

Gymnastics,  
Athletics,  
and Agon  
in Plato

edited by  
Heather L. Reid,  
Mark Ralkowski,  
and Coleen Zoller

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## Epigraphs

μέγας γάρ...ὁ ἀγών, ὦ φίλε Γλαύκων, μέγας, οὐχ ὅσος δοκεῖ,  
τὸ χρηστὸν ἢ κακὸν γενέσθαι

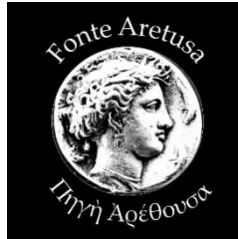
for the struggle to be good rather than bad is important,  
Glaucon, much more important than people think.

Plato, *Republic* 10.608b

παρακαλῶ δὲ καὶ τοὺς ἄλλους πάντας ἀνθρώπους, καθ' ὅσον  
δύναμαι, καὶ δὴ καὶ σὲ ἀντιπαρακαλῶ ἐπὶ τοῦτον τὸν βίον καὶ  
τὸν ἀγῶνα τοῦτον, ὃν ἐγὼ φημι ἀντὶ πάντων τῶν ἐνθάδε  
ἀγώνων εἶναι

And I call on all other people as well, as far as I can—and you  
especially I call on in response to your call—to this way of life,  
this contest, that I hold to be worth all the other contests in this  
life.

Plato, *Gorgias* 526e



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## Introduction

Staring back from the modern academy to the world of Classical Antiquity, it is easy to forget that the ancient Academy was a gymnasium and that Plato was an athlete—a wrestler serious enough to compete at the Isthmian Games—before he became a philosopher. The athletic settings, techniques and terminology that pepper his work are routinely overlooked, lost in translation, or written off as cultural commonplaces with little or no philosophical relevance.<sup>1</sup> To be sure, *agōn* was characteristic of ancient Greek culture in general,<sup>2</sup> but there is something special about Plato's relationship with athletics, gymnastics, and *agōn* that deserves attention from anyone wishing to understand his philosophy. The purpose of this book is to explore that relationship from a variety of perspectives. The sum of these accounts is far from comprehensive, but we hope it will serve as impetus to further study and more serious consideration of the agonism inherent in Plato's philosophy.

### Athletics

According to Diogenes Laertius (3.1.4), it was his coach, a wrestler named Ariston, who gave young Aristocles the nickname Plato, on account of his "*euexia*"—a gymnasium term that would be associated by Aristotle not just with good physical condition, but also moral virtue (*aretē*). The same passage confirms Plato's participation as a wrestler (probably as a

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Metcalf, *Philosophy as Agōn: A Study of Plato's Gorgias and Related Texts* (Evanston IL: Northwestern University Press, 2018) is a recent exception. Metcalf argues that Plato's philosophy is essentially agonistic, and he cites Nietzsche (*Twilight of the Idols* §23) as an authoritative precedent for the idea.

<sup>2</sup> A view primarily attributed to Jacob Burckhardt, *The Greeks and Greek Civilization*, ed. Oswyn Murray, trans. Sheila Stern (New York: St. Martin's, 1999). For a complete analysis, see Tobias Joho, "Burckhardt and Nietzsche on the *Agōn*: the dark luster of ancient Greece," in *Conflict and Competition: Agōn in Western Greece*, eds. H. Reid, J. Serrati, and T. Sorg (Sioux City: Parnassos Press, 2020), 267-288. Lisa Wilkinson, *Socratic Charis: Philosophy Without the Agon* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2013) challenges the idea, arguing that *agōn* is incompatible with equality, and thus democracy. She argues that Plato's dialogues may be more profitably read as challenging agonism.

boy) in the Panhellenic games at Isthmia.<sup>3</sup> Diogenes goes on to describe Plato meeting Socrates and beginning to study philosophy at the Academy (3.1.5), but we would be wrong to think of this place as a philosophical school. In those days it was simply a gymnasium, a parklike space reserved for nude exercise (*gymnastikē*) with little more than shaded paths, open areas for wrestling and games, a variety of religious monuments, and easy access to water for bathing.<sup>4</sup> At the Academy, there is no archaeological evidence of a *palaistra*—the square peristyle building with an open court for exercise, *exedrae*, and undressing rooms, sometimes called a gymnasium— until the second half of the fourth century BCE.<sup>5</sup> The Academy that Plato knew in his youth better resembled the one described in Aristophanes’s *Clouds*: a leafy park where “the plane-tree whispers to the elm.”<sup>6</sup>

Of course Aristophanes’s Academy is presented as the antithesis of Socrates’s “Thinkery,” but it would be rash to suggest that Plato is responsible for bringing philosophy into the gymnasium. Not only did Socrates, Antisthenes, Prodicus, and various other fifth-century intellectuals frequent gymnasia, they were all preceded by the proto-

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<sup>3</sup> Diogenes Laertius 3.1.4: “ἐγυμνάσατο δὲ παρὰ Ἀρίστωνι τῷ Ἀργεῖῳ παλαιστῆ: ἄφ’ οὗ καὶ Πλάτων διὰ τὴν εὐεξίαν μετωνομάσθη, πρότερον Ἀριστοκλῆς ἀπὸ τοῦ πάππου καλούμενος [ὄνομα], καθά φησιν Ἀλέξανδρος ἐν Διαδοχαῖς. ἔνιοι δὲ διὰ τὴν πλατύτητα τῆς ἐρμηνείας οὕτως ὀνομασθῆναι: ἢ ὅτι πλατὺς ἦν τὸ μέτωπον, ὡς φησι Νεάνθης. εἰσὶ δ’ οἱ καὶ παλαῖσαι φασιν αὐτὸν Ἴσθμοῖ, καθὰ καὶ Δικαίαρχος ἐν πρώτῳ Περὶ βίων.”

<sup>4</sup> On Greek gymnasia, see Jean Delorme, *Gymnasion: Etude sur les Monuments Consacres a l’Education en Grece* (Paris: Editions e. de Boccard, 1960).

<sup>5</sup> That is, decades after Plato’s school was inaugurated around 387 BCE. According to Delorme, *Gymnasion*, 325-329, the philosophical school at the Academy ultimately consisted of the garden, the house, the *mouseion*, and the *exedra*—which was probably built as a place to give lessons to the *ephebes*. For the archaeology of the Academy, see Ada Caruso, *Akademia: Archeologia di una scuola filosofica ad Atene da Platone a Proclo* (Athens-Paestum: Scuola Archaeologica Italiana di Atene, 2013), esp. 96-106.

<sup>6</sup> Aristophanes, *Clouds*, trans. Jeffrey Henderson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 1005-1008. The comedy was first performed in 423 BCE, when Plato would have been a young child.

philosopher Pythagoras.<sup>7</sup> Diogenes Laertius reports that in 588 BCE, the Olympic boxing crown was won by a Samian youth named Pythagoras, who triumphed by fighting “scientifically” despite having to compete against the men.<sup>8</sup> Like so many stories about Pythagoras, this one about Olympic victory is doubted, but the philosopher’s connection to athletics appears credible.<sup>9</sup> He was indisputably connected to Croton, a city noted for its dominance in the Olympic Games; and sources report a relationship with the city’s famed wrestler Milo.<sup>10</sup> Many of Plato’s ideas have roots in Pythagoreanism, perhaps even his decision to teach in a gymnasium—an act that followed his first trip to Western Greece, where athletics and

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<sup>7</sup> In addition to Plato, Xenophon, *Memorabilia*, 1.1.10, attests to Socrates’s habitual gymnasium visits. The Socratic Antisthenes (ca. 444-ca. 365 BCE) was said by Diogenes Laertius (6.10.13) to converse (*dialegetai*) in the Cynosarges gymnasium. Evidence for Prodicus’s presence in gymnasia comes from the pseudo-Platonic dialogue the *Eryxias* (399a-b), where the sophist is said to have been expelled from the Lyceum by the gymnasiarch for expressing dangerous views before a youthful audience.

<sup>8</sup> Diogenes Laertius (8.47): “Ερατοσθένης δέ φησι, καθὸ καὶ Φαβωρίνος ἐν τῇ ὀγδῶῃ Παντοδαπῆς ἱστορίας παρατίθεται, τοῦτον εἶναι τὸν πρῶτον ἐντέχνως πυκτεύσαντα ἐπὶ τῆς ὀγδῶς καὶ τετταρακοστῆς Ὀλυμπιάδος, κομήτην καὶ ἀλουργίδα φοροῦντα: ἐκκριθέντα τ’ ἐκ τῶν παίδων καὶ χλευασθέντα αὐτίκα προσβῆναι τοὺς ἄνδρας καὶ νικῆσαι.”

<sup>9</sup> This is the conclusion of Nigel Spivey, “Pythagoras and the Origins of Olympic Ideology,” in Barbara Goff and Michael Simpson, eds. *Thinking the Olympics* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011), 21-39. Pythagoras’s biographer Porphyry (15) reports that “Pythagoras trained the Samian athlete Eurymenes, who though he was of small stature, conquered at Olympia through his surpassing knowledge of Pythagoras’ wisdom.” The trainer story is denied by the more reliable biographer Iamblichus (25), but he nevertheless affirms that Pythagoras recruited athletes in Samos’s gymnasia (21) and went to the gymnasium in Croton as soon as he arrived (37). Iamblichus also relates that Pythagoreans were subject to a battery of tests (*dokimasia*), including their physical aspect (*eidōs*), gait (*poreia*) and ‘mobility’ (*kinēsis*) (71).

<sup>10</sup> Milo’s connections to Pythagoras and Pythagoreanism, including his marriage to Pythagoras’s daughter, Myia, are explained in detail by J-M Roubineau, *Milon de Croton ou l’invention de sport* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2016). An English review of the book by Heather L. Reid appears in *Classical Review* 67.2 (2017): 457-9.



Pythagoreanism were prominent.<sup>11</sup> Like Pythagoras, Plato believed that philosophy is not a skill, a profession, or even a subject of study, but rather a way of life that involves habituation or training (*ethos*), including daily exercise, and regular testing, which may take the form of athletic contest.<sup>12</sup>

We should not imagine that Plato himself, or any of his students, had Olympic victory as their goal. Athletics had become “professionalized” since Pythagoras’s day, and both *Republic* and *Laws* criticize the intense training required as an impediment to the pursuit of *aretē*.<sup>13</sup> He clearly sees value in competition, however, for men, women, children, and the community itself. In *Laws*, athletic festivals are to be held every month, and everyone in the community, including women and children, is encouraged—if not required—to compete.<sup>14</sup> Events include footraces ranging from 200 to 20,000 meters, almost all of them in armor (832e), as well as ballgames (830e), single and team combat events (833e), as well as armed equestrian events (834c). The function is partly martial: “if it helps us to train for war we must go in for it and put up prizes for the winners, but leave it strictly alone if it does not” (832e).<sup>15</sup> Ultimately, however, the goal of athletic contests in *Laws* is to preserve the “ways of virtue” (*agathon*) and to avoid injustice (*adikein*) from oneself and others (829ab). In his own life and in the ways of life he describes in his work, athletics has a role, but *aretē* is always the goal.

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<sup>11</sup> That Plato met with several Pythagoreans, especially Archytas or Taretum, on his trip west is attested by a variety of ancient sources, including the *Seventh Letter*. For an overview of the topic, see Heather Reid and Mark Ralkowski, eds., *Plato at Syracuse with a new translation of the Seventh Letter by Jonah Radding* (Sioux City: Parnassos Press, 2019).

<sup>12</sup> That Pythagoras thought this is attested by Aristotle (Fr. 195). Plato describes philosophy as a way of life at *Republic* 600ab.

<sup>13</sup> *Republic* 404a, *Laws* 807c. Ruobineau, *Milon de Croton*, argues credibly that the Pythagorean Milo was the first truly professional athlete.

<sup>14</sup> The festivals are discussed in *Laws* VIII. The text wavers on whether participation will be mandatory for everyone at all times, but clearly emphasizes that the rules will apply to men and women alike (829e). See H. Reid, “Plato on Women in Sport,” *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* 47:3 (2020): 1-18.

<sup>15</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all translations of Plato are from Plato, *Complete Works*, eds. John M. Cooper and D. S. Hutchinson (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997).

## Gymnastics

Athletic training and contests in an explicitly educational context are best described as gymnastics. Athletic contests and horse races (as well as dancing and hunting) are called *gymnastikē* at *Republic* 412b, not because they weren't part of the games, but because they were aimed at cultivating *aretē*.<sup>16</sup> Combining philosophy and gymnastics in education was not a new idea,<sup>17</sup> but most people thought the latter served only the body. Plato's Socrates explicitly rejects that idea at *Republic* 410c, saying, instead, that both *gymnastikē* and *mousikē* were established "chiefly for the sake of the soul." Gymnastics, in particular, is useful for harmonizing the spirited and wisdom-loving parts of the soul (411e). In other words, it promotes *aretē*, which is understood as a kind of health and harmony in the soul, which, like bodily health, requires exercise.<sup>18</sup> Since Plato believed that the soul is the origin of human movement,<sup>19</sup> he concluded that moving the body can actually train the soul. Socrates states explicitly 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). Performance in athletic contests is, accordingly, an indicator of healthy souls, and it is used in *Republic* to select who will receive higher education and become philosopher-rulers (537bc).<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> On the goals of gymnastic education in Plato's *Republic*, see Heather L Reid, "Sport as Moral Education in Plato's *Republic*," *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* 34:2 (2007): 160-175; and "Plato's Gymnasium," in *Athletics and Philosophy in the Ancient World: Contests of Virtue* (London: Routledge, 2011) 56-68. Plato's focus on the soul, rather than the body, may be part of the reason that he promotes gymnastic education for women just as much as men in both *Republic* and *Laws*; for an analysis, see Heather L. Reid, "Plato on Women in Sport," *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* 47:3 (2020): 1-18.

<sup>17</sup> Isocrates, *Antidosis*, 182 declares that philosophy and gymnastics are "twin arts—parallel and complementary—by which their masters prepare the mind to become more intelligent and the body to become more serviceable, not separating sharply the two kinds of education, but using similar methods of instruction, exercise, and other forms of discipline."

<sup>18</sup> Plato uses the virtue-as-health analogy in many dialogues, for example *Republic* 444d-e.

<sup>19</sup> A common view in ancient Greece, see Bruno Snell, *The Discovery of the Mind in Greek Philosophy and Literature* (New York: Dover, 1982), 8-22.

<sup>20</sup> Plato does not say that only the winners of the contests would be selected; he simply implies that the contests will test their mettle, so to speak, "more

The goal of Platonic gymnastics, as we said, is not Olympic victory, but rather to acquire what Socrates calls a “helper for philosophy” (498b); and by this he means a psychic state rather than a physical one. He seems to think that the kind of character that remains resolute in the face of temptation and adversity in sport will have what is needed to

take the longer road and put as much effort into learning as into physical training, for otherwise, as we were just saying, he will never reach the goal of the most important subject and the most appropriate one for him to learn.” (504cd)

“People’s souls give up much more easily in hard study than in physical training,” explains Socrates; they need a love for hard work (*philoponon*) that can be directed at learning, listening, and inquiry just as much as *gymnastikē* (535b-d). In *Republic’s* educational theory, the competitive spirit cultivated through sport is eventually applied to philosophical argument (539d). That something similar was probably practiced in Plato’s Academy is suggested by the dialogues themselves.

The real-life competition between Plato and his rival educators helps to explain his dialogues’ agonism. Plato had a professional interest in pitting Socrates against rival sophists,<sup>21</sup> or, more specifically, the sophistic understanding of education.<sup>22</sup> For Plato, *aretē* is not something that can be

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thoroughly than gold is tested by fire” (413cd). The testing of gold metaphor is repeated a bit later, “We said, if you remember, that they must show themselves to be lovers of their city when tested by pleasure and pain and that they must hold on to their resolve through labors, fears, and all other adversities. Anyone incapable of doing so was to be rejected, while anyone who came through unchanged—like gold tested in a fire—was to be made ruler and receive prizes [*athla*] both while he lived and after his death” (*Republic* 502d–503a).

<sup>21</sup> We use the word ‘sophist’ here in a stipulative way to identify Plato’s philosophical rivals. In fact, the distinction between sophist and philosopher was not so clear-cut in fifth and fourth century BCE Athens. See John Patrick Lynch, *Aristotle’s School* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1972), 41. In a letter from the late second or early 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE, Philostratus (*Epistles*, 1.73) tells Julia Domna that Plato is not so different from the sophists and has, in fact, borrowed some of their tricks.

<sup>22</sup> For a comparison of sophistic and Socratic education, see Coleen P. Zoller, “To ‘Graze Freely in the Pastures of Philosophy’: The Political Motives and

bought and sold, it must be earned through training and competition. So when sophists like Protagoras claim to teach *aretē* for a fee, he sends Socrates in to strip them bare and expose the fraud.<sup>23</sup> The attempt to commercialize *aretē*, among gymnastic and sophistic educators alike, corrupts the process of pursuing it. It tends to value external appearance over internal excellence, or to confuse the trappings of victory with the virtue that gives victory value in the first place. Sophists like Isocrates, who habitually confuse *aretē* with practical (especially rhetorical) skill because it is “recognized by all” (*Antidosis* 84), run afoul not only of Platonic metaphysics, which posits universal ideals, but also ancient Olympic values, which rewarded victors with only a sacred wreath of vegetation.

Platonic gymnastics orients the *agōn* toward *aretē*, replacing the love of victory (*philonikia*) with the love of wisdom (*philosophia*). It is no coincidence that in Plato’s *Apology*, Socrates chastises Meletus for carelessly and ambitiously bringing people to court, literally *eis agōna*—into the contest (24c). The competitive spirit of sophists, social climbers, and perhaps even athletes, needed to be directed toward a higher good.

### *Agōn*

Plato routinely describes Socratic dialogue in agonistic terms. In *Euthydemus*, the argument is compared to a ball game (277b) and wrestling match (277d, 278b, 288a). In *Protagoras*, it is called a verbal contest (*agōna logōn*), and Socrates compares Protagoras to the champion runner Krison

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Pedagogical Methods of Socrates and the Sophists,” *Polis* 27; 1 (2010): 80-110.

<sup>23</sup> *Protagoras* (313c-d): “Then can it be, Hippocrates, that the sophist is really a sort of merchant or dealer (*kapēlos*) in provisions on which a soul is nourished? For such is the view I take of him [...] And we must take care, my good friend, that the sophist, in commending his wares, does not deceive us, as both merchant and dealer (*kapēlos*) do in the case of our bodily food. For among the provisions, you know, in which these men deal, not only are they themselves ignorant what is good or bad for the body, since in selling they commend them all, but the people who buy from them are so too, unless one happens to be a trainer or a doctor. And in the same way, those who take their lessons (*mathēmata*) the round of our cities, hawking (*kapēleuontes*) them about to any odd purchaser who desires them, commend everything that they sell, and there may well be some of these too, my good sir, who are ignorant which of their wares is good or bad for the soul.” W.R.M. Lamb, trans., *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, vol. 3 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967).

of Himera (335e). In *Theaetetus*, Socrates is compared to Antaeus, a mythological athlete who lived in a cave and forced passers-by to wrestle him (169b). At *Philebus* 41b, Socrates says: “So let us get ready like athletes to form a line of attack around his problem,” and in *Cratylus*, he says “once we’re in the competition, we’re allowed no excuses” (421d). Socrates’s opponents even suggest that he is too competitive. “You love to win, Socrates,” says Callicles (*Gorgias* 515b). Observes Protagoras, “I think that you just want to win the argument, Socrates” (360e). Thrasymachus accuses the philosopher of competitiveness and love of honor (*Republic* 336c), adding “without trickery you’ll never be able to overpower me in argument” (341b).

But the method of Plato’s Socrates is not a zero-sum game. Socrates responds to Callicles’s charge of *philonikia* by saying, “it’s not for love of winning that I’m asking you. It’s rather because I really do want to know” (*Gorgias* 515b). To Protagoras, he replies, “I have no other reason for asking these things than my desire to answer these questions about virtue (*aretē*),” especially what it is and whether it can be taught (361a). This contrasts with the sophists’ approach, which he criticizes in *Euthydemus* for confusing the defeat of their opponents with the achievement of wisdom: “They think that if they place these persons in the position of appearing to be worth nothing, then victory in the contest for the reputation of wisdom will be indisputably and immediately theirs, and in the eyes of all” (305d). But this kind of victory amounts to settling for plausibility rather than truth, says Socrates; it confuses the reputation for wisdom with wisdom itself. One is reminded of the ancient Sicilian wrestler Leontiskos, who won matches not with wrestling skill, but by breaking his opponents’ fingers.<sup>24</sup> The problem with victories won through trickery, whether athletic or *eristic*, is that they subvert the ultimate purpose of the contest, which is *aretē*—for both opponents. Enlightened athletes and Socratic philosophers recognize this and come to regard agonistic struggle as mutually beneficial; their *philonikia* becomes *philosophia*.

When Critias accuses Socrates of trying to refute him rather than address the “real question at issue,” Socrates demurs, claiming that he is “examining the argument for my own sake primarily, but perhaps also for the sake of my friends” (*Charmides* 166d). Once Critias agrees that such clarification of concepts is part of the common good, Socrates tells him to

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<sup>24</sup> The story is told in Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, 6.4.3.

ignore who is being refuted and instead to “give your attention to the argument itself” (*Charmides* 166e). He reminds his interlocutor Protarchus that “we are not contending here out of love of victory for my suggestion to win or yours. We ought to act together as allies in support of the truest one” (*Philebus* 14b). He tells Polus that friends must help each other up when they fall (*Gorgias* 462c), and when the sophist complains he is hard to refute, Socrates responds that he himself would be grateful to be refuted: “Please don’t falter now in doing a friend a good turn,” he says, “Refute me” (470cd). Socrates believes in providing an agonistic challenge even to one’s beloved, as evidenced not only by his treatment of his own *eromenoi*, but also in the advice he gives to *erastes*.<sup>25</sup> Enlightened agonism, inspired by the athletic model of the heroes, is for Socrates the ultimate form of friendship. As he explains to Theodorus,

I have met with many a Heracles and Theseus in my time, mighty men of words; and they have well battered me. But for all that I don’t retire from the field, so terrible a lust has come upon me for these exercises. You must not begrudge me this either, try a fall with me and we shall both be the better. (*Theaetetus* 169bc)

## Essays

The essays in this volume address several aspects of *agōn* in Plato’s dialogues, from their dramatic setting and characters, to their methods, metaphors, and goals. Heather L. Reid opens the discussion by arguing that Plato’s dialogues not only employ athletic settings and metaphors, some of them actually function as virtual gymnasias, presenting Socrates as a coach who guides readers—as well as interlocutors—toward an innovative ideal of *aretē*. Matthew P. Evans’s essay examines the interplay between Plato’s philosophy and the architecture of the athletic buildings in which he sets *Lysis*, *Charmides*, *Euthydemus*, and *Theaetetus*. Evans argues that Plato encodes philosophical meaning into these spaces, thus reinforcing the power of his dialogues. Understanding the structure and function of gymnastic spaces in Plato’s time can enhance our understanding of his meaning. Next, Erik Kenyon analyzes the interaction of dramatic and philosophical *agōn* in *Laches*, *Charmides*, and *Lysis*, revealing how all of these layers of competition aim ultimately to promote virtue. These dialogues, set in or around wrestling schools, use care for the body as a framework for thinking about care for the soul.

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<sup>25</sup> See for example, *Lysis*, 210e.

Christopher Moore's essay examines the character of Critias in the *Protagoras*. On the one hand, Critias serves as a negative example of one who fails to enter the philosophical *agōn* by subjecting his views to the scrutiny of others, and lacks self-knowledge because of it. On the other hand, as an opponent of Socrates, he contributes constructively to the debate by nudging it toward a higher moral plane. Moore surmises that the historical Critias may have performed a similar role. Mark Ralkowski also examines a character, this time Alcibiades, in whom he sees the embodiment of an *agōn* between two ways of life in fifth c. BCE Athens. The battle is between the life of philosophy and that of politics, and the fact that Socrates lost Alcibiades to the latter is more an indictment of Athenian politics than of Socratic method.

Next, Stamatia Dova takes a philological approach to Plato's interest in *gymnastikē*, analyzing his use of *philogymnastia* and its cognates in several dialogues. In contrast to the assumption that Plato is an unabashed sports enthusiast, she argues that he thinks love of exercise can be a help or a hindrance to the philosophical life; it all depends on balance and measure. The longstanding *agōn* between philosophy and poetry as played out in the *Republic* is the subject of Guilherme Domingues da Motta's essay. He argues that Plato's opponents in this struggle are not only the poets, but also the (mis)interpreters of poetry, as represented by Glaucon's and Adeimantus's misleading speeches. Philosophy is the remedy to the abuse of poetry, not to poetry itself. Then, Marie-Élise Zovko's essay unravels the interlocking tapestry of *agōnes* in the *Symposium*. Set on the occasion of a dramatic contest, the contest of speeches constructs a deeper *agōn* between a human and a divine ideal of *erōs*. Zovko argues that the *Symposium* pits traditional Dionysian cult against a new form of erotic cult represented by Diotima.

A group of papers on method begins with Nicholas D. Smith arguing that Plato's Socrates uses shame agonistically, to push interlocutors emotionally toward rationally defensible beliefs. He says this process is compatible with Socratic "intellectualism" since it prepares people for rational decision-making while they are still subject to their emotions. Next, Jure Zovko argues that Socratic elenchos is fundamentally agonal in its structure and character, not just in the so-called early dialogues, but right through to Plato's later works. The dialectical analysis of language can teach us much about the good life, but to actually live it we need the kind of reasonable judgment that is cultivated through *agōn*. Gymnastic

training inspires philosophical method in *Parmenides*, according to Lidia Palumbo and Heather L. Reid. They argue that the dialectical method called *gymnasia* in that dialogue not only resembles athletic training, it invites readers to wrestle with the relationship between universals and particulars.

That Socratic method can't be separated from its goals is demonstrated by the final set of essays. Daniel A. Dombrowski's article analyzes the four-term analogies in the *Gorgias*: beautification : gymnastics :: cookery : medicine, and sophistic : legislation :: rhetoric : justice. Emphasizing Plato's hylomorphism, Dombrowski concludes that the athletic life and the intellectual life in Platonic philosophy amount to the same thing. The key distinction is between "flattery arts" that seek pleasure and those, like gymnastics, that seek the good. Next, Lee M. J. Coulson contrasts the agonism inherent in sophistic eristic with that of Platonic dialectic. He claims that eristic aims arrogantly at triumph while dialectic aims at noble victory, noting that the latter precludes the former. In the concluding essay, Coleen P. Zoller argues that Plato's agonism does not imply acceptance of a logic of domination. He rejects the pleonectic approach of interlocutors like Thrasymachus and Calicles, and promotes a meritocratic hierarchy aimed at fostering goodness, harmony, and peace for all. Commentators who overlook this aspect of Plato's agonism, may have an impoverished understanding of *agōn* itself.

On the whole, these chapters show that the concept of *agōn* was central to Plato's thinking about philosophy: its method and aims, its people and places, and especially its rivalry with competing ways of life. If the contributors to this volume are correct, Plato's views throughout his career were shaped by his early years as a competitive wrestler. He saw a family resemblance between caring for the body and caring for the soul, and he saw the struggle of competition in every dimension of life in the *polis*. This struggle occurred in each person's soul, and it happened in the city as a whole, in a competition between ways of living. There was no greater contest in life, and Socrates invited all of us to take it up for ourselves (*Gorgias* 526e).