence).

### ***Aretē* and the Gymnasium**

Taking the last claim first, we must remember that *aretē's* oldest associations were with athleticism. Gods such as Zeus and Hermes, and heroes such as Heracles and Achilles, were endowed with the strength and beauty that athletes strove to emulate. Unlike mere mortals, however, gods and heroes never trained—their *aretē* derived directly from their full or partial divinity, and it was naturally accompanied by wisdom and eloquence. The beauty and athleticism of aristocratic mortals was likewise attributed to divine heredity and thought to require no special training. However, the rise of athletic festivals, the Olympic Games in particular, eroded such beliefs by revealing that athletic *aretē* could be acquired through training. Even as aristocrats employed professional coaches and gravitated toward equestrian events in the effort to defend their "natural superiority" using the weapon of their wealth, public gymnasia proliferated as places where *aretē* might be cultivated among all youth with the leisure to do so. In the beginning, these gymnasia were basically parks with little else besides groves of trees, shaded walking paths, open areas for exercise, a variety of religious monuments, and easy access to water for bathing.<sup>6</sup> Aristophanes's description of the Academy in *Clouds* (1005-1008) as a leafy park where "the plane-tree whispers

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<sup>5</sup> The argument for this is made convincingly by Stephen G Miller, *The Berkeley Plato: From Neglected Relic to Ancient Treasure* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2009). Miller interprets "The Berkeley Plato," a portrait herm of Plato adorned with athletic victory ribbons as evidence for his role as gymnasiarch.

<sup>6</sup> For an overview of the Greek gymnasium, see Jean Delorme, *Gymnasion: Étude sur les monuments consacrés à l'éducation en Grèce* (Paris: E. de Boccard, 1960).

to the elm” and where good young men go to exercise and socialize illustrates the early gymnasium of virtue well.<sup>7</sup>

As the idea took hold that even aristocratic young men needed some form of higher education to perfect their natural *aretē*, private, urban *palaistrai* were constructed to facilitate this. They were more convenient than the public gymnasia located on the periphery, and access to them could be controlled. It is just such a facility that Hippothales pulls Socrates into at the beginning of *Lysis*, as the philosopher is making his way between two public gymnasia, the Academy and the Lyceum (203a). Given that gymnasia and *palaistrai* were recognized as places for training *aretē*, it is no surprise that they attracted teachers of oratory and argumentation, since eloquence and debating skill were also considered signs of excellence. In *Antidosis*, the rhetorician Isocrates argues that *aretē* is achieved through parallel training in the “twin arts” of philosophy and gymnastics, which “employ similar methods of instruction and exercise.”<sup>8</sup> By “philosophy,” however, Isocrates intends the art of oratory, which imparts what he calls worthwhile *aretē*—in contrast with those who “profess to turn men to a life of temperance and justice...a kind of virtue and wisdom which is ignored by the rest of the world and disputed among themselves.”<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Aristophanes, *Aristophanes Comoediae*, ed. F.W. Hall and W.M. Geldart, vol. 2. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1907): ἀλλ' εἰς Ἀκαδημείαν κατιῶν ὑπὸ ταῖς μορίαις ἀποθρέξει/ στεφανωσάμενος καλάμῳ λευκῷ μετὰ σώφρονος ἡλικιώτου,/ μίλακος ὄζων καὶ ἀπραγμοσύνης καὶ λευκῆς φυλλοβολούσης,/ ἦρος ἐν ὥρᾳ χαίρων, ὅπῃ πλάτανος πετελέα ψιθυρίζη.

<sup>8</sup> Isocrates, *Antidosis*, trans. G. Norlin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), 182: ἀντιστρόφους καὶ σύζυγας καὶ σφίσιν αὐταῖς ὁμολογουμένας, δι' ὧν οἱ προεστῶτες αὐτῶν τὰς τε ψυχὰς φρονιμωτέρας καὶ τὰ σώματα χρησιμώτερα παρασκευάζουσιν, οὐ πολὺ διαστησάμενοι τὰς παιδείας ἀπ' ἀλλήλων, ἀλλὰ παραπλησίαις χρώμενοι καὶ ταῖς διδασκαλίαις καὶ ταῖς γυμνασίαις καὶ ταῖς ἄλλαις ἐπιμελείαις.

<sup>9</sup> Isocrates, *Antidosis*, 84. ἀλλὰ μὴν καὶ τῶν ἐπὶ τὴν σωφροσύνην καὶ τὴν δικαιοσύνην προσποιουμένων προτρέπειν ἡμεῖς ἂν ἀληθέστεροι καὶ χρησιμώτεροι φανεῖμεν ὄντες. οἱ μὲν γὰρ παρακαλοῦσιν ἐπὶ τὴν ἀρετὴν καὶ τὴν φρόνησιν τὴν ὑπὸ τῶν ἄλλων μὲν ἀγνοουμένην, ὑπ' αὐτῶν δὲ τούτων ἀντιλεγόμενην, ἐγὼ δ' ἐπὶ τὴν ὑπὸ πάντων ὁμολογουμένην.

Isocrates's thinly-veiled reference to Socrates here should remind us that the Platonic understanding of *aretē* as a highly intellectualized “health of the soul” to be achieved through dialectical *agōn* must have been a radical innovation in its day. Isocrates, like many people, envisioned gymnastics as education strictly for the body and rhetorical education as sufficient for intellectual virtue. Plato's Socrates, however, explicitly rejects the former idea in *Republic*,<sup>10</sup> and attacks the latter with his own thinly veiled reference to Isocrates toward the end of *Euthydemus* as someone who fails to teach his students how to *use* their rhetorical skills, and thereby proving that “the art of speech writing is not the one a man would be happy if he acquired” (289d). This “art of happiness” is, instead, the Platonic idea of *aretē*, and Plato's gymnastic dialogues not only make the case—in opposition to his educational rivals—that there is a philosophical component of *aretē* which must be trained separately from (though not exclusive of) technical training in gymnastics, military arts, argumentation, and oratory, they also provide that training for their readers to some degree. Indeed some of them may have been written for the express purpose of being read and discussed in Plato's Academy.

### The Philosophical Gymnasium

Reading and discussion would not have been the only activities taking place at Plato's Academy. In fact, the kind of building where such discussions usually took place, does not appear at the Academy until decades after Plato's school is established.<sup>11</sup> Rather, Plato would have directed all the traditional

<sup>10</sup> Socrates says, instead, that both *gymnastikē* and *mousikē* were established “chiefly for the sake of the soul,” concluding further down: “It seems, then, that a god has given music and physical training to human beings not, except incidentally, for the body and the soul, but for the spirited and wisdom-loving parts of the soul itself, in order that these may be in harmony with one another, each being stretched and relaxed to an appropriate degree” (411e). This and all other English translations of Plato are taken from John Cooper, ed., *Plato: Complete Works* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997).

<sup>11</sup> Plato's school was inaugurated around 387 BCE. At the Academy, there is no archaeological evidence of a *palaistra* until the second half of the fourth

activities of the gymnasium toward the goal of improving the soul.<sup>12</sup> In Plato's dialogues, music, gymnastics, military training, and even erotic relationships are reinterpreted to promote Plato's philosophical understanding of *aretē*.<sup>13</sup> At *Republic* 410c, Socrates says specifically that the goal of music and gymnastics is to harmonize the soul<sup>14</sup>—a declaration that reveals two key assumptions behind Plato's gymnastic philosophy. The first is that the soul is the origin of human movement,<sup>15</sup> so moving the body

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century BCE. See Ada Caruso, *Akademia: Archeologia di una scuola filosofica ad Atene da Platone a Proclo* (Athens: Scuola Archaeological Italiana di Atene Pandemos, 2013).

<sup>12</sup> This is the general thesis of "Plato's Gymnasium" in Heather L. Reid, *Athletics and Philosophy in the Ancient World: Contests of Virtue* (London: Routledge, 2011), 66-68.

<sup>13</sup> Plato uses his own athletic analogy to provide a vivid illustration of the harmonious (and therefore just and virtuous) soul in another dialogue, *Phaedrus*. There, the tripartite *psychē* is likened to a two-horse chariot, the charioteer apparently representing the rational part of the soul, one good and noble horse the spirited part of the soul, and a second unruly horse the appetitive part (246ab). The chariot-soul's struggle for *aretē* is described as an upward climb toward truth and divinity that is especially difficult for humans because "the heaviness of the bad horse drags its charioteer toward the earth and weighs him down if he has failed to train it well" (247b). Keeping in mind the popularity of chariot racing in the ancient games, and noting the passage's use of athletic language such as *ponos* (effort) and *agōn* (contest), we might recognize a connection between the *psychē*'s struggle for virtue and the athlete's struggle for victory. Both struggles, like the chariot, require the harmonization and cooperation of all the soul's parts in order to achieve their goals. Perhaps Plato is suggesting that the athletic struggle for victory can prepare one's soul for its lifelong struggle for virtue. For the full argument see H.L. Reid, "Sport as Moral Education in Plato's *Republic*," *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* 34:2 (2007): 160-175, 163.

<sup>14</sup> At *Republic* 410c, Socrates says that both *gymnastikē* and *mousikē* were established "chiefly for the sake of the soul," concluding further down that "a god has given music and physical training to human beings not, except incidentally, for the body and the soul, but for the spirited and wisdom-loving parts of the soul itself, in order that these may be in harmony with one another, each being stretched and relaxed to an appropriate degree" (411e).

<sup>15</sup> In fact, for Homer, the *psychē* was life itself and the word for body, *sōma*, signified a corpse—a body lacking in movement because its *psychē* had

can actually train the soul. The second is that *aretē* (virtue, excellence) is understood as a kind of health and harmony in the soul, which, like bodily health, requires continual exercise or training (*askēsis*).<sup>16</sup> This exercise can be either physical or intellectual (ideally, it would be both). The issue is not so much the activity as its orientation. It needs to aim at Platonic virtue, which is to say at improvement of the soul, which is to say wisdom, which is to say philosophy.

In contrast with the conventional idea of a *kaloskagathos* (beautiful and good person), Plato's is an inside-out understanding of *aretē*, athleticism, and beauty. For him, even athleticism is a property of the soul—so much so that he imagines the athletic female Atalanta choosing to be reincarnated in a male body (*Republic* 620b). Socrates states clearly that a fit body does not produce virtue in the soul, but rather that the soul's *aretē* makes the body as good as possible (*Republic* 403d). Likewise, it is not victory that makes an argument valuable. And it is not mere eloquence that makes a speech admirable (*kalon*). Rather it is the *aretē* in a person's soul that renders all their actions—from argumentation to athletics—beautiful and good (*kala-kagatha*). The problem is that most people think, like Isocrates, that skill (*technē*) in athletics, argumentation, oratory, or whatever is sufficient for *aretē*. It is, after all, sufficient for Olympic victory, prevailing in lawsuits, and persuading large crowds. As Socrates argued in Plato's *Apology*, however, craftsmen's knowledge enables them to

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escaped it at death. Plato uses the word *sōma* to signify living bodies and he considers the *psychē* to be the seat of reason, but he does not seem to have abandoned the idea that the *psychē*, and most specifically the spirited part of the soul, *thymos*, is what moves the body. For an excellent discussion of these terms and ideas, see Bruno Snell, *The Discovery of the Mind in Greek Philosophy and Literature* (New York: Dover, 1982), 8-22. For an update, see Brooke Holmes, *The Symptom and the Subject: The Emergence of the Physical Body in Ancient Greece* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2010).

<sup>16</sup> Plato uses the virtue-as-health analogy in many dialogues. Here is one example from *Republic*: "Virtue seems, then, to be a kind of health, fine condition, and well-being of the soul, while vice is disease, shameful condition, and weakness" (444de).

perform their skill well, but it does not amount to *aretē* because it does not empower them to direct that skill toward the good (22d).

So a primary task of Plato's gymnasium, and of his gymnastic dialogues is to distinguish this innovative conception of *aretē* from its conventional association with athletic, oratorical, and argumentative *technē*. The health of the soul is the aim of every gymnastic activity and every gymnastic dialogue. The beginning of *Laches* even recounts a deliberation about this. A pair of fathers comes for counsel from two generals on educating their sons in military virtue. They are watching a demonstration of fighting in armor (presumably at a gymnasium), but all parties eventually agree that their goal is "a form of study for the sake of the souls of young men" (185de). They decide that worthy teachers would be "good themselves and have tended the souls of many young men" (186a). Socrates goes on to lament disingenuously that he lacked the money to be made "*kalon te kagathon*" by a sophist and says he is "unable to discover the art, even now" (186c). It turns out, however, that Socrates is exactly the instructor they need. Likewise, in the gymnastic dialogues, Socrates coaches readers by demonstrating his method, defeating dangerous views, and being an (unexpected) example of *aretē*. The dialogues also challenge readers to engage in dialectic and test their own understandings of *aretē*—which turns out to be a process that actually cultivates *aretē* in them.

### Stripping and Exposure

Plato's gymnastic dialogues generally begin—as any visit to a gymnasium would—with stripping. Here, it is the metaphorical stripping of Socrates's sophistic opponents and the exposure of their *technai* as inadequate for achieving *aretē*. *Euthydemus* is actually set in the *apodyterion* (undressing room) of the Lyceum gymnasium.<sup>17</sup> Scholars call the process *elenchos*—which means to

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<sup>17</sup> *Euthydemus* 272e. Socrates comments that Euthydemus and Dionysodorus joined him after making just two or three laps of the "*katastegnō dromō*" (273a). Since it was while walking around this covered walkway that philosophers worked out their theories (this may even be a specific

test, examine, refute, and even to shame. In the gymnastic dialogues it serves as consumer due diligence, since the sophists being examined are generally selling instruction in *aretē*. When Socrates asks Euthydemus what he teaches, the response is clear: "Virtue," he says, "and we think we can teach it better than anyone else and more quickly" (*Euthydemus* 273d). As Socrates counsels Hippocrates in *Protagoras*, however, "the sophist is really a sort of merchant or dealer (*kapēlos*) in provisions on which a soul is nourished," and just as vendors may hawk unwholesome food in the marketplace, sophists may be "ignorant which of their wares is good or bad for the soul" (313cd).<sup>18</sup> Socrates says in *Laches* that he was too poor to buy *kalokagathia* (186c), but the real point is that *kalokagathia* cannot be bought, it has to be trained—separately from skills like argumentation, rhetoric, and wrestling—through philosophy.

Socrates's stripping and exposure of the sophists does not imply that their skills are worthless, just that they are inadequate as education for *aretē*. Socrates demonstrates that Gorgias's *technē* of persuasion is achieved without understanding (454e-455a). And when Socrates points out that such skills may be abused, Gorgias defends himself with an athletic analogy:

Imagine someone who after attending a wrestling school, getting his body into good shape and becoming a boxer, went on to strike his father and mother or any family member or friend. By Zeus, that's no reason to hate physical trainers." (*Gorgias* 456d)

It is, however, a reason to think that supplemental moral education is needed. The point is reinforced by the example of Euthydemus and Dionysodorus, who are described by Socrates as *pancratists* capable of fighting not only in athletic contests, but also in the battle (*agōn*) of the law courts. "They have become so skilled in

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reference to the *peripatos* that eventually gave Aristotle's school its name), Socrates's comment may suggest that they are not "real philosophers" but are offering some quick and cheap substitute.

<sup>18</sup> W.R.M. Lamb trans., *Plato in Twelve Volumes* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967).

fighting in arguments," Socrates concludes, "[they can refute] whatever may be said, no matter whether it is true or false" (*Euthydemus* 271c-272b). Aristophanes had long since warned us of the danger of such skills. Just as the athlete needs a sense of the good in order to orient his skills toward virtuous action, skills in persuasion and argumentation need philosophical guidance.

The stripping and exposure of Socratic *elenchos*, like stripping for exercise in a gymnasium, should not be seen as an exercise in humiliation. As the myth in *Gorgias* shows, fair judgment of *aretē* requires psychic nudity—both for the judge and the judged. In that myth, Zeus puts a stop to bad judgment in the afterlife by requiring that both judges and judged be naked.

Next, they must be judged when they're stripped naked of all [worldly adornments], for they should be judged when they're dead. The judge, too, should be naked, and dead, and with only his soul he should study only the soul of each person immediately upon his death, when he's isolated from all his kinsmen and has left behind on earth all that adornment, so that the judgment may be a just one." (*Gorgias* 523e)

The judgment takes place after death, because that is when the soul is stripped of its biggest adornment, the body (524d). Socrates believes that injustice and incontinence—in other words, lack of virtue—make the soul ugly (*Gorgias* 525a). *Aretē* is what makes souls beautiful, and like the athletic fitness that makes bodies beautiful, it requires gymnastic training that begins with stripping down.

### Training with the Master

Socrates, for his part, says he'll "reveal to the judge a soul that's as healthy as it can be." He says he'll do this by disregarding the things that most people care about and by "practicing truth" (*Gorgias* 526de). The verb he uses, *askein*, is most properly applied to athletic training or exercise. "Practicing truth" or "practicing wisdom and virtue" (*Euthydemus* 283a) are both short, gymnastic answers to the very complicated question of how Socratic *aretē*

might be achieved. They make it clear, however, that *aretē* is achieved in and through activity, and—like any skilled activity—they suggest that it must be learned through a kind of apprenticeship. It is not simply a matter of conventional knowledge, of memorizing formulas or recognizing terminology. As in the acquisition of a second language, we not only have to learn the vocabulary and grammar, we need to be able to speak, ultimately without effort and conscious calculation. And one of the first things we look for in learning this and other skills is a master, one who consistently demonstrates excellence in the desired skill.

In *Laches*, Socrates emerges as a master of virtue, first because "he is always spending his time in places where the young men engage in any study or noble pursuit of the sort you are looking for" (*Laches* 180c), and second because he has demonstrated his valor in battle, his *aretic* art has a recognizably excellent product. Says Laches, "He marched with me in the retreat from Delium, and I can tell you that if the rest had been willing to behave in the same manner, our city would be safe and we would not then have suffered a disaster" (181b). Laches observes that Socrates not only discusses virtue, his actions also demonstrate virtue. He compares this to a musical "harmony" that is "genuinely Greek" (188d). Socrates reinforces the harmony metaphor at *Gorgias* 482bc, noting he would rather have everyone disagree with him "than to be out of harmony with [himself]." Plato's depiction of Socrates in the gymnastic dialogues, and especially in the *Apology*, is clearly presented as an example to be imitated. He is a kind of *aretic* hero and his story as presented by Plato may be analogous to Achilles's story in the *Iliad*.

But Socrates's *aretē* is something different from Achilles's, and besides the heroic task of defeating sophistic monsters (a task he refers to as "labors" (*ponoi*), evoking Heracles, at *Apology* 22a), we might ask just how Socrates is actually "training" *aretē* in the gymnastic dialogues. The answer comes back to the issue of guidance and orientation. Like athletes and heroes, Socrates engages in dialectical struggle (*agōn*), but unlike *eristics* and rhetoricians, the goal of his *agōn* is wisdom. The subject of this *agōn*, furthermore, is *aretē*. And so there is a kind of double

movement—it is by struggling to understand what *aretē* is that we cultivate it. The concept is illustrated in *Laches* with a metaphor about putting sight into eyes.

Suppose we know that sight, when added to the eyes, makes better those eyes to which it is added, and furthermore, we are able to add it to the eyes, then clearly we know what this very thing sight is, about which we should be consulting as to how one might obtain it most easily and best. (*Laches* 190ab)

To put virtue into the soul, likewise, we must first strive to understand what virtue is. And it is through the attempt to understand what virtue is—the directing of our discussion toward wisdom—that we begin to achieve it.

### Training One's Sights on Wisdom

In the gymnastic dialogues, virtue almost always turns out to be some kind of wisdom. In *Laches*, it is wisdom that makes “endurance of the soul” good and beautiful (*kalē kagathē*) (192c). Eventually, the argument leads to the hypothesis that courage amounts to the knowledge of good and evil (199cd). This is rejected, but only because it would imply that courage is no different from the other parts of virtue (i.e., justice, temperance, and piety) and they had previously agreed that courage could only be part of virtue (199e); but this is not Plato's considered view. In *Euthydemus* it is established that wisdom obviates any need for good fortune (280b) because it allows us to put goods such as wealth and health and beauty (and perhaps even skills like argumentation) to good use—to render them beneficial (281ab). Concludes Socrates,

it seems likely that with respect to all the things we called good in the beginning, the correct account is not that in themselves they are good by nature, but rather as follows: if ignorance controls them, they are greater evils than their opposites, to the extent that they are more capable of complying with a bad master; but if good sense and wisdom (*phronēsis kai sophia*) are in control, they are

greater goods. In themselves, however, neither sort is of any value.” (*Euthydemus* 281de)

The wisdom appropriate to *aretē* turns out to be a kind of art (*technē*), but it is a special kind that rules over the other arts—directing them toward the good. As Socrates tells young Clinias, “what we need, my fair friend...is a kind of knowledge which combines making and knowing how to use the thing which it makes” (*Euthydemus* 289b). In the end this is identified as a “kingly art” (*basilikē technē*) which rules all the products of the other crafts (291d). This metaphor of wise management will be perfected in *Republic*, but it is present in the gymnastic dialogues like *Gorgias* as well.

The best way in which the excellence (*aretē*) of each thing comes to be present in it, whether it's that of an artifact or of a body or a soul as well, or of any animal, is not just any old way, but is due to whatever organization, correctness, and craftsmanship is bestowed on each of them. (*Gorgias* 506d)<sup>19</sup>

Ultimately, the *Gorgias* describes virtue as a kind of “helmsmanship, which saves not only souls, but also bodies and valuables from the utmost dangers.” (511d).<sup>20</sup> Socrates's ability to “steer” his trial and execution, despite their apparent injustice, toward the ideals of virtue and justice is a paradigmatic example of this navigational *aretē*. By his example in the dialogue, furthermore, he guides not just his interlocutors, but also attentive readers toward the good.

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<sup>19</sup> “ἀλλὰ μὲν διῆ ἢ γε ἀρετῆ ἐκάστου, καὶ σκεύους καὶ σώματος καὶ ψυχῆς αὐτῶν καὶ ζώου παντός, οὐ τῷ εἰκῆ κάλλιστα παραγίγνεται, ἀλλὰ τάξει καὶ ὀρθότητι καὶ τέχνῃ, ἣτις ἐκάστῳ ἀποδέδοται αὐτῶν: ἄρα ἔστιν ταῦτα;”

<sup>20</sup> The nautical imagery appears also at *Laws* 803a-b: “I'm trying to distinguish for you the various ways in which our character shapes the kind of life we live; I really am trying to ‘lay down the keel,’ because I'm giving proper consideration to the way we should try to live—to the “character-keel” we need to lay if we are going to sail through this voyage of life successfully.”

Socrates not only theorizes his understanding of *aretē* as guidance toward the good, he demonstrates it like a good coach should, and even invites his charges to get involved. In *Euthydemus*, Socrates matches the argumentative skill of the “pancratist” brothers, defeating them repeatedly at their own game. The ultimate point is that argument must be more than just a game if it is to lead to wisdom and virtue. Socrates describes Dionysodorus picking up the argument “as though it were a ball” and aiming at the boy, Clinias (*Euthydemus* 277b). The philosopher also intervenes to encourage Clinias while “Euthydemus was hastening to throw the young man for the third fall,” as in wrestling (277d). Ultimately Euthydemus and Dionysodorus fail not because they lack skill but because they aim at victory rather than wisdom. Their argument, says Socrates, has the old trouble of falling down itself in the process of knocking down others (288a). The misuse of argumentation for sport reduces it to child’s play or frivolity (*paidia*) because, as Socrates puts it,

even if a man were to learn many or even all such things, he would be none the wiser as to how matters stand but would only be able to make fun of people, tripping them up and overturning them by means of the distinctions in words, just like the people who pull the chair out from under a man who is going to sit down and then laugh gleefully when they see him sprawling on his back. (*Euthydemus* 278bc)

The frivolous *paidia* of Euthydemus and Dionysodorus contrasts starkly with their advertised goal of *paideia* (education).

Misdirection from lack of virtue not only prevents a *technē* from being beneficial, it can prevent the *technē* from truly being a *technē* at all. This is the thought behind Socrates’s accusation in *Gorgias* that oratory isn’t a craft, but merely a “knack” because all it really produces is gratification and pleasure (462a-c). He goes on to characterize it as “flattery” (*kolakeia*)—something that actively corrupts a true craft, the way cosmetics corrupts gymnastics and

pastry-baking corrupts medicine.<sup>21</sup> Flattery “guesses at what is pleasant with no consideration for what is best” (464d-465c), thereby sacrificing what is truly good and noble in favor of a more easily achieved appearance of it. Socrates accuses oratory of flattering justice, whereas it and every other craft “is always to be used in support of what’s just” (527c).<sup>22</sup> The tendency to engage in flattery is only exacerbated by the commercial pressures alluded to in *Protagoras*. If a teacher’s goal is to make money, the temptation to aim one’s craft at pleasure rather than truth can be strong. But the good man, as Socrates points out in *Gorgias*, always keeps his product in view (503de). That product for the craftsman of virtue is good and beautiful actions, which derive from *aretē*, which derives from the love and pursuit of wisdom (*philosophia*).

### Readers Are Expected to Engage in *Aretic* Gymnastics

Philosophy turns out to be the “practice of *aretē*” and the gymnastic dialogues provide a “place” where the reader is invited to practice philosophy. The experience may be more analogous to an engaged spectator at a wrestling match than to actually competing in a wrestling match. But, like an engaged spectator, we learn to discern the most skillful moves and responses, and perhaps to anticipate them mentally as the dialogue goes forward. The *aporetic* nature of these works—the fact that no final answer to the questions they pose is given—invites us to continue the debate with friends or even in our own minds. We may be rooting for Socrates in the debate, but we are not supposed to imagine him having the answer. He is an experienced coach or guide, searching

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<sup>21</sup> Socrates explains with an analogy between fitness in the body and fitness in the soul. Just as cosmetic may create the mere appearance of bodily fitness, which is properly gained through gymnastics, oratory may create the mere appearance of virtue in the soul, which is properly gained through philosophy (*Gorgias* 464a). See Dombrowski’s essay in this volume.

<sup>22</sup> Socrates points to himself as an example of the proper use of oratory, which he calls the political craft: “I believe that I’m one of a few Athenians—so as not to say I’m the only one, but the only one among our contemporaries—to take up the true political craft and practice the true politics. This is because the speeches I make on each occasion do not aim at gratification but at what’s best. They don’t aim at what’s most pleasant” (*Gorgias* 521de).

alongside us for wisdom: "For the things I say I certainly don't say with any knowledge at all; no, I'm searching together with you so that if my opponent clearly has a point, I'll be the first to concede it" (*Gorgias* 506a). Socrates even invites us readers, along with his interlocutors, to challenge his hypotheses. "Please don't falter in doing a friend a good turn," he says to Polus, "Refute me" (*Gorgias* 470c).

There is a sense that we, as readers, are competing with Socrates to understand *aretē*, but that is not the same as competing *against* him, and it is not for victory that we are competing. We are competing, like enlightened athletes, for the sake of mutual improvement, for the sake of *aretē*. Socrates says he is pleased to have met Callicles, who challenged him so fiercely, because the argument has functioned for Socrates's soul like a stone used to test the purity of gold (*Gorgias* 486de). "You love to win," Callicles says to Socrates, and the philosopher does not deny it. "But it's not for love of winning (*philonikia*) that I'm asking you," he explains, "It's rather because I really do want to know" (*Gorgias* 515b). We compete with Socrates not for *philonikia*, but rather for *philosophia*. And *philosophia*, because it is love of wisdom and not some perfected state of wisdom, can be practiced even with opponents who care only about victory, or opponents who are nothing more than characters in a dialogue. We become philosophers in the Socratic sense by thinking about and debating virtue, and like every skill, we get better through practice. As the *Gorgias* concludes,

Nothing terrible will happen to you if you really are a *kaloskagathos*, one who practices excellence (*askōn aretein*). And then, after we've practiced it together [...] then we'll deliberate about whatever subject we please, when we're better at deliberating than we are now. (*Gorgias* 527d)

Even if the gymnastic dialogues fail to involve us in their debates, just as Socrates fails to get Theodorus to strip and wrestle with Theaetetus in the dialogue of the same name, it is enough that they inspire us to love wisdom—since it is that love that orients the "helmsman" of virtue, just as surely as the stars orient the

helmsman of a ship. Socrates sets the example, commenting in *Gorgias* that just as lovers believe whatever their beloved says, he believes whatever his beloved, *Philosophy*, says, "and she's by far less fickle than my other beloved" [i.e., Alcibiades] (482a). In *Euthydemus*, the boy Clinias is exhorted that it is "necessary to love wisdom" (282d), "become wise and good" (282e), and to "practice (*askein*) wisdom and virtue" (283a). The argument with Dionysodorus has been an "incitement to virtue" (283b). Every gymnastic dialogue is likewise an incitement to philosophy, and therefore virtue. Most of them even end with a promise to continue the discussion—and most readers silently count themselves in on the promise. *Gorgias* ends with the good coach Socrates calling everyone "to this way of life, this contest (*agōn*), that I hold to be worth all the other contests in this life" (*Gorgias* 526e). And he exhorts us in *Euthydemus* to "pay no attention to the practitioners of philosophy but rather to the thing itself...to take it to heart, pursue it, and (*askē*) practice it" (307c).