History and Heritage

We begin with history and heritage not only because philosophical studies should be informed by the history of their subjects but also because there is an important link between the history of sport and of philosophy. The obvious connection is that the two practices share a common birthplace in ancient Greece, but there is also a sense in which the knowledge-seeking spirit characteristic of philosophy was originally exhibited in Olympic-style sport. Before the Greeks got hold of it, athleticism seems to have functioned primarily as a political tool for demonstrating a leader’s divine favor and worthiness to lead. We find this function also in Homer, as when Agamemnon claims victory in the javelin event or Odysseus takes back his kingdom by winning an archery contest and stringing the royal bow. But Homer also describes Olympic-style sport, in which the outcome is uncertain and left to the contest to decide—at the risk of challenging existing social hierarchy.

I call this familiar style of sport “Olympic” because I believe it was competing claims to honor among the diverse tribes present at the Panhellenic sanctuary of ancient Olympia that motivated the use of a fair and impartial mechanism for choosing someone to light the sacrificial flame—the mechanism of a footrace. Just as early Olympic sport sought answers through impartial testing rather than preexisting belief, early philosophy sought answers about the world through the testing of ideas rather than the passive acceptance of mythology or orthodox beliefs. Just as sport is essentially blind to social assumptions and distinctions, philosophy sought to liberate truth from cultural tradition. Sport revealed furthermore that excellence could be trained and was not merely a matter of birth, perhaps inspiring philosophers
like Socrates and Plato to find ways of training virtue through competitive debate. From these roots sprang also the phenomenon of democracy, and its values remain embedded in sport. Philosophy, democracy, and the Olympic Games are commonly counted among Greece's gifts to the modern world. The spirit of sport is visible in all of them.

The Olympic Games were revived at the end of the nineteenth century as a deliberate expression of philosophy. This philosophy, called Olympism, was not based on the ideas of Plato and Aristotle, so much as the beliefs of the European Enlightenment. Furthermore, it was the work of not professional philosophers but rather a group of idealistic enthusiasts, led by the French pedagogue Pierre de Coubertin. Its lack of analytic rigor and precision raises the question of whether Olympism is really a philosophy, but it may also explain Olympism's success as the guiding principle of such a complex and multicultural organization as the Olympic Movement.

Taking a flexible approach we can discern in Olympism the main branches of philosophy: metaphysics, ethics, and politics. Olympism's metaphysics posit a conception of an ideal human that exalts body as well as mind and emphasizes balance and harmony, but the portrait is not so specific as to exclude any gender or ethnicity. Olympism's ethics refer to universal fundamental principles without spelling out what they are—a weakness that turns into a strength when facing the challenges of multiculturalism. Sport provides the common culture that unites the diverse individuals in the Olympic Movement, and the structure of sport reflects such moral values as equality of opportunity and the pursuit of excellence. Sport also serves as the foundation for Olympism's political goal of peace. By requiring people to put aside their differences, treat one another as equals, and tolerate their differences, the Olympic festival creates a model for peaceful coexistence that depends not on a civilizing authority but rather on cooperation. Olympism, to be sure, is a thin philosophy, but it is one intimately connected to sport that has withstood the test of time.

Chapter One

The Ancient Hellenic Heritage

Imagine yourself at the conclusion of a conference championship game in college basketball. The gymnasium is packed full with euphoric fans, the victorious players writhe on the floor in glee, and the coaches shake hands and exchange solemn words as the ritual of cutting the nets down begins. Now imagine that the microphone is given to a famous sports commentator who has been asked to say a few words about the historic victory. He stands at center court as a hush comes over the stands. He looks up toward the heavens and then begins his speech:

Creatures of a day!
What is someone? What is no one?
A dream of a shadow is man.1

These poetic-philosophical lines are part of an ancient Greek athlete's victory hymn, but how out of place would they seem in sports today? The arena may stand on a university campus and the building may be full of students, but philosophers, poets, and other intellectuals are usually sequestered in ivy-covered stone buildings—they don't wander into the gymnasium. If we were in ancient Greece, however, the philosophers would be running the gymnasium and poets would staff the sports information office. Athletics and philosophy were close enough in ancient Greece that the great poet Pindar not only described men as dreams of shadows, he nicknamed Olympia the "Mistress of Truth."2

It is not just coincidence that philosophy, democracy, and Olympic-style sport share a common birthplace in ancient Greece. There are important conceptual resemblances between these three things, and it should not be forgotten that the eldest of the family members is, in fact, athletics. The conventional date for the founding of the Olympic Games is 776 bce, al-
Though the first running contest there happened much earlier. Philosophy arrived on the scene hundreds of years later, sometime in the sixth century BCE, while democracy showed up even later, near the end of that century. The resemblance between these three practices begins with their ability to sort out competing claims to virtue, truth, and governance, without capitulating to existing social hierarchies or resorting to the use of violent force. Indeed, sport seems to have helped the ancient Hellenes to question the validity of natural aristocracy and the truth value of mythology. These seeds of doubt were sown partly by intercultural exchange between the diverse tribes and intellectual ideas present at the Olympic Games, as well as the foreign cultures contacted through overseas trade. The evidence that even lower-class athletes could achieve excellence through training likely inspired the educational activities of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. Sport was not the subject of serious philosophical reflection in ancient Greece, but philosophy itself was closely linked with sport.

HEROES AND HIERARCHIES

When looking for the origins of what we now call sport, we arrive inevitably at the epics of Homer. The Iliad and Odyssey are foundational in many ways, but their often overlooked accounts of athletics offer important clues not only for understanding the nature of sport today but also for providing perspective on how sport has changed since those ancient times. Homer describes athletics more or less as they existed in his own era, around the eighth century BCE, though he purports to recounting events that happened much earlier, around the twelfth century BCE. And in fact, Homer’s contests have much in common with the athletic practices of earlier civilizations such as the Mesopotamians, Egyptians, Minoans, and Hittites. The most important commonality is the perceived link between athleticism and human virtue, specifically the worthiness to lead.

As early as the third millennium BCE, the athletic ability of ancient leaders like Gilgamesh of Uruk was taken as evidence of their divine favor or at least partially divine status. A hero, in ancient parlance, was part deity and part mortal. For instance, the Greek hero Heracles (Latin: Hercules) was the son of the god Zeus and the mortal woman Alcmene. The Mesopotamian king Gilgamesh is likewise described in the epic that bears his name as two-thirds man and one-third god. Egyptian Pharaohs were also thought to be the children of gods. Indeed, the link between divinity and kingship survives right through the Roman emperors (who often had their own cults) to the seventeenth-century notion of the divine right of kings. Belief in a ruler’s divinity was no doubt of great comfort to societies that attributed most natural phenomena to the capricious will of gods. But even modern politicians like to associate themselves with the divine; they advertise their religious beliefs and invoke divine names during speeches. The conceptual link between athleticism and divinity also persists in modern-day descriptions of athletes as “heroes,” or even euphemistically as “gods.”

What is remarkable about ancient leaders is that they used athleticism to prove their divine association and royal desert, or at least they tried to. As one might expect, the reality of a leader’s athleticism did not always live up to the propaganda. The kind of live demonstrations we expect of great athletes today were at least carefully controlled and often completely avoided. Indirect evidence for a leader’s greatness was preferred, such as the (apparently embellished) story about the Sumerian king Shulgi, who is claimed in a song to have run one hundred miles in a single day with rain and hailstones “lashing at his back.” In other cases ancient kings’ “athletic feats” turn out to be staged game hunts, fixed boxing matches, or ritual acts of little difficulty. At Egypt’s Festival of Sed (circa 2600 BCE), the pharaohs ran uncontested around two posts placed a mere fifty-five meters apart—hardly proof of superhuman athleticism. Perhaps this ritual was a reenactment of some ancestral feat like Shulgi’s, but it is hard to believe that it could convince skeptical subjects of their leader’s divinity. Then again, perhaps there was simply not much doubt—or not much point in doubting—the king’s worthiness to lead. By the time of Homer’s epics, however, that had definitely changed.

The funeral games dedicated to Patroklos in the twenty-third book of Homer’s Iliad end with a scene eerily reminiscent of ancient sporting practices. King Agamemnon is named winner of the javelin event and awarded the prize without ever making a throw. As supreme leader, his superior athleticism is presumed and honored without having to be subject to a test. This turn of events contrasts sharply with the overall theme of the poem, however, which revolves around a dispute over Agamemnon’s worthiness to lead and his refusal to subject his authority to any kind of challenge. What we have in Iliad is a novel situation in which many kings—Achilles, Odysseus, and their peers are all the supreme leaders of their individual tribes—have been removed from their familiar homeland hierarchies and asked to join together as equals to fight for a common cause. The situation provokes competing claims to aretē (excellence or virtue), or a “crisis of value,” in which each man’s claim to social honor must be renegotiated. The athletic games staged in book 23 provide a kind of model for that: a relatively open process for (re)distributing honor according to merit.

In the Iliad’s games we recognize many familiar aspects of sport: a (relatively) open call for voluntary participation, a common understanding of the rules, a uniform starting line, responsible referees, the resolution of disputes about fairness, the selection of victors, and the awarding of prizes. There are
also important differences: only members of the upper echelon are allowed to compete, prizes are not always awarded according to contest results, and gods and goddesses interfere with the contest to help their favorites and hinder rivals. The competitive spirit is clearly recognizable, however, and as it does today, the competitive nature of Homeric society extends well beyond sport. The Homeric conception of areté, or more precisely, aristeia, is inherently competitive: it can be neatly expressed in the oft-quoted phrase “being the best and outdoing all others.” What is revolutionary in Homer in contrast with earlier forms of sport, however, is that one’s areté is not presumed on the basis of social status or ancestry; rather, it must be publicly demonstrated through action—in war, in government, or even in athletic contests. In this context, sport begins to resemble in some measure a form of inquiry rather than propaganda, and so it begins to acquire what I call its “philosophical” or truth-seeking nature.  

ANCIENT OLYMPIC PHILOSOPHY

Like philosophy, sport should begin in wonder and uncertainty. When contestants line up on a starting line in Homer’s Iliad, there is usually uncertainty—an authentic question about who will prevail. In the Odyssey, the Homeric epic that describes Odysseus’s decade-long return home after the Trojan War, sport is used to prove areté and worthiness to lead. The journey-worn hero overcomes doubt about his nobility by performing athletic feats on the island of the Phaeacians and wins back his queen and his kingdom in Ithaca by triumphing in an archery contest. So, in the Odyssey there is doubt, but sport still affirms the aristocratic status quo in a way not so very far removed from the earlier “feats” of Egyptian and Mesopotamian kings. It was with the advent of the ancient Olympic Games that sport would seriously dissociate itself from man-made hierarchies and exhibit authentic philosophical wonder and uncertainty, by leaving questions about virtue and worthiness up to the contest itself.

The motivation for this change was ultimately religious. Long before athletes began to compete at Olympia, the site was a Panhellenic sanctuary that honored all the gods and served all the tribes of Greece. As in Homer’s Iliad, the bringing together of diverse tribes for a common cause—even the religious cause of worship—was not without its conflicts. Each tribe brought its own social hierarchy to the officially neutral sanctuary, so when the time came to select someone to light the sacrificial flame, the choice was not as easy as simply pointing at the king. Furthermore, it mattered to everyone that someone pleasing to the god was chosen for this honor because the benefits believed to be provided by the gods—such as successful harvests and recovery from disease—were thought to depend upon divine propitiation through such rituals. The process can be regarded as a kind of gift exchange between humans and gods through the ritual of sacrifice. The first athletic event contested at Olympia seems to have been a footrace from the edge of the sanctuary to the altar, where the winner was given the honor of lighting the sacrificial flame. The athletic victor became a kind of symbolic sacrifice or dedication to the god; the olive wreath, palm branch, and ribbons awarded to Olympic champions were also associated with sacrificial animals and priests.

By using a footrace to select a suitable honoree—or perhaps by staging a footrace to allow the god to select his favorite—Olympia was both preserving the traditional association among athleticism, virtue, and divine favor and introducing the novelty of letting the contest, rather than existing social hierarchies, decide the results. The process reflects, in many ways, the emergence of philosophy in Hellenic Ionia during the sixth century BCE. The so-called pre-Socratic philosophers—such as Thales, Xenophanes, and Anaximenes—distinguished themselves from earlier mythological and poetic forms of truth-seeking by insisting on some amount of argument and evidence to support their claims. Philosophy is a process of truth seeking that acknowledges the fallibility of existing beliefs, and structures a relatively rational and impartial process for finding a universally acceptable answer, all under the scrutiny of a watchful public. Indeed, I think that the Olympic Games’ association with peace derives less from the so-called truce (ekecheiria) that protected athletes and spectators travelling to the festival, and more from the pacifying and unifying effects of bringing diverse people together to engage in a fair and transparent decision-making process.

The unsurpassed prestige and longevity of the ancient Olympic Games (over a thousand years) depended heavily on the perceived accuracy and justice of its results. Olympia never allowed subjectively judged events and carefully policed the integrity of both athletes and officials. In wrestling, boxing, and pankration (similar to mixed martial arts), pairings for the “heavy” events (so called because there were no weight classes and so bigger, heavier athletes dominated) were drawn by lot, and care was taken to avoid unfair advantages. The boxing events, for example, were staged near noon, to avoid fighters being blinded by the sun. A starting gate called the hysplex was developed to reduce the chance of “jumping the gun” in the sprints. And in the horse races, starts were staggered to compensate for the difference in distance from the various starting gates to the central turning post. Violations of the rules were considered affronts to the gods, and stories of divine retribution levied against cheaters were reinforced by the row of zanes—statues of Zeus erected with the money from fines paid by cheaters—that lined the entrance to the stadium and reminded passersby that “Olympic
victory is to be won not by money but by swiftness of foot or strength of body.”

FROM ARISTOCRACY TO DEMOCRACY

The motivation for all this attention to fairness was at least partly religious—selecting anything less than the most worthy victor might displease the god—but the practical effect seems to have been widespread public confidence in the validity of the results. Eventually this confidence became strong enough to create doubt about the validity of existing social hierarchies, whereas pre-Olympic sport had merely reinforced them. Some claim, in fact, that Olympic-style athletics provided a foundation for the invention of democracy (more on this in chapter 14). Athletics in ancient Greece had originally been embraced by the aristocracy as a way to justify their privileged political position—to demonstrate that areté was a matter of heredity, not hard work. As Nigel Nicholson explains, “If quality was not inherited, there was no reason power should be either.” In order for the upper classes to keep dominating the Games, however, they were forced to rely increasingly on the competitive edges that wealth can provide: time to train and travel, private gymnasia, personal coaches, top-flight race horses, and professional charioteers. But even as these advantages helped to win crowns for the wealthy, they inevitably eroded the very idea of genetic aristeia that such victories were intended to protect. People knew the difference between a victory earned with sweat and one earned with wealth.

Meanwhile, the relatively equal opportunity and merit-based rewards that athletic games provided, combined with the prestige and divine favor associated with victory, motivated cities to look past their internal class distinctions in search of potential champions. The success of the social underdog seems to have fascinated the ancient world no less than it does today. The first official Olympic champion, from 776 BCE, is said to have been a cook. Aristotle remarks that a later Olympic champion was a fishmonger. In reality, it is hard to know the social class of Olympic victors since most of our surviving evidence comes from families wealthy enough to erect memorial statues or commission famous poets such as Pindar to write victory odes. But even if nonaristocratic Olympic champions were few in the ancient world—as gold medalists from poor countries are today—the fact that they existed at all reflects the democratic impetus built into the structure of sport.

Democracy, which emerged in Athens more than two centuries after the Olympic Games began, shares with sport at least two fundamental values: liberty and equality. The Greek word for liberty, eleutheria, represented first and foremost the coveted distinction of being a free person rather than a slave. Later, it became more closely associated with freedom from tyranny. Part of eleutheria’s association with athletics comes from the athletic duo Harmodius and Aristogeiton, who became a symbol of the democratic spirit in Athens after they killed the tyrant Hipparchus in the Panathenaic Games of 514 BCE. The Greek word dēmokratia (democracy) suggests government by the many, but the real ruler in a democracy is the law, to which all of the people willingly subject themselves. It is likewise characteristic of sport that competitors willingly subject themselves to the rules of the game. The fact that diverse people managed to submit themselves to a single set of sports rules at Olympia might indeed have inspired the democratic idea that citizens of diverse classes could coexist under the authority of a common law.

Not only did ancient athletes subject themselves to common rules at Olympia, but also they understood that they were considered equal under those rules, no matter what their social rank might have been at home. Stephen Miller argues that this fact about ancient athletics inspired the Greek concept of isonomia, equality before the law—a concept so closely linked with democracy that Herodotus actually indicates “rule of the many” by the term isonomia. A second democratic concept, iségoria, meaning equal access or opportunity to participate in public debates as a free citizen, is also associated with sport, albeit less clearly. Females, slaves, and foreigners were explicitly excluded from the Olympic Games, and participation was more difficult for the poor than the rich. Likewise, Greek democracy limited full participation to a certain subset of eligible males. Nevertheless, it was revolutionary in its time because it reduced the overwhelming gap between rich and poor, noble and commoner.

ATHLETICS AND PHILOSOPHY IN GREEK EDUCATION

Perhaps the greatest legacy of the social changes inspired by sport in ancient Greece was the focus that even diehard aristocrats like Plato placed on education. Since the areté traditionally associated with athletic success was revealed to be something cultivated through training rather than an entitlement of birth or capricious divine favor, the idea emerged that the areté associated with citizenship could also be gained through effort. Indeed, it is tempting, given the sixth century BCE proliferation of gymnasia, to recognize ancient Greece as the originator of physical education.

Of course, the Greeks would never have used that term because their metaphysical understanding of persons was quite different than our own. Most ancient Greeks conceived of the human being as a combination of sōma (body) and psyche, a word commonly translated as “soul” but also encompassing our modern ideas of life, mind, spirit, and emotion. The psyche is
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and all Athenians better by showing them that they don’t know as much as they thought they did. After all, he says, it is better to be as he is and not believe oneself to be wise when one is not. He says that what he deserves from the city as recompense for his service is the reward given to Olympic victors, because “the Olympian victor makes you think yourself happy; I make you happy.” This criticism of the civic rewards afforded athletes recalls the earlier philosopher Xenophanes, who said, “It is not right to prefer strength to my good wisdom” because victorious athletes do not “fatten the storerooms of the city.” But Socrates’s point is not that philosophy will bring the city wealth or even prestige; on the contrary, he exhorts Athenians to be ashamed of caring for such things instead of areté, “the best possible state of one’s soul.”

So Socrates’s competitive defeat and shaming of the sophists are aimed at exposing their ignorance, thereby seducing them and, more importantly, their would-be students to the study of philosophy. A philosophical education with Socrates still involves competitive argument and even some mild forms of shaming, to reveal false conceit. But Socrates regards this intellectual wrestling as a kind of friendship—a cooperative contest in which one opponent’s challenge improves the other opponent’s strength. This is the very attitude toward competition espoused by enlightened athletes, who use sport as a means not just to win contests, prestige, or even prizes, but also to make themselves better persons through the experience. As Socrates tells his interlocutor Protagoras, “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.”

By improving the participants’ mutual understanding of virtues such as piety, courage, or self-control, Socratic conversations help to cultivate areté. Achieving the wisdom characteristic of areté is a struggle (agōn), and so gymnasium conversations modeled on athletic contests (agōnes) must have seemed like a good way to accomplish it.

THE ACADEMIC GYMNASIUM

When we look back today at what Socrates was doing, we might say he was bringing academics into sport or maybe adapting athletic methods to academic uses, but we would deny that his methods are “physical education.” In stating that, however, we would forget that the very word “academics” derives precisely from one of Socrates’s favorite gymnasiums: the Academy on the outskirts of Athens where Socrates’s student Plato set up his famous school.
It is important when we imagine ancient gymnasias that we don’t think of buildings with grandstands and basketball courts. Ancient gymnasias were more like modern parks: open-air spaces with easy access to water and room for running, wrestling, and other sports. Sometimes they included covered colonnades to protect athletes from the sun and rain. There might also have been facilities for undressing and oiling the skin, as well as storage rooms and bathing facilities. Besides the tradition started by Pythagoras and Socrates of philosophers plying their trade in gymnasia, Plato may have set his school up in one because he thought gymnastike—exercises such as running, jumping, and wrestling—were just as important a part of education as philosophical debate. In fact, Plato seems to have embraced the customary gymnasium values of military preparedness, athletic beauty, and even erotic partnerships—but with a twist. Plato tries to redirect these traditions away from the body and toward the soul and abstract ideals. In Plato’s gymnasium, the educational ideal of kalokagathia—being both beautiful and good—gets redefined.

There are scholars who explain the entirety of Greek gymnastics and athletics in terms of military preparedness and simulated battle. This is part of the story, but far too restrictive. As an admirer of the gymnastic education in Sparta—a state almost completely devoted to military excellence—Plato clearly understood that many of the benefits of athletic and gymnastic training were beneficial in war. He recognized the value of not just physical qualities like strength but also moral virtues like courage. In fact, in Plato’s dialogue Laches, two generals debate appropriate training for soldiers and discover that Socrates’s philosophical virtue—as evidenced by his performance in the Peloponnesian War—trumps training in armor or even military experience. Socrates’s military valor turns out to be nothing more than a kind of wisdom—as do all of the other virtues explored in Plato’s dialogues. So Plato’s gymnasium would not eliminate military or physical exercises, but it would look for a way to put them ultimately in the service of wisdom and, therefore, arete.

In Plato’s Republic, this is precisely the function that sport and athletic training serve. They are used to educate and to select the kind of people who will have the self-discipline, psychological endurance, and civic dedication to serve the community as guardians and eventually philosopher-kings (and queens). Plato thought that the same virtues that lead to success in athletics—for example, courage, endurance, and indifference to wealth and fame—also lead to success in philosophy, because the road toward wisdom and virtue is, as Hesiod said, long and steep. Athletes who train for superfluous goals, such as a beautiful appearance, gathering admirers, or even winning fame and riches in the games, are effectively letting their souls go to waste. In Plato’s later political dialogue, Laws, only education aimed at arete is taken to be worthy of the name. “A training directed to acquiring money or a robust physique, or even to some intellectual facility not guided by reason and justice, we should want to call coarse and illiberal, and say that it had no claim whatever to be called education.” It is not the means so much as the ends that distinguish Plato’s virtue-based gymnastics from the more superficially aimed activities called “physical education.”

Even the conventional athletic beauty so celebrated in Greek sculptures such as Myron’s Discus Thrower is trumped on Plato’s view by the psychic beauty characteristic of arete. In Symposium, the physically unattractive Socrates is praised by the astonishingly handsome Alcibiades as having a soul “so bright and beautiful and utterly amazing” that the younger man finds him irresistible. What we have in this scene is an athletic aristocrat (who also won an Olympic crown, albeit as a chariot owner) defying the traditional assumption that arete is a matter of genetic inheritance by falling in love with an aged man from the lower classes who is lampooned for his bulging eyes and pug nose. It is superficially a reversal of the traditional erotic relationships between young men and adolescent boys, institutionalized as early as the seventh century BCE as means of education in many parts of ancient Greece. But by excluding physical intercourse—Socrates refuses Alcibiades’s advances—and focusing instead on the arete of the soul, the partnership resuscitates the educational purpose of these relationships and gives us the eleventh idea of what we now call “Platonic love.” Beauty and Eros, then, are preserved in Plato’s gymnasium, but are given a more ethereal association with arete that leaves material concerns behind.

Another decidedly nontraditional thing to be found in Plato’s gymnasium is the presence of females. In both Republic and Laws, girls and women take part in gymnastic training and athletic games as well as more robust forms of citizenship than were current at the time. There are also reports that Plato’s real-life Academy had at least two female students: Axiote of Philibus and Lasthenia of Mantinea. Sparta had gymnastic education for girls—gymnastic even in the sense that they exercised gymnai, nude. It is possible that Plato took his cue from Sparta, but the metaphysical rationale underpinning his inclusion of females in sport is the same for all of his educational innovations: a focus on the soul, which he views as sexually neutral. Arete, as excellence of the soul, was accordingly the same for men and women in Plato’s view.

ARISTOTELIAN ATHLETES

Plato’s most famous student, Aristotle, did not share those beliefs, however. Aristotle regarded females as little more than mutilated males who were not fit to rule themselves because their rational faculty was naturally inferior to
ends and deliberation about proper means as medicine and ethics. Although he does not promote it explicitly, athletic training is consistent in many ways with the underlying principles of Aristotle’s ethics.

What is likely is that athletics, as practiced in Aristotle’s fourth century BCE Athens, was characterized more by blind excess and pursuit of ignoble ends, such as wealth and fame, rather than the training for virtue valued by Aristotle, Plato, and their prime inspiration, Socrates. Most modern sport philosophers and physical educators would make the same criticism of sport and its role in education today. But just because sport often fails to live up to its potential as education for virtue does not mean that striving to appreciate that potential is a waste of time. What is more, our contemporary separation of academics and athletics—a result of the segregation of body and mind, discussed in chapter 7—deserves to be revisited considering the close connections between philosophy and athletics in the golden age of Greece. By the same token, the ancient Olympic discovery of sport’s potential to challenge social hierarchies is likewise worth remembering as we continue to struggle with issues of privilege, class, race, and gender. The ancient Greek heritage suggests a genuine link between athletics and virtue, but it also provides an inspiring example of sport’s educational and political potential—as long as its connection with philosophy is preserved.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. In ancient times, athleticism was used to demonstrate rulers’ worthiness to lead. Is athletics relevant to leadership in the modern world?
2. The religious context of the ancient Olympic Games inspired a truth-seeking attitude toward sport that emphasized impartial judging and accuracy of results. What would be the effect of more religious involvement in the modern Olympic Games?
3. Ancient sport is said to have inspired democracy in part by revealing the worth of people from lower classes. Does sport today provide a similar opportunity for poor people to show their worth, or does it tend to favor the wealthy?
4. Plato promoted athletics for females because he viewed athletics as a form of moral education. What would he say about female participation in school sports today and equal opportunity laws such as the United States’ Title IX?
5. Aristotle’s ethics emphasizes activity and training. Do you think training for sports can also be a kind of moral training?