THE OLYMPICS AND PHILOSOPHY

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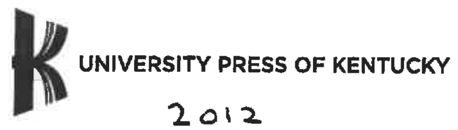

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THE OLYMPICS OF THE MIND

Philosophy and Athletics in the Ancient Greek World

> Every talent must unfold itself in fighting: that is the command of Hellenic popular pedagogy. . . . And just as the youths were educated through contests, their educators were also engaged in contests with each other. The great musical masters, Pindar and Simonides, stood side by side, mistrustful and jealous; in the spirit of contest, the sophist . . . meets another sophist; even the . . . drama was meted out to the people only in the form of a tremendous wrestling among the great musical and dramatic artists. . . . "Even the artist hates the artist." . . . The Greek knows the artist *only as engaged in a personal fight.*
> —Friedrich Nietzsche, "Homer's Contest"

The ancient Greeks were the most competitive people in history. As a profound student of the Hellenic world, the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche—a classical scholar by profession—devotes his essay "Homer's Contest" to detailing the many ways in which the ancient Greeks, above all the Athenians, loved to engage in combat, both literal and metaphorical. Even the art of drama in Athens took the form of civic contests, in which tragedians like Aeschylus and Sophocles competed against each other for prizes. It comes as no surprise, then, to learn that the ancient Greeks invented athletic competition as we know it, and indeed we take our words *athlete* and *athletics* from ancient Greek. One of the many ways in which we moderns are the heirs of the ancient Greeks is our revival and recreation of the supreme athletic competition they first staged, the Olympic Games. As Nietzsche realized, no subject takes us

closer to the heart of the ancient Greek world than the competitive spirit of the Olympics.

Nietzsche perceived how this competitive spirit extended even into the rarefied world of philosophy itself. We think of philosophers as detached and disinterested thinkers, with their heads in the clouds, far removed from the hustle and bustle of everyday life. But as a philosopher himself, Nietzsche intuited how much a spirit of rivalry permeated ancient philosophical disputes, as well as those between philosophers and other claimants to wisdom, such as poets and rhetoricians. Today, Plato may be our model of the serene master of thought, but Nietzsche argues that a contentious spirit was at the root of the Athenian's art as a philosopher:

> What, for example, is of special artistic significance in Plato's dialogues is for the most part the result of a contest with the art of the orators, the sophists, and the dramatists of his time, invented for the purpose of enabling him to say in the end: "Look, I too can do what my great rivals can do; indeed, I can do it better than they. No Protagoras has invented myths as beautiful as mine; no dramatist such a vivid and captivating whole as my *Symposium;* no orator has written orations like those in my *Gorgias*—and now I repudiate all this entirely and condemn all imitative art. Only the contest made me a poet, a sophist, an orator."[1]

The philosopher as athlete of the mind—that is Nietzsche's great insight into the debates we see in Plato's dialogues between Socrates and all the pretenders to wisdom in Athens he interrogates, humiliates, and defeats in argument. Thus to understand ancient Greek philosophy, it helps to look at the Olympics, and to understand the Olympics, it helps to look at ancient Greek philosophy. Wherever we turn in the Hellenic world, we see Greek pitted against Greek in the kind of competition epitomized by the Olympics. The Greek dream is to be the best, to be the first, to be the last man standing. The same competitive spirit that manifests itself on the race course and in the boxing arena comes out in Plato's dialogues (Socrates is literally the last man standing at the end of the all-night drinking contest in the *Symposium*). Socrates using his mental strength and agility to triumph over his opponents is the distant descendant of the very physical heroes of Homer's *Iliad*—not just Achilles, but all the athletes in the funeral games of Book XXIII, who prefigure the Olympians of later days. In Nietzsche's understanding, Plato's dialogues are the Olympics of philosophy.

The ancient Greeks were so possessed by the spirit of competition that they had a special word for it: *thumos.*[2] The word appears as early as Homer's epics, but receives its definitive analysis, appropriately enough, in Plato's dialogue *The Republic.*[3] The term comes up in the course of Socrates' attempt to distinguish the parts of the soul. We easily recognize the first two he discusses: (1) *logismos*—a word that designates the rational or calculating part of the soul, the logical power that can govern the passions; (2) *epithumia*—a word that designates appetites like hunger and thirst, and all forms of desire, including sexual impulses. But Socrates insists that a third part of the soul exists, an irrational element that is nevertheless not a form of desire and can in fact become the ally of *logos* against *epithumia.* This is what Socrates calls *thumos,* a term that at first looks very strange to us.[4] It is even difficult to find a single word in English that corresponds to what the ancient Greeks mean by *thumos.* Perhaps the closest equivalent in English is "spirit" or "spiritedness." But we are all familiar with the aspect of human nature Socrates is talking about. In fact, our best access to the phenomenon today is precisely in the world of athletics.

When we watch a boxer get off the canvas to snatch victory from defeat, or a wrestler struggling through pain to pin his opponent, or a swimmer straining to out-touch his rival in the next lane, or a cyclist pushing herself beyond the limits of endurance, we are watching *thumos* in action. The modern Olympics, like its ancient counterpart, is a festival of *thumos. Thumos* is what makes human beings—men and women—competitive; it is the passion to be first, to excel in any form of endeavor. It is an irrational force that leads human beings to scorn the limitations of their bodies and continually break through existing boundaries of performance. It is the drive to the finish line. The Greeks think of *thumos* in very physical terms; Homer consistently pictures it as located in the chest.[5] In fact, we would not go too far wrong if we translated *thumos* as "heart" or "guts." It is exactly what we are talking about in such expressions as: "You gotta have heart" or "That took a lotta guts." *Thumos* is manifest in warfare as well as in athletics. Soldiers on the battlefield, struggling to conquer their enemies, are equally driven by *thumos,* and indeed it does take an irrational force to get human beings to risk their lives in combat. *Thumos* is thus closely linked to the warlike qualities of courage and aggressiveness, and often takes the form of anger, a

disposition to take offense and seek revenge. *Thumos* is what makes human beings stake out and defend a turf. The characteristic thumotic gesture is to draw a line in the sand and challenge anyone to step across it. And then to beat one's chest.[6]

In ancient Greek literature, the classic portrait of the thumotic man is Achilles in Homer's *Iliad*. Achilles' spirited indignation over what he regards as a slight to his honor by the Greek leader Agamemnon leads him to withdraw in a huff from battle, with disastrous consequences for the Greek army. In Homer's portrait of Achilles, we see the archetypal ancient Greek hero, and he embodies the whole complex of passions associated with *thumos:* competitiveness, the compulsion to be first in everything, aggressiveness in battle, a quick temper, sensitivity in matters of honor, a capacity for noble indignation—all linked to the basic emotion of raw anger. The announced theme of the *Iliad* is, after all, the wrath of Achilles. In his tragic story, Homer reveals how truly problematic *thumos* can be. *Thumos* is the source of Achilles' glory; it is what drives him to be a hero, even at the risk of his life; it leads him to his ultimate triumph over his great antagonist Hector. And yet Achilles' petulant withdrawal from battle at the beginning of the *Iliad* eventually costs the life of his friend Patroclus and threatens to cause the Greeks to lose the war against Troy. *Thumos* is after all an irrational part of the soul, and can be a disruptive and destructive force in human life.

Thus the *Iliad* portrays the potential for tragedy in *thumos,* and explores how this dangerous force might be controlled (as we will see, Homer offers athletics as one possible solution). In particular, the *Iliad* reveals the tragic tension between the thumotic hero and the community that both needs and cannot live with his spiritedness, especially when it leads him into insubordination and rebellion. The hope of all communities is to turn spiritedness into public spiritedness, to channel this potentially divisive and dangerous force, with its obsession with private honor, into support for the public good. The trick to making *thumos* serve the community is to link the courage it inspires with patriotism, and thereby to get spirited individuals to fight for their homelands, not just for themselves. The *Iliad* is the first in a long line of martial epics that show just how difficult this task can be.

How to control *thumos* is also a central concern of Plato's *Republic.* In the overall scheme of the dialogue, Socrates correlates the three parts

of the soul with the three classes of people in the best city he is constructing in speech. *Logismos* corresponds to the philosopher-kings who will rule the city; *epithumia* corresponds to all the citizens who will be devoted to serving the needs and desires of the body—the farmers, the artisans, the merchants. *Thumos* (or *thumoeides*) corresponds to the guardian class, the warriors who will protect the city from its enemies. That of course is why this class must be characterized by *thumos;* the warriors need to be aggressive in battle. But their warlike character creates a problem for the city. Who will guard the guardians? Precisely because of their proud and aggressive nature, they may want to rule the city themselves, and with all its arms in their hands, they will have the power to do so.

Thus much of the *Republic* is devoted to the question of the education of the warrior class, how they can be raised so that they will be fierce with the city's enemies but at the same time be willing to accept tamely a subordinate position within the city, and in particular to accept the rule of the philosopher-kings. The *thumos* of the warriors must be moderated by their education in gymnastics and music. Gymnastic exercises will toughen them up, but at the same time impose discipline on them.[7] We see the fundamental Greek impulse to use athletics to divert *thumos* into acceptable channels, where it cannot do harm to the community. By "music," the ancient Greeks meant something more comprehensive than we do by the term—anything having to do with the Muses and hence all the arts—and that included what we would call education in poetry. In Socrates' plan, the city's warriors will be educated by an expurgated version of Homer's epics, one that will omit the more passionate scenes, including those that seem to endorse unbridled expressions of *thumos.* The warriors in Socrates' city will not be allowed to grow up into copies of Achilles. Their *thumos* will be thoroughly socialized to eliminate the tragic possibility of its coming into conflict with the city's demands. Carefully tamed in their education, their *thumos* will be fully in the service of the city and its ruling philosopher-kings.

In the overall parallel between the soul and the city in the *Republic,* Socrates' plan is thus to enlist *thumos* on the side of reason against desire. That is why the dialogue offers such a positive evaluation of *thumos,* even while acknowledging that it is one of the two irrational parts of the soul. From the beginning of his analysis of *thumos,* Socrates offers it as a force that can help reason deal with the power of desire. The spirited man

is too proud—he has too much sense of his dignity as a rational creature—to give in to the baseness of his bodily desires: "Notice that, when desires force someone contrary to the calculating part [*logismos*], he reproaches himself and his spirit is aroused against that in him which is doing the forcing, and, just as though there were two parties at faction, such a man's spirit becomes the ally of speech. . . . In the factions of the soul, it sets its arms on the side of the calculating part."[8] As usual, Socrates sums up his analysis in the form of a question, expecting (and receiving) a "yes" from his interlocutor, Glaucon: "just as there were three classes in the city that held it together, money-making, auxiliary, and deliberative, is there in the soul too this third, the spirited, by nature an auxiliary to the calculating part, if it's not corrupted by bad rearing?"[9] In sum, Socrates acknowledges good and bad forms of *thumos*, one that can serve the city and one that can tear it apart. The central purpose of education in the *Republic* is to bring out the good side of the competitive spirit of the guardians and make them fight in the service of the city and on behalf of its ruling philosopher-kings.

Plato has Socrates go further in enlisting *thumos* on the side of philosophy. Indeed, he presents philosophy as itself a thumotic activity, since it involves warring on behalf of truth. To understand this point, we must cease to treat the *Republic* as if it were a philosophical treatise, and instead analyze it as the genuine drama of ideas that it is. The problem of *thumos* is the key to the dramatic action of the *Republic*.[10] It explains Socrates' interaction with his two principal interlocutors in the dialogue, Glaucon and Adeimantus. Plato characterizes these two figures, especially Glaucon, as the kind of spirited young men Socrates was always attracted to, and whom he hoped to win away from their devotion to Athens over to a life of philosophy (in this context, recall that Glaucon and Adeimantus were Plato's brothers). The problem for Socrates is that it is precisely the *thumos* of Glaucon and Adeimantus that attaches them to the city. The way Athens has socialized their *thumos* gets in the way of his efforts to open them up to the possibility of philosophy. Their pride and ambition make them obsessed with being honored in the eyes of their fellow Athenians, and hence they devote themselves to areas of life conventionally regarded as glorious by the city, such as athletic competition and warfare. Moreover, spirited young men have been taught by Athens to have contempt for philosophers, who are not honored by the city and even

appear to be disreputable characters, engaged in unmanly pursuits that take the form of "all talk and no action." Under these circumstances, how is the philosopher to gain a foothold among the thumotic youth of the city?

The core of Socrates' strategy, as we have already seen Nietzsche suggest, is to assimilate philosophy to the city's conventional models of honorable activity—to turn philosophic argument into a kind of contest, a form of warfare or athletics, in which Socrates can prove himself superior to any man in Athens. Then he can win the respect and admiration of the spirited Glaucon and Adeimantus. In the *Republic,* as in most of Plato's dialogues, Socrates must use a form of intellectual combat to establish himself as the best of the Greeks. Thus the first book of the *Republic* shows Socrates taking on all comers in argument, and defeating them. Above all, he manages to tame the hostile rhetorician Thrasymachus by exposing the inner contradictions in his argument. Only by neutralizing the rhetorical power of Thrasymachus and his clever celebration of injustice can Socrates prepare Glaucon and Adeimantus to listen patiently to arguments on behalf of justice as the best way of life (and philosophy as the highest form of justice). In his rhetorical combat with Thrasymachus, Socrates exhibits all the characteristics of the warlike and athletic hero. A master of strategy and tactics, he must be tenacious and even dogged in argument, always going on the attack, never letting his opponents off the hook, pursuing the fallacies in their arguments until he corners them and delivers the philosophical equivalent of a knockout punch. It does not take long for Glaucon and Adeimantus to realize that Socrates is the strongest man in Athens when it comes to philosophic argument. Fascinated by Socrates' power, they become willing to engage in a remarkably long discussion of the nature of justice in the city and in the soul. The way Socrates engages these spirited young men in philosophic dialogue is the ultimate example in the *Republic* of how *thumos* can be enlisted in the service of reason, of how spiritedness can be diverted from its normal and often dangerous channels into higher, intellectual pursuits.[11]

The *Republic* represents a relatively late and certainly very philosophical attempt to deal with the problem of *thumos* among the ancient Greeks. But as we have seen, even at the beginning of Greek literature, in the *Iliad,* Homer already presents *thumos* as problematic, and it turns out that athletics is very much part of the picture when the

epic poet tries to deal with the phenomenon. In particular, an analogy from athletics may help us understand one of the major cruxes in the interpretation of the *Iliad*. Commentators have long puzzled over and debated what appears to be Achilles' change of heart at the end of the poem. For much of the *Iliad*, Achilles appears as a fierce and fearsome warrior. In the grip of *thumos*, he boils over with anger and rage, and leaves death and destruction in his wake. Once he sets out to avenge his comrade Patroclus, he becomes an implacable killing machine. Nothing can stop him in the frenzy of his *thumos*, not even the intervention of a river god or Apollo. In his final confrontation with the noble Hector, Achilles shows no mercy. He hounds his opponent to his death and afterwards desecrates Hector's body by dragging it behind his chariot in his relentless effort to triumph over and humiliate the man who killed Patroclus. By carrying revenge to its limits and beyond, Achilles demonstrates how truly frightening *thumos* in action can be, and seems to be on the verge of losing his very humanity in Book XXII.

When King Priam longs to reclaim his son Hector's body from the enraged Achilles in order to give it proper burial, his wife, Hecuba, cautions him against even trying. She fears that Achilles will continue his campaign of vengeance by murdering the Trojan king if he can just get his hands on Priam. And yet when Priam comes to Achilles' tent as a suppliant, the thumotic warrior treats him hospitably, serving him dinner, preparing him a bed, and promising not to resume fighting for the twelve days the Trojans will need for the funeral of Hector. By talking of his son, Priam makes Achilles think of his own father, Peleus, and that creates a bond between the Greek and the Trojan. At one point Achilles even takes Priam by the hand and shares his grief with him. Since antiquity, many explanations have been offered for Achilles' seemingly abrupt change from an uncontrollable killer to a man willing to make a truce with his bitter enemy. On the surface, Achilles' reconciliation with Priam appears to be an act of piety; Zeus sends a message to Achilles cautioning him against carrying his vendetta too far and ordering him to return Hector's body. But why should Achilles choose to do the pious thing at this moment? Earlier in the poem he repeatedly defies the gods, even when Apollo directly confronts him. Something must have changed in Achilles. Thus some commentators want to read a moral out of Book XXIV; they view Achilles as having learned a lesson in human mortality by the end of

the poem. In Patroclus' death, perhaps even more so in Hector's death, Achilles has seen a mirror of his own fate, and finally comes to accept his own mortality and hence his humanity. In the end he recognizes the common element of mortality that unites Greek and Trojan, and that allows him to experience a new form of fellow feeling with Priam. After all his thumotic efforts to outdo even the gods, Achilles becomes a human being at the end of the *Iliad*, and many interpreters welcome this transformation, this humanizing of the godlike hero.[12]

This reading makes the end of the *Iliad* very moving, and the structure of the poem as a whole—the contrast between the opening and closing books—does seem to comment on the need to moderate *thumos* and bring it under control. In Achilles' savage treatment of Hector's corpse, we see what happens when thumotic anger operates without restraint. The calm that descends upon Achilles in Book XXIV does appear to be some kind of restoration of balance in his soul. And yet: what brought it about at just this moment? Here, as elsewhere, in interpreting the ancient Greeks, we must beware of Christianizing a pagan phenomenon. As Nietzsche warns in "Homer's Contest" and other writings, our modern prejudices may get in the way of our understanding ancient phenomena such as Greek competitiveness. The language of learning a moral lesson may be anachronistic in analyzing the world of Homer. Are we saying that, by the end of the *Iliad*, Achilles has undergone a character transformation and truly become a man of peace? That he has learned his lesson and will never kill a fellow human being again? This reading seems more appropriate to a nineteenth-century novel than a pre-Christian epic. We know from what survives of the ancient Greek epic cycle beyond Homer that the events at the end of the *Iliad* did not bring Achilles' career as a superhuman warrior to a close.[13] His raging *thumos* was to flare up again in further battles; only his death could bring his warlike behavior truly to an end.

Here is where an analogy from the world of athletics may help us understand the *Iliad*. When athletes cool down after the heat of competition, the reason is not that they have learned a moral lesson about the dangers of overexerting themselves; the reason is that they have expended a tremendous amount of energy and are exhausted. This is the pattern of athletic competition: athletes must build up, mentally as well as physically, to their big events, and then they must give their all at the moment of

competition. "I left it all in the pool," Michael Phelps kept saying in the interviews he gave after his Achilles-like triumphs at the Beijing Olympics in 2008. It is obvious that athletes are physically exhausted after their great victories, but anyone who really knows sports is aware that they are mentally exhausted as well. *Thumos* is the point where the mental and the physical intersect, and that is why it is the key to understanding athletics, to realizing that it involves the soul as well as the body. The ancient Greeks located *thumos* physically in the body—in the guts—but they also knew that it has what we would call a mental component. *Thumos* is one of the words Homer uses in places where we would say "mind." In building up to their big events, the great athletes are building up the *thumos* in their souls. That combination of competitiveness, pride, aggressiveness, and even anger is what fuels their best efforts. That explains why many athletes, in the weeks or months leading up to a big event, carry around a photo or some other reminder of their chief competitor. They are psyching themselves up for the contest, building up their anger, their pride, their *thumos*.

The ancient Greeks had a kind of "hydraulic" understanding of *thumos*, as a sort of fluid that builds up pressure in the soul.[14] Here is how Socrates characterizes the power of *thumos* in the case of righteous indignation: "and what about when a man believes he's being done injustice? Doesn't his spirit in this case boil and become harsh and form an alliance for battle?"[15] This image of *thumos* boiling captures something essential in the ancient Greek understanding of the phenomenon—the sense of an energy building up that needs to be discharged and that may explode when it is finally released. We share this conception today when we talk about athletes "blowing off steam" in the heat of the contest. If *thumos* is what fuels athletic competition, then we can picture it in three stages: (1) the calm buildup of *thumos* before the event; (2) the stormy release of all the pent-up *thumos* in the heat of competition; (3) the calm after the storm once all the *thumos* has been discharged.[16]

The athletic pattern of "calm before the storm–storm–calm after the storm" fits the story of Achilles in the *Iliad* very well. When Achilles indignantly withdraws from battle, he imposes upon himself what for him is an unnatural regime of inactivity. He is a man who lives for warfare and is used to expending *thumos* on a daily basis, warring with opponents and getting what we today would call an adrenaline rush.[17] He needs

warfare to satisfy his pride and his aggressiveness; he is a combat junkie. Once he ceases fighting, with no outlet for his *thumos*, pressure starts to build up in him to return to the fray. Achilles sulking in his tent is like an athlete on the sidelines itching to get back into the game. Thus once Achilles finally goes back into combat, his *thumos* explodes in a monumental rage and a murderous frenzy. His combat with Hector is the main event he and everyone else have been anticipating, just as if it were a world championship boxing match. Everything hinges on this one supreme moment of contest, and Achilles, like a great athlete, focuses all his thumotic energy on triumphing over Hector.

That Achilles should experience a kind of calm after this colossal discharge of *thumos* is only natural. In one moment of overwhelming tension, Achilles has expended all the energy, mental and physical, he had been building up in his days of inactivity.[18] Thus it is not surprising that after killing Hector, he behaves differently from the way he did before. With his great purpose accomplished and all his energy expended, he has calmed down and become disposed to listen to messages from the gods that he would have angrily dismissed just days earlier, during the buildup to his confrontation with Hector. Having satisfied his thumotic need for revenge in the most vicious and complete way possible, Achilles becomes almost a different person and can behave like a gentleman for a change. To press our athletic analogy further: think of the peculiar pattern of behavior characteristic of boxers, especially champions and contenders. Leading up to their big fight, two boxers will "bad-mouth" and "trash talk" each other at press conferences, much the way the heroes in Homer verbally spar before their combats. With boxers today, much of this behavior is for the benefit of the television camera, and is clearly part of a publicity campaign designed to sell tickets. But at least some of this animosity is real, and when a fight breaks out between boxers at a ceremonial weigh-in, it is not always fake. Boxers really do have to work up hate for each other before their confrontation in the ring, and once their fight begins, their savagery in attacking each other can become frightening. And yet, in many big boxing contests, a seeming miracle occurs when the final bell rings. Two men who looked as if they were trying to kill each other for twelve rounds suddenly embrace and hug. From being the worst of enemies, they suddenly appear to become the best of friends. Having discharged their *thumos* in the most direct way

possible, the boxers can start behaving like ordinary, decent human beings again and no longer like savage warriors. The same logic governs Achilles' treatment of Priam and his ability to reach out to a man who is his enemy.

To carry our athletic analogy even further: Think of the typical victorious athlete in a post-fight or post-game interview: "I'm going to take a few days off, just relax, enjoy the moment." But when athletes speak this way, it does not mean that they are ready for retirement. They are not expressing a lesson they have learned that athletic competition is not really for them. On the contrary, the typical athlete enjoys the warm afterglow of a great victory for a while, but sooner or later longs to reenter the ring or the stadium.[19] Similarly in the case of Achilles, even as he appears to be reconciled with Priam, he calls for what amounts to only a cease-fire, not a full-scale end to warfare between Greeks and Trojans. An undercurrent of hostility runs beneath his dialogue with Priam; he feels he needs to remind the suppliant king of what might happen if his *thumos* were aroused and his anger flared up again: "So don't anger me now. Don't stir my raging heart still more. / Or under my own roof I may not spare your life, old man."[20] Clearly in Book XXIV Achilles is already thinking of returning to the battlefield. Given his thumotic nature, he has no choice.

We hope that no one will think that we are making light of Homer and the *Iliad* by suggesting this kind of athletic analogy for the story of Achilles. The ancient Greeks took their athletic competitions very seriously, and treated their victorious athletes as heroes just the way they did their victorious generals. Thus to speak of Achilles in athletic terms is not to belittle or make fun of him. Nor is it to reject completely the lesson about common humanity that many interpreters would like to read out of the *Iliad.* One can question whether Achilles really learns a moral lesson in the course of the poem without denying that the poem as a whole embodies a sobering teaching about humanity and the need to control *thumos.* The ancient Greeks, from Homer to Plato, thought of what they called *thumos* as an essential part of human nature. That Achilles' conduct in the *Iliad* can be explained in terms of the working out of *thumos* in his soul is thus in ancient Greek terms a lesson in humanity.

The way athletics takes on increasing importance toward the end of the *Iliad* is evidence for this understanding of Achilles. In its grand

architectonic pattern, the poem begins with *thumos* at work in an army camp and concludes with *thumos* at work on an athletic field. Opening with the quarrel between Achilles and Agamemnon, the *Iliad* shows *thumos* at its most divisive. Forced to give up his own concubine, Agamemnon decides to take Achilles' concubine Briseis as recompense. The problem is that Briseis was a prize of war for Achilles. He becomes enraged at Agamemnon, not because he deeply desires Briseis or profoundly cares for her, but because she is a badge of his honor, his triumph as a warrior.[21] Above all, he begrudges relinquishing her to Agamemnon, which would be a sign of his inferiority to him. The affront to his honor is so great that Achilles is on the verge of killing Agamemnon on the spot—only the intervention of the goddess Athena prevents this violent outcome. Still, this quarrel, as we have seen, leads to all the carnage in the *Iliad.* Once the *thumos* of the Greek and Trojan warriors is released and set in motion, they kill each other with enthusiasm and a kind of joy in the competition. Only when the display of thumotic aggressiveness culminates in the spectacular confrontation of Hector and Achilles are the warriors ready for a brief cessation of hostilities and a little rest and recreation.

Accordingly, Homer devotes Book XXIII of the *Iliad* to the funeral games Achilles ordains to commemorate the death and burial of Patroclus. These athletic contests are a remarkable anticipation of the ancient Olympic Games. They include many of the classic Olympic events: chariot racing, boxing, wrestling, foot racing, and javelin throwing.[22] Many of the institutions of formal athletic competition are already in place in Homer's account. A race course has been laid out, umpires or referees are on the scene, some rules of competition are in effect, prizes have been set up. There is even some coaching and the possibility of cheating. Virtually every element of athletic competition as we know it today comes up in the *Iliad,* including betting on the outcomes. Perhaps all that is missing is product endorsements by the victors (if they happen to cry "Nike" when they win, that is *not* a brand name, but simply the Greek word for "victory"). It says something about the centrality of the Olympics in ancient Greek culture that, already in its foundational poem, we see such a detailed blueprint for what was to become Olympic competition. If Homer was the teacher of the Greeks, then one thing he taught them was the need for the Olympics to channel *thumos* away from the deadly combat of war.

Already in the *Iliad,* Homer offers athletic competition as an alternative to war, a different way of expending *thumos.* We see all the aspects of thumotic behavior in the funeral games—the overwhelming desire to be first, the aggressiveness of the competitors, their pride in victory, their bitter shame and anger in defeat.[23] Even in what is supposed to be the alternative to deadly combat (and part of a religious rite), the Greeks apparently cannot help risking their lives to be first. The chariot racers behave like NASCAR drivers today. At the risk of crashing, they push their vehicles to their limits of performance, and jockey dangerously for the most advantageous positions on the turns. Even the spectators get so caught up in the excitement of the competition that Ajax and Idomeneus feel that they must place bets and are on the verge of coming to blows when Achilles intervenes to calm them down.

Achilles' role in the funeral games is especially instructive. In the calm that has descended upon him in the aftermath of his overwhelming and deeply satisfying defeat of Hector, Achilles has made a deliberate and seemingly uncharacteristic decision not to compete. Still, he cannot help pointing out that if he were to do so, "surely I'd walk off to my tent with first prize."[24] But because Achilles is not competing, his *thumos* is not engaged, and he can play the unfamiliar role of mediator in the disputes that arise between the intensely competitive participants in the games. He very diplomatically settles conflicts over such contentious issues as order of finish, and even manages to juggle the prizes to satisfy contestants who feel they have been cheated or slighted.[25] Achilles invents what we would call consolation prizes, and thereby reveals what distinguishes athletics from warfare. There are no consolation prizes on the battlefield. Indeed Homer presents military combat as the classic zero-sum game. Typically in the *Iliad,* the result of combat is that one hero lives and the other dies. The Homeric epic is the ultimate example of the principle that the last man standing wins. As the Achillean American general Douglas MacArthur said in his famous Farewell Address to Congress on April 19, 1951: "In war there is no substitute for victory."

The principle of "no substitutes" is what created the original problem between Achilles and Agamemnon. Agamemnon could offer no replacement for Briseis in Achilles' eyes because what was at stake between them was not an object for which something else could substitute but rather a pure matter of honor. It is therefore significant that in the funeral games, the Greek heroes are willing to accept substitutes for the prizes they initially believe they deserve; they are actually willing to settle for second prize or even lower.[26] Perhaps most significant of all is the way Achilles chooses to treat Agamemnon in the funeral games. He speaks to him courteously and makes sure that the great king is honored without even having to compete. The way both Achilles and Agamemnon are generous with giving away prizes at the end of Book XXIII contrasts sharply with their behavior in Book I, where their proud clinging to their possessions provokes their disastrous argument. The contrast between Book I and Book XXIII in this respect must be deliberate. In the funeral games, we can see Homer's hope that the volatile force of *thumos* might somehow be moderated among the fiercely competitive Greeks, by channeling it into athletic competition. And yet the way Homer's Greeks compete furiously even on the athletic field, and the way that, even in play, their contentiousness almost leads to deadly results, reminds us how powerful and dangerous the force of *thumos* was in the ancient Greek world.

We normally think of philosophy and athletics as occupying opposite ends of the spectrum of human activity, with the former exercising the mind and the latter the body. But as we have seen in examining texts by Nietzsche, Plato, and Homer, philosophy and athletics have much in common and much to teach each other. The Greek concept of *thumos,* most fully articulated in Plato but already present in Homer, reveals an aspect of human nature in which the mind and the body intersect, and which therefore can manifest itself in both philosophy and athletics. We have seen that Plato's philosophic discussion of *thumos* can help us understand the competitive spirit that motivates athletes. By the same token, as Nietzsche shows, athletic competition provides a useful model for what occurs when philosophers enter into spirited dialogue with each other. As we saw in Homer's *Iliad,* from the earliest moments we can observe in Greek culture, concern with athletic competition is bound up with larger concerns about the human condition. The kinds of athletic competition we associate with the ancient Olympic Games were already being played out in Homer's imagination on the plains of Troy. As Nietzsche, Plato, and Homer show, the competitive spirit, the *thumos,* that animated the Olympics pervaded the whole of the ancient Greek world.

Notes

The epigraph is from *The Portable Nietzsche*, Walter Kaufmann, ed. and trans. (New York: Viking, 1954), 37.

1. *Nietzsche*, 37–38. On the pervasiveness of competition in ancient Greek culture, see John J. Hermann Jr. and Christine Kondoleon, *Games for the Gods: The Greek Athlete and the Olympic Spirit* (Boston: MFA Publications, 2004), 145, and M. I. Finley and H. W. Pleket, *The Olympic Games: The First Thousand Years* (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2005), 21–22.

2. The Greek word is often transliterated into English as *thymos*. For a wide-ranging series of essays on the philosophical importance of *thumos*, see Catherine H. Zuckert, ed., *Understanding the Political Spirit: Philosophical Investigations from Socrates to Nietzsche* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988). For other philosophical reflections on *thumos*, see Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992), 162–191, and Harvey C. Mansfield, *Manliness* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 206–208, 220–221, 228, 230–231, 236.

3. For a careful attempt to discriminate among the many meanings of *thumos* in Homer, see Julian Jaynes, *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1976), 69, 258–259, 261–263, 274–275. For the archaic meaning of *thumos*, see also Bruno Snell, *The Discovery of the Mind: The Greek Origins of European Thought*, trans. T. G. Rosenmeyer (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), 8–22; Snell stresses that we must distinguish between the meaning of *thumos* in Homer (where it is a very concrete term) and its meaning in later Greek literature, such as Plato (where the term becomes more abstract). On the meaning of *thumos* specifically in Homer, see also James M. Redfield, *Nature and Culture in the Iliad: The Tragedy of Hector* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994), 171–179.

4. In fact, in the *Republic*, Plato uses the even stranger word *thumoeides* ("thumos-formed") in addition to the more normal Greek word *thumos*. For the use of the words *thumos* and *thumoeides* in the *Republic* and throughout Plato's dialogues, see Leon Craig, *The War Lover: A Study of Plato's Republic* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994), 96 and 381–383, note 10. This book is one of the most thorough and insightful studies of the importance of *thumos* in the *Republic* and specifically relates it to athletics on 66–67.

5. Jaynes, *Origin of Consciousness*, 263.

6. As difficult as it may be to believe, this full range of meanings is indeed comprehended under the Greek word *thumos*. Here is a partial listing of the translations of *thumos* in the authoritative Liddell and Scott Greek-English lexicon: the soul, breath, life, spirit, heart, mind, the seat of sorrow or joy, temper, will, courage, the seat of anger, wrath (*An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon* [Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1889], 371).

7. On the connection between gymnastics and philosophy, see Craig, *War Lover*, 72–73.

8. Allan Bloom, ed. and trans., *The Republic of Plato* (New York: Basic Books, 1968), 119–120 (440b,e in the standard Stephanus numbering of Plato's dialogues).

9. Ibid., 120 (441a).

10. For detailed analysis of the dramatic action of the *Republic*, see Leo Strauss, *The City and Man* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1964), 50–138, and the "Interpretive Essay" in Bloom, *Republic*, 307–436. For the specific issue of *thumos*, the problem of educating the guardians, and Socrates' relation to Glaucon and Adeimantus, see Strauss, *City and Man*, 85–112, and Bloom, *Republic*, 337–343, 348–365, 375–378.

11. For a systematic analysis of the connection between *thumos* and philosophy in the *Republic*, see Craig, *War Lover*. For a different view of the subject, see Mary P. Nichols, "Spiritedness and Philosophy in Plato's *Republic*," in Zuckert, *Political Spirit*, 48–66.

12. See, for example, what Bernard Knox says of this scene in his introduction to Robert Fagles's translation of the *Iliad*: "This is a new Achilles, who can feel pity for others, see deep into their hearts and into his own. For the first time, he shows self-knowledge and acts to prevent the calamity his violent temper might bring about. It is as near to self-criticism as he ever gets, but it marks the point at which he ceases to be godlike Achilles and becomes a human being in the full sense of the word. . . . It is an admission of mortality, of limitations, of the bond that unites him to Priam, and all men" (Homer, *The Iliad*, trans. Robert Fagles [New York: Penguin, 1990], 60–61). See also Redfield's comment on this scene: "At this point Achilles . . . becomes himself a moralist" (*Nature and Culture*, 217; see also 215–216). On this point, see also Arlene W. Saxonhouse, "*Thymos*, Justice, and Moderation of Anger in the Story of Achilles," in Zuckert, *Political Spirit*, 44. This essay is one of the best treatments of the role of *thumos* in the *Iliad*.

13. In the epic cycle, Homer's *Iliad* was followed by the *Aethiopis*, traditionally ascribed to Arctinus of Miletus. This poem evidently carried the story of the Trojan War through the death of Achilles up to the quarrel between Odysseus and Ajax over the arms of Achilles, which resulted in Ajax's suicide. In the course of the *Aethiopis*, Achilles once again goes on a rampage: he kills the Amazon warrior Penthesilea, as well as the scurrilous Thersites within the Greek camp, and is finally himself killed by Paris with the aid of Apollo in the course of his attempt to assault Troy to avenge the death of Antilochus (an episode that appears to recapitulate his avenging of Patroclus). Of course none of this legendary material is presented within the *Iliad*, but Homer was undoubtedly aware of at least some of it. At a minimum, he registers throughout the *Iliad* his awareness that Achilles was soon going to die in battle. For what we know of the *Aethiopis*, see Hugh G. Evelyn-White, ed. and trans., *Hesiod, The Homeric Hymns and Homerica* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1914), 506–509. For an imaginative attempt to retell these legends (nevertheless grounded in the ancient sources), see Gustav Schwab, *Gods and Heroes of Ancient Greece*, trans. Olga Marx and Ernst Morowitz (New York: Random House, 1974), 498–529.

14. Redfield makes the point this way: "*thumos* is not an organ; rather, it is a substance which fills an organ, namely, the *phrenes*" (Redfield, *Nature and Culture*, 173; *phrenes* is another Greek word meaning "mind," from which we get words like *phrenology;* in Homer, as Redfield points out, the *phrenes* is identified with the lungs and the *thumos* with the breath that fills the lungs).

15. Bloom, *Republic,* 120 (440c). The image of boiling is in the original Greek.

16. Redfield develops a similar understanding of another key term in the *Iliad*—*cholos,* the word that is used to describe Achilles' "rage." Redfield characterizes *cholos* as a force that builds up and then must be discharged: "*Cholos* is a whole-body reaction, the adrenal surge which drives men to violent speech and action. . . . There are two ways of dealing with *cholos*. It can be poured into violent action and in that way 'healed' (IV.36). Or it can be 'digested' (I.81; cf. IX.565); in the course of time the body will consume the *cholos* and the man will be calm again" (*Nature and Culture,* 14–15; Redfield's book/line references are to the original Greek text of the *Iliad*).

17. For the "physiology" of *thumos* and its association with adrenaline, see Jaynes, *Origins of Consciousness,* 262: "*Thumos* then refers to a mass of internal sensations in response to environmental crises. It was, I suggest, a pattern of stimulation familiar to modern physiology, the so-called stress or emergency response of the sympathetic nervous system and its liberation of adrenalin[e] and noradrenalin[e] from the adrenal glands. This includes the dilation of the blood vessels in striate muscles and in the heart, an increase in tremor of striate muscles, a burst of blood pressure, the constriction of blood vessels in the abdominal viscera and in the skin, the relaxing of smooth muscles, and the sudden increased energy from the sugar released into the blood from the liver, and possible perceptual changes with the dilation of the pupil of the eye. This complex was, then, the internal pattern of sensation that preceded particularly violent activity in a critical situation. And by doing so repeatedly, the pattern of sensation begins to take on the term for the activity itself. Thereafer, it is the *thumos* which gives strength to a warrior in battle, etc. All the references to *thumos* in the *Iliad* as an internal sensation are consistent with this interpretation." Since Jaynes is talking about Homer here, he is referring to activity in warfare, but the physiological responses he describes are equally involved in athletic exertion. For a simultaneously mythological and physiological view of Greek athletics, see Hermann and Kondoleon, *Games for the Gods,* 22: "Divine intervention was considered a major factor in the outcome of athletic contests. In Homer, gods give extra rushes of adrenaline to their favorites."

18. For Achilles' exhaustion after his battle with Hector, see Homer, *Iliad,* 23: 11. 74–75: "his powerful frame was bone-weary from charging Hector / straight and hard to the walls of windswept Troy" (Achilles' *thumos* is mentioned in the preceding line in the Greek: 23, 1. 62). On Achilles' exhaustion, see also Homer, *Iliad,* 23: 11. 266—he "sank down, exhausted. Sweet sleep overwhelmed him." We quote the *Iliad* in English from Fagles's translation (cited in note 12), and give book and line numbers. Since these line numbers differ in the original, when we cite the Greek text, we are referring to the Loeb Classical Library edition, *Homer: Iliad,* 2nd ed., trans. A. T. Murray, rev. William F. Wyatt (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

19. This change in mood after athletic competition may not simply be a mental phenomenon; it apparently has a physiological component. The idea that strenuous physical exertion can by itself produce a feeling of contentment is embodied in the common expression "runner's high." Recent medical studies have uncovered and documented a physiological basis for this well-known feeling. Strenuous exercise evidently leads the body to release its natural opiates, endorphins, into the bloodstream, thus producing a general feeling of well-being. This research was carried out at the Technische Universität München and the University of Bonn and is reported in the journal *Cerebral Cortex* 18 (November 2008): 2523–2531, in a paper entitled "The Runner's High: Opioidergic Mechanisms in the Human Brain." For popular accounts of this research, see Gina Kolata, "Yes, Running Can Make You High," *New York Times,* March 27, 2008, and "Runners' High Demonstrated: Brain Imaging Shows Release of Endorphins In Brain," *Science Daily,* March 6, 2008. Achilles' famous change of mood at the end of the *Iliad* may thus be the result of his extraordinary physical exertion in chasing down Hector around the walls of Troy. It is, after all, not improbable that "swift-footed" Achilles might provide the all-time greatest example of runner's high.

20. Homer, *Iliad,* 24: 11. 667–678. On this point, see Saxonhouse, "*Thymos,*" 43. Where Fagles translates "heart" in this passage, Homer's original Greek is in fact *thumos* (24: 1. 568 in the Greek).

21. But see Saxonhouse, "*Thymos,*" 36, for the puzzling moment when Achilles refers to Briseis as his "wife" (*alochon*) at IX: 1. 336 in the Greek.

22. For a list of the events at the ancient Olympics, see Finley and Pleket, *Olympic Games,* 43. For the relation of the *Iliad* to the Olympics, see 19–20.

23. See Homer's description of the participants in the chariot race: "the heart of each man raced, / straining for victory" (*Iliad,* 23: 11. 418–419). The word Fagles translates as "heart" is *thumos* in the Greek (23: 1. 370).

24. Homer, *Iliad,* 23: 1. 316.

25. See Saxonhouse, "*Thymos,*" 40.

26. See Redfield, *Nature and Culture,* 209, where he says of the funeral games: "The competition is not zero sum." Redfield provides a very thorough and illuminating discussion of the funeral games in general, 204–210. In contrast to the athletic competition in the *Iliad,* "only first place counted at the ancient Olympics . . . ; second- and third-place finishers were just losers" (Hermann and Kondoleon, *Games for the Gods,* 26). See also Finley and Pleket, *Olympic Games,* 22.