

**Philostratus' *Gymnasticus*:
The Ethics of an Athletic Aesthetic¹**

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Philostratus' *Gymnasticus* is often described as the only ancient text we have completely devoted to athletics. It has generally been regarded as a technical manual for trainers, however, of little value to sociologists and philosophers of sport. Modern coaches and athletes, moreover, find little of practical value in the text. Even literary experts may recoil at Philostratus' dubious retelling of sports history and mythology. In short, scholars of sport, both ancient and modern, have wondered what—if anything—can be learned from the *Gymnasticus*.

For those interested in the social and educational potential of sport, the question is not easy to answer. In fact, a first reading of the text produces more questions than answers. We are struck as much by what *Gymnasticus* doesn't say as what it does. First, in a text that presents itself as a manual for coaches, there is little advice on the day-to-day training of athletes. Second, the issues of nudity and eroticism in Greek gymnasia--a topic of great concern in preceding Roman literature—are conspicuously absent. Third, although Greek gymnastics are traditionally associated with education for virtue (*aretē*), the topic is hardly discussed.

Instead of what we expect to find in a treatise on ancient athletics, Philostratus says many unexpected things. First among these is that gymnastics (i.e. the art of athletic training) is a form of wisdom (*sophia*), comparable to philosophy, poetry, music, geometry, and astronomy. Second, Philostratus offers an extensive catalogue of athletic body types, which purports to reveal not only their suitability for particular events, but also their moral nature. Third, he portrays Greek athletics as in a state of decline--a claim contradicted by historical evidence, which shows the 3rd century CE to be a high water mark for participation in and popularity of Greek athletics. As if to illustrate this imagined decline, furthermore, Philostratus devotes much of the book to a kind of revisionist Olympic history—one less concerned with truth than with the fairy-tale nature of such stories.

So, what *does* the *Gymnasticus* have to offer modern students and scholars of sport? To find out, we need a second reading that tries to answer the questions raised by the first—a reading that considers historical context, Hellenic *paideia*, and the relationship between nature and culture. To understand Philostratus' *Gymnasticus*, we must get beyond surface appearances and attune ourselves to the symbols and meanings that underpin Greek athletics. If we do this, we will learn that gymnastics is not just a form of healthy recreation, but a meaningful activity that demands education and develops a kind of ethical aesthetic. We will discover that, beyond technical expertise, wisdom is needed to make the most of our experience with sport. And, most of all, we will come to understand that those who practice and appreciate athletics constitute a community with a particular identity informed by a glorious history.

All of these lessons are as important today as they were in Imperial Rome. But none of them will be learned from the text if we read it as a training manual, looking only for workout tips and secret paths to victory. The book is of little use to those who care only about winning and performance. But then sport is of little use to those who care only about winning and performance. *Gymnasticus*, in the end, is an attempt to ennoble athletics as a social practice by emphasizing its Hellenic heritage and educational potential. Such a project is as relevant today as it was in Imperial Rome, and it deserves our attention and care.

I. Expected things the text doesn't say

Why is there so little practical training advice?

The first thing modern readers expect to find in a book from the Roman Imperial period with the title, *On Gymnastics*, is practical training advice for gladiators and charioteers as well as traditional Greek-style athletes. The fact that we get very little of that should make us wonder what the real purpose of the book is and for whom it is written. The author's decision to ignore traditional Roman sports does not mean that they were not popular in the 3rd Century CE, or that he was unaware of them. What it tells us is that Greek-style athletics and the institution of the Greek gymnasium is what Philostratus cares about. And he cares about them precisely because they are Greek--not in the sense that they belong to a particular geographical area or are practiced by a particular ethnic group, but rather because they symbolize and embody a set of values and approach to life—a social identity—that was itself an important subject of debate and negotiation in the Roman Empire at that time.²

This literary-historical phenomenon has been named the Second Sophistic (after one of Philostratus' own works) and it may be seen as part of a resurgence of Hellenic culture among Roman elites in an increasingly multicultural empire.³ The Severan dynasty (193-235 CE), begins with the reign of Septimius Severus, a North African who aligned himself with a prominent Syrian family by marrying Julia Domna. Their son, Caracalla, erased the political distinction between Italic and non-Italic members of the Empire with the Antonine Constitution.⁴ And the Severan period saw a proliferation of Greek-style athletic festivals, art, and architecture throughout the Empire--including the palatial Baths of Caracalla in Rome.⁵ The last in the line, Severus Alexander, sponsored the refurbishing of those baths along with Domitian's Stadium (today's Piazza Navona), home of the Greek-style Capitoline Games, and inaugurated new games there in honor of Heracles—patron god of the Severan family and of the Greek Gymnasium.⁶ Not only did Greek athletics flourish in this period—outstripping even the Classical period in terms of events and participation—Julia Domna was also a great patron of philosophers and other intellectuals; Philostratus himself was part of her circle.

Hellenic culture and education, *paideia*, became a marker of elite social identity in this multicultural environment,⁷ and the *Gymnasticus* seems to be aimed at that reader rather than those toiling day-to-day with athletes in the gym. Philostratus expects his audience not only to read Greek, but also to be familiar with Greek mythology, history and philosophy—works to which he cleverly alludes. At the same time he tries to educate his readers—coaxing them toward a deeper understanding and appreciation of contemporary gymnastic training by embedding it in the glory of the Hellenic past. On the one hand, he is seducing the reader into a particular understanding of Greek athletics, while, on the other hand, he is competing with rival intellectuals--Galen foremost among them—to construct an elite identity within the Roman world by defining what it means to be hellenically educated—a *pepaideumenos*.⁸ The *Gymnasticus* is an instruction manual less for athletes and trainers than for those who wish to achieve a truly Hellenic appreciation of athletics.

Why no discussion of nudity, eroticism, and pederasty?

This Hellenic appreciation of athletics seems primarily visual rather than participatory, which raises the question again of why the *Gymnasticus* talks so little about nudity and not at all

about pederasty or the general eroticism associated with the Greek gymnasium. This had been *the* overriding concern of earlier Roman writers such as Cicero and Seneca. As Plutarch put it, “The Romans used to be particularly suspicious of rubbing down with oil, and even today believe that nothing has been so responsible for the enslavement and effeminacy of the Greeks as their gymnasia and wrestling schools, which engender for the cities much indolence, wasting of time, and pederasty.”⁹ Or, as the Republican-era writer Ennius put it pithily, “Shame’s beginning is the stripping of men’s bodies openly.”¹⁰ It is possible that attitudes had changed by the 3rd century and Philostratus felt no need to respond to those concerns. He may also be dismissing them with a booming silence as the misunderstandings of those unable to appreciate the Hellenic meaning of gymnastics. If what you saw when you looked at nude men oiling themselves and wrestling in the gymnasium was a sexually-charged atmosphere—there was something wrong with you. You failed to appreciate the true meaning of nudity, of gymnastics, and even of institutionalized pederasty.

In many ancient Greek cities, erotic educational relationships between youths¹¹ and older males were publically promoted. As Xenophon’s *Symposium* illustrates, these partnerships had the approval of the boy’s parents and the explicit goal of developing virtue (*aretē*).¹² Their association with the gymnasium has more to do with the educational link between athletics and *aretē* than it does with nudity and olive oil—at least that is how a Hellenically educated person would understand it.¹³ In fact, one who understood Platonic ideas would know that *erōs* is a kind of love that draws one toward what he lacks. In Plato’s *Symposium*, erotic love begins with an appreciation of beautiful bodies, then progresses to beautiful souls, and finally directs itself to the form of the beautiful and good itself. The Roman practice of using young athletic slaves for sexual pleasure, however, flies in the face of the Hellenic pederastic paradigm.¹⁴ The *pepaideumenos* would understand all of that and see within a young athlete’s beauty the reflection of *aretē* and of the good itself. Purely sexual attraction, by contrast, aims downward toward the worldly and carnal—it has no place in an educated person’s understanding of the gymnasium.¹⁵

When Philostratus does talk about sex in *Gymnasticus*, he uses varieties of the verb ‘*aphrodisiazō*’ (to have sex) and denigrates it as a corrupting form of luxury inappropriate for and harmful to athletes. He even lumps it in with greed as a source of cheating and corruption among athletes (*Gym.* 45, 48). “In what sense are they men?” he asks of those who would “exchange crowns and victory announcements for disgraceful pleasures” (*Gym.* 52). To the trained Hellenic eye, gymnastic beauty is associated with modesty and chastity—both characteristics of the virtue known as *sophrosynē* (self-control).¹⁶ This is the ideal reflected in the imagery and practices of Greek gymnasia.¹⁷ Philostratus’ other writings, especially the *Love Letters* and *Imagines*, show a great erotic appreciation for youthful male beauty and even denigrate as *anerastos* the man who is insensitive to it.¹⁸ The key, however, is to control one’s *eros*, as he says in Letter 43, “To be in love and to resist love shows more self-control than not to fall in love at all.”¹⁹ Love, like strength, is a great thing when directed into virtuous pursuits like athletics. Philostratus omits erotic discussions from *Gymnasticus* so as not to dignify the crude concerns of earlier writers with a response, and also to model the more elevated Hellenic understanding of athletic beauty and self-control. What you saw and felt when you looked at Greek athletes said a lot about who you were and whether you were Hellenically or barbarically educated.

Why so little talk about cultivating *aretē*?

The third thing we expect to be discussed in an ancient treatise on Hellenic gymnastics is its function as moral education—the use of athletic activities to cultivate virtue (*aretē*) in youth.

Athleticism had been taken as a sign of *aretē* long before Homer's epics and the founding of the Olympic Games.²⁰ What made the Olympic Games revolutionary was their use of an impartial contest to select a single honoree. As Philostratus explains, "The runners stood one *stade*²¹ away from the altar and a priest stood in front of it as an umpire, holding a torch; and the winner of the race, having set fire to the offerings, went away as Olympic victor" (*Gym* 5). This mechanism of the impartial contest would eventually reveal not only that non-nobles could have *aretē*, but also that it could be cultivated through training.²² Since the Classical Greek philosophers Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle also promoted *aretē*, they (like Pythagoras before them) plied their trade in gymnasia, adapting athletic techniques to the pursuit of wisdom.²³ In Philostratus' time, gymnastic education was still widely practiced, at least in the Hellenized parts of the empire.²⁴ Philosophers may have remained in the gymnasium, as suggested by the imagery of statues and mosaics, as well as by the inclusion of libraries and classroom-like spaces in Roman gymnasia and bath complexes.²⁵

What apparently was lost—at least in Philostratus' eyes—was popular belief in the link between athleticism and *aretē*. At the end of section 2, he explains that this problem is not the fault of nature. "As far as athletes are concerned, and the virtues (*aretai*) that were once associated with them, it is not nature (*physis*) who has abandoned them—for she still produces men who are spirited and well formed and quick witted; these are all natural attributes. Instead it is a lack of healthy training and vigorous exercises that have deprived nature of her strength" (*Gym*. 2).²⁶ This passage suggests that the text will go on to explain the kind of athletic training needed to "give nature back her strength." But instead, it launches in to a fanciful examination of the "origins" (*aitias*) of various sports. The term *aretē* appears only two other places in the text, once in reference to the hero Peleus (*Gym*. 3) and once as something "trafficked" by unscrupulous trainers (*Gym*. 45).²⁷ The terms he uses here for trafficker (*kapēlos*) and trafficking (*kapēleuo*) are precisely those used by Plato in *Protagoras* to describe sophists who fraudulently sell *aretē*, when it is something that must result—like athletic excellence—from training.²⁸ Still, Philostratus offers precious little in terms of instruction of such training—has he given up on the classical link between gymnastics and moral education?

As with the aforementioned unexpected omissions, I think this one is explained by the nature of Philostratus' audience and kind of the moral education he is providing. The *Gymnasticus* is a form of *paideia*, but its audience is neither young athletes nor their coaches, and its understanding of *aretē* is based more on watching, knowing, and speaking about athletics than on training for and participating in them. The book makes sense as education for elite men in a kind of virtuous discernment to be exercised in important social situations, such as their regular visits to Roman bath-gymnasium complexes.²⁹ Similar to Philostratus' more famous work, *Imagines*, in which the narrator teaches a group of young men the cultural meanings to be drawn from real or imagined paintings at a villa, the *Gymnasticus* is teaching its readers to understand the real and imagined cultural meanings embodied in the live and artistic images of the Greek athlete. The virtue Philostratus has in mind is less the kind of competitive *aretē* associated with Homeric heroes and Olympic athletes, and more of an aesthetic *aretē* that consists in being able to appreciate and act in accordance with the beauty inherent in athletic practice. This concept may seem like a typically Roman, spectatorship-based approach to sport, but in fact it is another classically Hellenic ideal, that of *kalokagathia* (beautiful goodness), the virtue appropriate to the noble man. Philostratus is trying to construct a model of the Roman *pepaideumenos* as a *kaloskagathos*.

II. Unexpected things the text does say

Gymnastics is a *sophia*

The idea that Philostratus' *paideia* aims at the ethical aesthetic of *kalokagathia* is confirmed by the unexpected things he does say. The first of these comes with the first word of the text: *sophia* (wisdom), the first example of wisdom: *philosophia*, and then the bold assertion that *Gymnastikē* is a *sophia*, inferior to no craft (*technē*). The alert reader will note three things here. First, that Philostratus' reference to music, geometry, and philosophy recalls Plato's *Republic*, where Socrates advocates an education balanced between *gymnastikē* and *mousikē* to be complemented with geometry (after a few years devoted to athletic/military training), for the ideal city's future philosopher-kings.³⁰ Second, the Roman *pepaideumenos* will recognize here a competitive response to Galen who had disparaged athletic training as a mere craft (*technē*) subservient to the *sophia* of medicine, which was much better qualified to care for the bodies and souls of the youth.³¹ The third thing, which overhangs both discussions, is the larger philosophical debate in ancient Greek philosophy about the relationship between *technē* (craft) and *aretē* (virtue). As far back as Plato's *Apology*, Socrates had said that craft-knowledge was useful, but it didn't yield virtue.³² The knowledge appropriate to *aretē* looks to be a *sophia*.

It is interesting, in light of all these philosophical allusions, to note that Philostratus considers himself a sophist rather than a philosopher—a distinction that still held weight in the 3rd c. CE.³³ However, he distinguishes philosophers from sophists not according to topic or aim, but on the basis that a philosopher claims to have “no sure knowledge” whereas the sophist “assumes a knowledge of that whereof he speaks.”³⁴ Philostratus clearly admires philosophers. He praises Plato in a letter to Julia Domna, claiming that he borrows sophists' tricks.³⁵ But sophistry is better suited to Philostratus' social situation. Not only must the Roman *pepaideumenos* know “of that whereof he speaks,” he needs to be the kind of gentlemanly insider who can hold his own in elite society. Philosophers, almost by definition, were scraggly outsiders who cultivated virtue by publically refuting their interlocutors.³⁶ Philostratus, by contrast, is seducing his audience into Hellenic *paideia* with the promise that it will confer elite status in the Imperial Roman social contest for honor (*philotimia*). You needed to be an urbane insider to succeed in this social game, and you needed to do more than follow the rules—you needed to have *sophia*.

In *Gymnasticus*, the distinction between *sophia* and *technē* is developed through the comparison of the *gymnastēs* and *paidotribēs* in chapter 14. Both terms can be translated as ‘trainer’ and *paidotribēs* is the more commonly used, but Philostratus uses the term *gymnastēs* to indicate a trainer who has *sophia* in addition to the *technē* of the *paidotribēs*.³⁷ He says specifically that the *gymnastēs* must know all the practical techniques and strategies of the *paidotribēs*, and also have medical knowledge of things like “cleansing the humors” and “smoothing dried-up flesh.” He then explains that even if the *paidotribēs* knows of such things, “he will use that knowledge in harmful ways on the boys he is training, torturing their free and pure blood.” This suggests that the *gymnastēs*' wisdom is not just a combination of multiple *technai*, rather it consists in the ability to *apply* technical knowledge in a way that produces good—an implication resonant of the Platonic idea that virtue demands knowledge of the good and of Aristotle's definition of *kalokagathia*.³⁸ Philostratus' reprisal of this idea is confirmed in chapter 54, where the wise *gymnastēs* rejects the inflexible and instrumentalist “tetrad” training technique, which led to the death of a young wrestler. He concludes that chapter (and perhaps the book) by predicting that a revival of gymnastic

sophia will “give strength to the athletes and the stadia will regain their youth.” It is the ethical aesthetic of *sophia* and not *technē* that will save athletics.

Physiognomy and decline

The idea that *sophia* is a kind of ethical discernment helps to resolve the second unexpected aspect of the book—its preoccupation with physiognomy and decline. Right after asserting that training is a *sophia*, Philostratus contrasts the sorry state of contemporary *gymnastikē* with such heroic athletes of the past as Peleus, Theseus, and Heracles (*Gym.* 1). “I have decided to teach the causes of this degeneration,” he continues, “and to defend nature, which is criticized because the athletes of today are inferior to those of former times” (*Gym.* 2). It is not nature (*physis*) that makes contemporary athletes inferior, he argues, but rather trainers and training conventions (*nomoi*) which lack *sophia*. Decline is a longstanding Hellenic theme that goes back at least to Hesiod’s myth of the gold, silver, bronze, heroic and iron ages,³⁹ but the *Gymnasticus* links it with the enduring philosophical debate about nature (*physis*) and convention (*nomos*). Philostratus claims that gymnastics is inborn, linking it with Prometheus’ creation myth (*Gym.* 16). He also lauds the athletes of old as naturally strong despite their lack of trainers and medical knowledge. But Philostratus is not advocating a return to this kind of nature—to sleeping on the ground and training by racing against hares (*Gym.* 43)—rather he has in mind a sophisticated gymnastic *nomos* that works in harmony with nature to perfect it.

The idea that virtue is a perfection of nature has deep roots in Greek philosophy. In order to perfect nature, however, one must first recognize it. Hence the trainer’s *sophia* includes the physiognomic ability⁴⁰ to discern an athlete’s “nature”—to strip and examine him before he undergoes training (*Gym.* 26). This explains the extensive interpretation of athletic body types in chapters 29-42. The goal here is not (as modern readers may assume) to pick athletes for success in competition. Philostratus’ trainer discerns not only athletes’ suitability for particular events, he also judges their moral character (*ēthos*) (*Gym.* 25). In contrast with the Olympic judges (*hellanodikai*), whose laws (*nomoi*) limit their judgment to questions of age, residence, and social class, the wise *gymnastēs* can see whether an athlete is self-disciplined and courageous or dissembling and impetuous (*Gym.* 25). He discerns an athlete’s *ēthos* first by inspecting the eyes, but also by observing the harmony and proportion of the body parts, as is done with sculpture.⁴¹ Although discerning moral character by observing the body is the traditional claim of physiognomy—a science traced to Pythagoras, associated with Aristotle’s school, and practiced by Galen⁴²—Philostratus takes it a step further. By applying physiognomy to athletes’ suitability for events, and by engaging such aesthetic ideas as symmetry and proportion, he not only recalls the sculptor Polykleitos’ famous *kanon*, but also the Stoic Epictetus’ conflation of beauty, *aretē*, and fitness for a task,⁴³ as well as Aristotle’s praise of the pentathlete’s beauty as derivative of his suitability to the event.⁴⁴ The body of the athlete, in short, reveals the quality of his soul.⁴⁵

If beauty and virtue are perfections of nature and gymnastics is a natural thing, then what is the *nomos* that has corrupted it?⁴⁶ In chapter 44, Philostratus says the decline began with a departure of athletes from warfare, which caused them to become sluggish and soft.⁴⁷ Then, fueled by the popularity of Sicilian gastronomy, “the stadia became enfeebled, and all the more so since the art of flattery was introduced into athletic training.” This comment recalls Plato’s *Gorgias* where flattery (*kolakeia*) caused the corruption and decline of medicine and gymnastics. Specifically, it was cosmetics that flattered gymnastics—a *technē* that creates merely superficial beauty. And it was cookery that flattered medicine—a *technē* aimed at pleasure rather than health.⁴⁸ In *Gymnasticus*, it was medicine’s promotion of

luxurious foods that “flattered” gymnastics and caused its demise. This love of luxury then corrupted athletes’ chastity and finally their piety, as Philostratus illustrates with an example of greedy athletes so ethically oblivious that they actually swear to the gods that they had bought and sold victory. Trainers too became obsessed with profit and ended up “trafficking” athletic *aretē* (*Gym.* 45)—a sin almost identical to the one Socrates used to accuse the sophists of.⁴⁹ The problem here is that flattery aims at pleasure or profit rather than excellence so it corrupts nature rather than perfecting it. Philostratus is calling for a new athletic *nomos* that—in the words of his second *Dialexis*--“establishes for men prizes for virtue (*aretē*), as if honoring Nature.”⁵⁰ Sport should reward not simply performance or results, and athletes should not strive for fame and fortune, but rather the kind of virtue (*aretē*) that is a perfection of their nature.

History and interpretation

The realignment of *nomos* and *physis*, like the *sophia* that ennobles *technē*, depends on the trainer’s understanding of the Hellenic past. His ability to interpret contemporary athletics in terms of that past, furthermore, has the capacity to revive ancient virtues. Philostratus simultaneously describes and demonstrates this process through his fanciful reconstruction of athletic myth and history. He begins with a ten chapter-long account of the origins, or better, the reasons for (*aitia*) traditional Greek athletic events. He justifies the account in *Gym.* 12 by claiming that the events were all invented and perfected by gymnastic trainers, but I think his real motivations are pedagogical—he wants to educate his Roman readers about Greek athletics in a way that embeds its history in a greater history of (usually military) Hellenic glory. So he says the *dolichos* (endurance race) derives from wartime messengers (*Gym.* 5), the hoplite race commemorates mythical as well as historical battles (*Gym.* 7), boxing comes from the Spartans’ habit of fighting without helmets (*Gym.* 9), and wrestling and *pankration* are linked with the famed battle of Marathon (*Gym.* 10). The aim here is not historical truth. Many of Philostratus’ accounts lack corroboration from or are contradicted by other sources.⁵¹ For the hoplite race he lists a variety of explanations and then invents his own (*Gym.* 7). His goal is to tell a story that convinces his audience of the worth of athletics, both in a practical sense and as part and parcel of the elite Hellenic identity that they covet.

The ingenious seduction of the audience through description and interpretation is likewise the task of the *gymnastēs*. After listing a parade of champions in chapters 12 and 13, Philostratus claims their victories belong equally to their trainers. We learn why in chapters 17 to 24, which are full of moralizing stories from the ancient games, including tales in which trainers inspire their athletes by encouraging, rebuking, threatening, or even tricking them (*Gym.* 20). Here, youthful emotions like nostalgia, love, family pride, and personal loyalty are transformed into virtuous performances through a trainer’s ingenuity. So we learn of a certain love struck Promachus from Pellene whose trainer inspired him to victory with a lie about his beloved accepting him if he won at Olympia (*Gym.* 22). The story is told in praise of the trainer, who correctly interpreted the situation and transformed his athlete’s erotic weakness into a virtue. Philostratus seems equally willing to promote falsehood for virtuous ends—as he shows by choosing the story of a coach killing a lazy athlete with a sharpened strigil as his preferred explanation for trainers carrying those implements. “I agree with that explanation,” he says. “For it is better for it to be believed than disbelieved. Let the strigil be a sword against worthless athletes and let the trainer at Olympia rank in some respects above the *hellanodikai*” (*Gym.* 18). The description and interpretation of the past derives its value not from truth, but from its ability to inspire virtue.

Philostratus' rhetorical tactics may grate against modern moral sensibilities (especially in light of Kant's refusal to permit lying in any circumstance), and they may remind us why Plato was so critical of sophists. But Plato's own *Hippias Minor* suggests that lying is only a vice when used against the good (371d) and the famed "noble lie" of the *Republic* (415a-d) is defended on the grounds that it will make citizens care more for the city and each other.⁵² The problem is a lack of *sophia*, which, as we have seen, is the failure to direct *gymnastikē*—or any other practice, including rhetoric—toward the good. Philostratus' *gymnastēs*, like the sophists and heroes of his other works, practice their various arts with *sophia*, which is to say with the understanding and appreciation of ancient Hellenic culture appropriate to a *pepaideumenos*. In fact, a true *pepaideumenos* can actually bring the Hellenic past back to life. Philostratus' *Heroicus* recounts a conversation between a Phoenician merchant and a Hellenic vinedresser whose knowledge and appreciation of the Trojan War hero Protesilaos enables him to meet interact with the dead hero's spirit (*Her.* 9.5-11.7). The revival of heroic spirits through the reenactment (*mimēsis*) of their virtues is also a respected scholarly explanation for the invention of athletic contests.⁵³ Indeed Philostratus' repeated allusions and references to heroes, ideas, and language of the Hellenic past may be a kind of *mimēsis* designed to bring them back to life. In *Gymnasticus*, rhetoric and interpretation are used to make contemporary athletes appear as embodiments of ancient virtues, and thereby to revive the Classical Hellenic spirit in the games, gymnasia, and baths of Imperial Rome.

III. Things of relevance to sport today

An Ethical Aesthetic

The *Gymnasticus*' unexpected omissions on the topics of training, eroticism, and *aretē* reveal that its aim was to educate readers in a kind of visual discernment, an ethical aesthetic that would enable them to appreciate and act in accordance with the beauty inherent in athletic practice. In ancient Greece this appreciation was called *kalokagathia* (being both beautiful and good), and it described people who had such a keen understanding of the beauty of what is good that they would effortlessly feel and act in accordance with it. This means that they would forgo worldly concerns such as profit and physical pleasure in favor of higher ideals like virtue. Although sport has changed since ancient times, what is good and beautiful about athletes remains the same. It is not money, or esteem, or even victory that is good—it is the ideal of *aretē* embodied in the athlete's beauty which underpins the value of all these things. Without its enduring association with virtue, sport would never draw the popularity and profits that it does today. It takes education to understand this, however. Anyone can see the desirability of victory that brings prizes and popularity, just as anyone can see the sexual attractiveness of a well-trained athlete's body. It takes education, however, to see beneath the surface of such things and discern the true goods that underpin them. The ability to see those goods and the beauty that they give to sport is *kalokagathia*, the goal of Philostratus' *paideia*.

Nomos, technē and sophia

The ancient debates between nature and convention (*nomos* vs. *physis*) and *technē* vs. *aretē* endure in questions about the role that performance-enhancing technologies should play in athletic victory. Philostratus argued that virtue is the perfection of nature, therefore conventions (*nomoi*) and technologies (*technai*) need to promote nature and virtue rather than detracting from them. This requires the guidance of wisdom (*sophia*). Although techniques like the tetrad system of training or special diets might improve an athlete's performance,

they could ignore and even corrupt his true nature with disastrous results. The true nature of human beings is—among other things—limited. Yet the ethos of modern athletics, aided by the easy electronic measurement of performance in terms of heart-rate, oxygen-uptake, watt production and other metrics, promotes the pernicious idea that the goal of sport is unlimited improvement in those numbers. Pythagoreans were interested in numbers, too, but they were trying to achieve a harmonious, symmetrical balance rather than ever-increasing extremes. The limited nature of human beings calls for a limited and harmonious conception of *aretē*. Performance-enhancing technologies, whether chemical or mechanical, that increase performance metrics while reducing the role of virtue in athletic success diminish sport's ability to promote social good. Advanced *technē* is not necessarily a bad thing for sport, but it needs the guidance of *sophia* to keep it aimed at the good. Athletic rules and conventions (*nomoi*) of sport must be aligned with nature (*physis*)—including the essentially limited nature of human beings—in order to serve the goal of virtue (*aretē*).

History and identity

Philostratus' use of sophistry to promote a particular identity may actually be a reasonable prescription for reviving modern sport. Being a Hellenically-educated *pepaideumenos* is no longer a ticket to social status as it was in Imperial Rome. In these days of globalization, however, sports themselves often constitute communities—social practice communities, to use the technical term coined by philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre.⁵⁴ A social practice community is a group of people united by a common practice such as medicine, knitting, or baseball. As in Philostratus' Rome, these communities confer identity and status to their members and construct ethical norms—especially conceptions of moral virtue—based on the goods and values internal to the practice. To fully appreciate a practice like baseball, and to understand the goods and values internal to it, one must not only participate in the practice (at some level) one must understand its history and mythology.⁵⁵ Although standards for verisimilitude may be higher today than they were for Philostratus, the choice of stories we tell and how we tell them very often involves a kind of mythologizing that would be familiar to ancient Hellenes. The recent movie about Jackie Robinson, *42*, for example, presented him in an ideal light, not least by overlooking or revising historical facts. It did this to promote the internal values of the sport—perhaps even in response to a perceived decline. Although the classically Hellenic *paideia* promoted by Philostratus may not be particularly important to a sport like baseball, it is central to the values of the Olympic Games and to a certain degree to all sports.

An Ethical Aesthetic

The final and perhaps most important lesson Philostratus' *Gymnasticus* has for modern sport is its emphasis on the connection between ethics and aesthetics. *Kalokagathia* is not a new idea in ancient ethics—it is a term widely used and rightly associated with the idealized athletic art that decorated Greek sanctuaries and Roman baths alike. What *Gymnasticus* reveals is that *kalokagathia* is not so much about looking *like* one of those statues, it is about looking *at* those statues (or at living athletes) and being moved by the history and ideals of virtue that they represent to direct one's own actions toward the beautiful and good. Modern approaches to sport and to ethics as well tend to focus on rules and principles rather than aesthetics and ideals. Fair play in sport is understood almost reductively as adherence to the letter of the rules. But attempts to codify fairness, for example by publishing a list of banned substances, only pushes athletes to find substances not on the list which nevertheless give them an unfair advantage. We need rules in sport. Indeed, without rules, there can be no

sport. But we also need an aesthetic understanding of concepts like fairness which give sport its value in order to effectively write, follow, and enforce those rules. This ethical aesthetic is identified by Philostratus to be the *sophia* that enables the *gymnastēs* to direct the practice of athletics toward the good. More important, an ethical aesthetic akin to *kalokagathia* needs to inform the whole community's understanding of the values internal to their practice.

The project of understanding ancient athletics and its connection to classical Greek culture may actually help to revive the spirit of modern sport as Philostratus hoped his *Gymnasticus* would revitalize ancient sport. Reading *Gymnasticus* again with open-mindedness and care is a very good place to start.

¹ I would like to acknowledge the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, and the American Academy in Rome for their support of this and other projects. I am also grateful to Jason König and Christos Evangelou for their very helpful comments and criticisms.

² The theme is mentioned repeatedly in the anthology Ewen Bowie and Jas Elsner, eds. (2009), *Philostratus*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, and by Jason König (2005), *Athletics and Literature in the Roman Empire*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

³ For an overview, see Tim Whitmarsh (2005), *The Second Sophistic*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

⁴ This edict of 212 CE, declared all free men in the Empire to be Roman citizens and gave free women the same rights as their counterparts in Italy. Before that time, most people living in the Roman provinces did not have the rights of citizenship.

⁵ In the words of Zahra Newby (2007), *Greek Athletics in the Roman World: Victory and Virtue*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1, "During the first three centuries AD, Greek athletics came to play a dominant role in the cultural life of the Roman Empire. For an overview of athletics in the Severan period, see König (2007), "Greek Athletics in the Severan Period," in *Several Culture*, ed. Jas Elsner, Stephen Harrison, and Simon Swain, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 135-45.

⁶ On Severus Alexander's restoration of Domitian's stadium, see Newby (2007, 63). On the *Agōn* in honor of Hercules, see König (2007, 136). Both authors cite *Scriptores Historiae Augustae*, Severus Alexander, 35.4.

⁷ See Whitmarsh (2005), 1.

⁸ See Jason König (2009), "Training athletes and interpreting the past in Philostratus' *Gymnasticus*," in Bowie, Ewen and Jas Elsner, eds. *Philostratus*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 251-283.

⁹ Plutarch. *Quaestiones Romanae* 40 274de.

¹⁰ Ennius qtd. in Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations* 4.70.

¹¹ The Greek term *meirakion* usually refers to the period after puberty up until manhood, about 15-21 years. See Judith Evans Grubbs and Tim Parkn (2013), *The Oxford Handbook of Childhood and Education in the Classical World*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 112.

¹² In Xenophon's *Symposium*, the young athlete Autolykos is invited with his father to a dinner at the house of the rich Athenian Kallias, who is courting the boy as an *eromenos*. See Christos C. Evangelou, (2010), "Socrates on Aretic Athletics," *Phronimon* 11:1, 45-63.

¹³ In letters 5 and 8, Philostratus uses mythological and historical examples of such pederastic couples (i.e. Achilles and Patroclus and Harmodius and Aristogeiton) in the effort to woo a beloved boy.

¹⁴ In her discussion of adolescent athletic statuary at elite Roman villas, Newby (2007, 125-134) notes that the institution of Hellenic pederasty may have been used as a cover for Roman men who were being sexually served by youthful slaves often brought from the East. It is not difficult to see how such behavior goes against the ideals of Hellenic *paideia* and would have angered someone like Philostratus.

¹⁵ This distinction appears in Hellenic literature as the difference between common (*pandemos*) and heavenly (*ourania*) Aphrodite.

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- ¹⁶ It should be noted that Philostratus' Letter 64 criticizes the *sophrosynē* of a boy who is resisting his advances as "inhuman." However, possibly gymnastic context (anointing with oil is mentioned) seems to confirm the connection between this virtue and athletic culture.
- ¹⁷ Ancient athletes often infibulated themselves by drawing the foreskin over the glans and tying it off with a string, a situation that would have discouraged arousal. The string was called in slang a leash, and "keeping your dog on its leash" seems to have been a metaphor for athletic chastity. These infibulations can be seen on some ancient statues and paintings of athletes. Even when an athlete's penis is not infibulated, it is depicted as smaller than life as a symbol of chastity. See Scanlon XXX.
- ¹⁸ Being *anerastos* is disdained in letters 4, 33, and 59. Philostratus's view of love is perhaps best expressed in Letter #52 "οὐ τὸ ἐρᾶν νόσος, ἀλλὰ τὸ μὴ ἐρᾶν, εἰ γὰρ ἀπὸ τοῦ ὄρᾶν τὸ ἐρᾶν τυφλοὶ οἱ μὴ ἐρῶντες" (It is not loving but loving not that is a disease. For if 'loving' is derived from 'seeing', those that love are not blind).
- ¹⁹ Allen Rogers Benner and Francis H. Fobes, translators (1949), *The Letters of Alciphron, Aelian and Philostratus*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. The full text of the letter is, "τὸ ἐρῶντα καρτερεῖν σωφρονέστερον τοῦ μὴδὲ ἐρασθῆναι, καὶ γὰρ δὴ καὶ τὰ πολεμικὰ ἄνδρες οὐχ οἱ μὴ τραυθέντες, ἀλλ' οἱ νικῶντες ἐν τραύμασιν."
- ²⁰ The 3rd millennium BC kings Gilgamesh and Shulgi, as well as the Egyptian Pharaohs, for example, used athleticism to demonstrate their worthiness to lead. For an overview, see Heather Reid (2011), *Athletics and Philosophy in the Ancient World: Contests of Virtue*, London: Routledge, 11-21.
- ²¹ The length of an ancient athletic stadium, about 200 meters.
- ²² For the full argument, see Reid (2010, 22-31).
- ²³ This argument is also made in Reid (2010, 43-80).
- ²⁴ Newby (2007, 141-201).
- ²⁵ The full extent of this is still to be developed. It is noteworthy that a 16th century text explaining ancient Gymnasia lists philosophers and other intellectuals as the first group of people that used to frequent the gymnasia. Athletes are the third group. Girolamo Mercuriale (1569: 2008) *The Art of Gymnastics*. Translated by Vivian Nutton. Firenze: Leo S. Olschki, 55-57. Paul Zanker's (1995) *The Mask of Socrates*, Berkeley CA: University of California Press, also notes the frequency with which portraits of intellectuals appear in ancient gymnasia and baths.
- ²⁶ Compare Aristotle *Politics* VIII 1339a, where the same verb (*afaireo*) is used to describe harsh exercise depriving young athletes of their strength: "...σημεῖον γὰρ οὐ μικρὸν ὅτι δύνανται τοῦτο παρασκευάζειν, ἐν γὰρ τοῖς Ὀλυμπιονίκαις δύο τις ἂν ἦ τρεῖς εὗροι τοὺς αὐτοὺς νενικηκότας ἄνδρας τε καὶ παιδας, διὰ τὸ νέους ἀσκοῦντας ἀφαιρεῖσθαι τὴν δύναμιν ὑπὸ τῶν ἀναγκαίων γυμνασίῳν."
- ²⁷ *Gym.* 45: "That is what I have to say against these traffickers (*kapēleuontōn*)—for they traffic (*kapēleouosi*), as it were, the virtue of athletes while profiting in their own affairs." καὶ ταυτὶ μὲν κατὰ καπηλευόντων εἰρήσθω μοι, καπηλεύουσι γὰρ που τὰς τῶν ἀθλητῶν ἀρετὰς τὸ ἑαυτῶν εὖ τιθέμενοι."
- ²⁸ *Protagoras* (313cd): "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." The term is also used in *Gorgias* at 517d and 518b in a discussion contrasting good athletic trainers from those who "flatter" the art with luxurious food and wine.
- ²⁹ Roman baths were attached to traditional gymnasia in the Hellenized East, but even complexes like the Baths of Caracalla in Rome made extensive use of athletic art and provided visual access to workout areas. For a description of the experience of athletic imagery in the baths, see Newby (2007, 45-87)

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- ³⁰ The discussion of education in *Republic* begins at 376e, the claim that gymnastics is for the soul comes at 410b-411e, the period devoted to training is mentioned at 537b. For a full account of the role of gymnastics in *Republic*, see Heather Reid (2007), “Sport and Moral Education in Plato’s *Republic*,” *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* 34:1, 160-175.
- ³¹ Galen *Protrepticus* 14. The rivalry between Galen and Philostratus is well developed by König (2005), especially 301-244. He also discusses it in the introduction to his Loeb translation: Philostratus (2014), *Heroicus, Gymnasticus, Discourses 1 and 2*, edited and translated by Jeffrey Rusten and Jason König, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 333-392.
- ³² In Plato’s *Apology* 22de, Socrates claims that craftsmen confused their technical knowledge with wisdom in the most important things (i.e. virtue).
- ³³ Harry Sidebottom (2009), “Philostratus and the symbolic roles of the sophist and philosopher” in Bowie, Ewen and Jas Elsner, eds. *Philostratus*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 69-99. 71.
- ³⁴ Philostratus and Eunapius, *The Lives of the Sophists*, translated by Wilmer Cave Wright, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1.1.
- ³⁵ *Epistles*, 1.73.
- ³⁶ Sidebottom (2009, 94-5).
- ³⁷ Here, Philostratus may be echoing Aristotle’s distinction between the *gymnastēs* and *paidotribēs* in *Politics* 4.1288b, the Roman writer’s conclusions are more exacting, however. Aristotle’s text reads: “In all the arts and the sciences that are not merely sectional but that in relation to some one class of subject are complete, it is the function of a single art or science to study what is suited to each class, for instance what sort of gymnastic exercise is beneficial for what sort of bodily frame, and what is the best sort (for the best must naturally suit the person of the finest natural endowment and equipment), and also what one exercise taken by all is the best for the largest number (for this is also a question for gymnastic science), and in addition, in case someone desires a habit of body and a knowledge of athletic exercises that are not the ones adapted to him, it is clearly just as much the task of the trainer and gymnastic master to produce this capacity”
- ³⁸ The connection of knowledge and virtue in Plato appears throughout the dialogues, including *Republic* and *Meno*. It also figures into such doctrines as the unity of the virtues and the denial of *akrasia* (weakness of will). Aristotle’s description of *kalokagathia* in *Eudemian Ethics*, specifies that the *kaloskagathos* knows not just the nature of the good but also how to realize good things in action: “Although it is [*kalon*] even to attain a knowledge of the various [beautiful] things, all the same nevertheless in the case of goodness [*aretē*] it is not the knowledge of its essential nature that is most valuable but the ascertainment of the sources that produce it. For our aim is not to know what courage is but to be courageous, not to know what justice is but to be just, in the same way as we want to be healthy rather than to ascertain what health is, and to be in good condition of body rather than to ascertain what good bodily condition is.” EE1.1216b19-25.
- ³⁹ Hesiod, *Works and Days* 109-201. For a full account of decline in *Gymnasticus*, see Charles Stocking (2013), “Ages of Athletes: Generational Decline in Philostratus’ *Gymnasticus* and Archaic Greek Poetry,” *CHS Research Bulletin* 1, no. 2.
- ⁴⁰ Philostratus’ esteem for physiognomy may be confirmed by letter #49.
- ⁴¹ *Gym.* 25: “ἢ γὰρ φύσις ὥρας μὲν ἄστροις ἐσημήνατο, ἦθη δὲ ὀφθαλμοῖς τὴν δὲ αὐτῶν σώματος ἑμερῶν ἀναλογίαν, ὥσπερ ἐν ἀγαλαματοποιίᾳ, ὧδε ἐπισκεπτέον: σφυρὸν μὲν καρπῶ ὁμολογεῖν ἑεῖ, κνήμη δὲ πῆχυν, καὶ βραχίονα μηρῶ ἀντικρίνεσθαι καὶ ὤμω γλουτόν, μετάφρενα θεωρεῖσθαι πρὸς γαστέρα καὶ στέρνα ἐκκεῖσθαι παραπλησίως τοῖς ὑπὸ τὸ ἰσχίον, κεφαλὴν τε, σχῆμα τοῦ παντὸς οὖσαν, πρὸς ταῦτα πάντα ἔχειν συμμετρῶς.” König (2014) identifies this as an allusion to Polykleitos’ *canon*—a semi-mathematical formula for producing beautiful sculpture (now lost). It also has Pythagorean overtones linking beauty with numbers. Aristotle, too, connects beauty with proportion and harmony in *Metaphysics* 13.1078a.32037 “The main species of beauty are orderly arrangement, proportion, and definiteness; τοῦ δὲ καλοῦ μέγιστα εἶδη τάξις καὶ συμμετρία καὶ τὸ ὠρισμένον.”
- ⁴² The eyes-moral character connection is especially emphasized in Polem’s second century text *Physiognomy*. An analysis can be found in Maud Gleason 1995, *Making Men*, Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 55-58. For an overview of the topic in Greek philosophy, see Mariska Leunissen (2010), “Signs of Physiognomy in Aristotle” in *Center for Hellenic Studies Research Bulletin*, Washington DC: CHS.

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- ⁴³ Epictetus, *Discourses* 3.1 in George Long, translator (1890), *The Discourses of Epictetus, with the Encheiridion and Fragments*. London: George Bell and Sons: “For I think that what makes a Pancratiast beautiful, makes a wrestler to be not good, and a runner to be most ridiculous; and he who is beautiful for the Pentathlon, is very ugly for wrestling.”
- ⁴⁴ Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 1361b.11, in Jonathan Barnes, editor (1984), *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press: “Beauty varies with each age. In a young man, it consists in possessing a body capable of enduring all efforts, either of the racecourse or of bodily strength, while he himself is pleasant to look upon and a sheer delight. This is why the athletes in the pentathlon are most beautiful, because they are naturally adapted for bodily exertion and for swiftness of foot.” κάλλος δὲ ἕτερον καθ’ ἐκάστην ἡλικίαν ἐστίν. νέου μὲν οὖν κάλλος τὸ πρὸς τοὺς πόνους χρήσιμον ἔχειν τὸ σῶμα τοὺς τε πρὸς δρόμον καὶ πρὸς βίαν, ἡδὺν ὄντα ἰδεῖν πρὸς ἀπόλαυσιν: διὸ οἱ πένταθλοι κάλλιστοι, ὅτι πρὸς βίαν καὶ πρὸς τάχος ἅμα πεφύκασιν.
- ⁴⁵ Whether the same is true of female athletes is an open question, but footraces for “virgins” were a part of Greek athletics even in the Imperial period. Since the *aretē* of a potential wife was clearly important, the idea that athletic beauty reflects *aretē* may very well apply to females, too.
- ⁴⁶ That Philostratus takes beauty to be a natural thing easily corrupted by *nomos* is confirmed by letters such as #22 where he warns beautiful women against adorning themselves with make-up and fancy clothing. “The woman beautifies herself seeks to supply what is lacking; she fears detection of her deficiency. The woman whose beauty is natural needs nothing adventitious, for she is self-sufficient to the point of utter perfection.” ἡ καλλωπιζομένη γυνὴ θεραπεύει τὸ ἐλλιπὲς φοβουμένη φωραθῆναι ὁ οὐκ ἔχει ἢ φύσις, ἢ δὲ καλὴ οὐδενὸς δεῖται τῶν ἐπικτήτων ἀρκοῦσα ἑαυτῇ πρὸς πᾶν τὸ ὀλόκληρον
- ⁴⁷ I have chosen not to discuss Philostratus’ connections between gymnastics and warfare here. I suspect they are least partly a response to the the popular Roman belief that Greek athletics were useless as military training. Philostratus goes to some length to show a close historical connection between the glories of Greek military history and the tradition of gymnastic training.
- ⁴⁸ Plato, *Gorgias*, 464b-66a. This dialogue deals with the issues of sophistry, *nomos* vs. *physis*, and contains many athletic allusions. For a brief discussion, see Jason Konig (2009) “Training athletes and interpreting the past in Philostratus’ *Gymasticus*,” in Bowie, Ewen and Jas Elsner, eds. *Philostratus*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 251-283.
- ⁴⁹ See notes 27 and 28 above.
- ⁵⁰ *Dialexis 2* translated in Simon Swain Swain (2009), “Culture and nature in Philostratus,” in Bowie, Ewen and Elsner, eds., *Philostratus*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 33-46. “φύσις μὲν ἔννοον δημιουργεῖ τὸν ἄνθρωπον καὶ λογικὸν καὶ εὐφυᾶ πάντα, νόμος δὲ παιδεύει καὶ ὀπλιζει καὶ ὑποδεῖ καὶ ἀμφιένυσιν, ἐπειδὴ γυμνὸς αὐτῷ παρὰ τῆς φύσεως πέμπεται, προτίθησι δὲ ὁ νόμος καὶ ἀρετῆς ἄθλα ἀνθρώποις, οἷον τιμῶν τὴν φύσιν.”
- ⁵¹ This is clearly evidenced by Konig’s (2014) copious notes.
- ⁵² It is noteworthy that the noble lie reprises Hesiod’s idea of gold, silver, and bronze generations mentioned above.
- ⁵³ The argument is made by Gregory Nagy (2013), *The Ancient Greek Hero in 24 Hours*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 8 §53.
- ⁵⁴ Alasdair MacIntyre (1981), *After Virtue*, Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press. MacIntyre’s theory has been applied to sport repeatedly by authors including Graham McFee (2004), *Sports, Rules and Values*, London: Routledge, and William J. Morgan (1994), *Leftist Theories of Sport*, Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
- ⁵⁵ For an overview of how MacIntyre’s theory applies to sport, see Heather Reid (2012), *Introduction to the Philosophy of Sport*, Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 57-68.