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ARCHIVES ANNOUNCEMENTS

Home > Vol 36, No 2 (2006) > Reid

Font Size:   

Athletic competition as Socratic philosophy

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Abstract

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

Full Text: [PDF](#)

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Reading Tools

Athletic competit...

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Review policy
About the author
How to cite item
Indexing metadata
Print version
Notify colleague*
Finding References

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CLOSE

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