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# The Decency of Strength and the Strength of Decency: A Philosophical Approach to the Sport of Wrestling

Nikolaos Kameas,<sup>1</sup> Evangelos Albanidis,<sup>1</sup> and Ioannis Barbas<sup>1</sup>

**ABSTRACT.** The standard of the ancient Greek ideal of *noble competition*, timelessly constitutes the ultimate proposal for decent manifestation of human strength on all levels: physical/somatic, intellectual, emotional, mental, and spiritual. The logic of sportsmanship in ancient Greek culture, especially in athletics and education, contains in its core the sport of wrestling. Thus, in this study, the qualitative characteristics of wrestling were analyzed to demonstrate—philosophically—the value of this sport as a chance/possibility for development and culturing of human existence. Reference points of this study were as follows: (a) the ancient Greek literature (Homer, Pindar, Isocrates, Xenophon Lucian,), (b) ancient Greek philosophers (Heraclitus, Empedocles, Plato, Aristotle), (c) modern philosophers (Friedrich Nietzsche), and (d) contemporary studiers. The reasoning course of the study was initiated by the primary struggle of natural elements and the presence of primordial war instinct in Man, (b) continued with the beneficial influence of the ancient Greek athletic standard of fair play in the totality of human nature, and (c) the central role of wrestling in the edifice of the agonistic ancient Greek civilization emerged while stressing the moral, intellectual, and spiritual dimension of this sport and its distinct pedagogical value timelessly.

**Keywords:** philosophy, contest, respect, superiority, noble competition

## The Primary Struggle

The logic of existence involves in its core the struggle of opposing forces fighting each other for dominance, shaping an endless creative conflict situation, but also coexistence—an eternal “becoming” where cold fights with warm, liquid with solid, light with darkness, the night with the day, the male with the female, friendship with hostility. Empedocles was influential in advancing this philosophy which have come to us mostly in fragments preserved as poetic quotations in his works, as well as references made to his works by other ancient authors (Kirk, Raven, & Schofield, 1983). The predominance of one or the other element is only transient, and the unending battle between them confirms the need for the dispute and the importance of this natural struggle. One element is fighting with each other, struggling to dominate, leading to the perpetual cycle of life. The seemingly final unilateral predominance of one element

(e.g., of the darkness against the light in a situation of a long night), beyond the boundaries of “natural measure,” constitutes—with exceptions—one type of diversion from the natural equilibrium, resulting in immediate intervention of the opposite element, in this case the light, struggling to restore order, bringing back day. Thus, light and darkness, darkness and light, like all the elements of nature, are destined to wrestle each other, beating and losing continuously, to a sequence where the fight affirms the existence and the existence the struggle. This primitive element of conflict is the operative event of everything. Heraclitus stated that this primitive element of conflict is the operative event of everything (Axelos, 1974; Kirk, Raven, & Schofield, 1983). Only through the struggle between the liquid and the solid, the hot and the cold, the male and the female, and so on, there may be life in nature, life can be born for Man.

“Heraclitus accomplished this by observing the typical course of this becoming and decay, which is captured by him by the form of polarity and separation of a force into two qualitatively different activities, which opposing and struggling to reunite. Incessantly a quality divided into two opposites, which tends incessantly to reunite ... but in reality, light and dark, sweet and bitter, all the time

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are connected and joined together, like two wrestlers of whom when the one and when the other has the supremacy. From the war of opposites the whole becoming is born” (Nietzsche, 1975, p. 135).

Man as an interactive part of the natural becoming (Colli & Molinari, 1988; Sarikas, 2008, p. 107) bring within, in the field of instincts, the qualitative characteristics of primary natural perpetual struggle as previously described. Thus, the element of archetypal fight is expressed in the totality of human activities. Man as a being is destined to struggle constantly literally and figuratively: to interact with his environment, to create through struggles, fighting with anything encountered as an obstacle in his path to survival, for creating, for evolution. Birth comes through the showdown with the destruction, and Man gives form to this natural struggle in all aspects of his life, from the simplest to the most complex: from everyday life and the struggle for survival, up to the creation of art and civilization.

## THE ANCIENT GREEK IDEAL OF ATHLETICS

### The Decent Manifestation of Primary Struggle

In this broad field of human agonistic action, athletics, and specifically wrestling, is included as a vivid expression of the primary element of the struggle:

.... the conception of the contest...this concept, derived from gymnasiums and palestras, from artistic contests, the competition between political parties and cities, has been risen and become so general that now the mechanism of the world moves around it... is the conception of the struggle” (Colli & Molinari, 1988; Sarikas, 2008, p. 39).

Athletics, in the ancient Greek standards of moderation, noble competition, and intercontact with the sacred element (Almpanidis, 2004, p. 234; Goggaki, 2003, p. 343) requires the purest and the most decent manifestation of primary natural struggle for mankind: the inherent human primitive instincts of conflict and destruction are set within proper measure, thus obtaining a higher aesthetic dimension, touching the boundaries of an artwork (Kameas & Albanidis, 2012, pp. 7–10). The unlimited potential of awesome instincts, and especially of the instinct of war, is manifested by a violent and primitive way in war conditions. But this pernicious element is controlled within the boundaries of agonistic activities in ancient Greece: In this way, athletics can promote peace and culture, acquiring the qualitative characteristics both of an artwork and also of a sacred act, rebaptizing and upgrading psychosomatically the human kind. (Albanidis, 2004; Arvanitakis, 1999; Skouteropoulos, 2002). In his *Republic*, Plato comments on the relation between physical activity and the soul and mind: “...μουσικήν τε καὶ γυμναστικήν ἐπὶ τὸ θυμοειδὲς καὶ τὸ φιλόσοφον.” (“...music and gymnastics for the service of the

high-spirited principle and the love of knowledge...”; Shorey, [trans.], 1969). He saw the base of education as the “... great gymnastics and music” (Despotopoulos in Andriopoulos, ed., 2002). According to the Skouteropoulos (2002), gymnastics is addressed primarily to the soul. Arvanitakis (1999) referring to the views of Plato for gymnastics, says that the soul directs the exercise, but not the body and everything about gymnastics will be instructed to the soul and the mind, that is characteristic of the soul, because it only can transmit its virtue to the body. The opposite is not true. The soul, the spirit is what will define the rules of gymnastics. Plato and his students’ use of the term gymnastics means to exercise the body and not the specialized form of exercise of the sport of gymnastics as we use it in nowadays. This general exercise of the body in ancient Greece is related closer to wrestling and was governed by the ancient spirit of fair play that impose to the contestants the contact with the divine. The ancient Greek spirit of *agon* was a major feature of the period of classical antiquity (428–323 BC) in Greece.

Athletes fight each other with intensity and vigor, aiming victory and moral reward and not the destruction of the other (opponent), as in war conditions. The primitive, wild instincts that exist in Man, without losing their enormous potential, acquire the form of noble competition—transmuted into creative effort for victory and raised in respect for the opponent and for the sanctity of the match. This dominant ethical element of respect and modesty, in combination with the sense of shame from/for a possible (moral) diversion, is called *αἰδῶς* (“*aidos*”). The meaning of the term *aidos* constitutes the supreme human ideal with a divine dimension for the life of the ancient Greeks (including athletics). *Aidos* was the Greek goddess of shame, modesty, and humility that encompassed the feeling of reverence or shame that restrains men from doing the wrong thing:

“*Aidos*” was the one that made an athlete dear not only to the Gods but also to humans, preventing the young man to abuse his strength or seek to win unfairly. “*Aidos*” reminded the athlete to respect the opponent, because without him there would be no struggle and competition ....” (Golden, 2004, p. 82; Liddell & Scott, 1996, p. 40; Mouratides, 2000, pp. 310–11)

This is the essence of athletics in ancient Greece, with its most representative example: the sport of wrestling.

## WRESTLING: THE DECENCY OF STRENGTH

### The Authentic Expression of the Athletic Ideal

We talk about wrestling, the sport that expresses naturally and more directly than any other the ideal of athletics in its more authentic form, as cultivated in ancient Greece. There is the intensively dynamic effort of the wrestlers to prevail

over one another, to demonstrate their superiority (Giannakis, 2000), finally surpassing themselves. On the other hand, there is the presence of the spirit of sportsmanship that requires absolute respect for the sanctity of the opponent, the rules, and ultimately, for the contest itself (Goggaki, 2003). Constant contact and confrontation of bodies and formidable force applied on both sides of the wrestlers form within the palestra a particular agonistic situation in which the physical strength, acuteness, and spiritual vigor prevail. Wrestlers come to the palestra to wrestle, having exercised physically, mentally, spiritually, and morally aspiring to win: Their main concern is to show and prove decently their agonistic supremacy. To achieve the aforementioned objective-civilized manifestation of athletic excellence, it is absolutely necessary to respect the opponent and the sanctity of the match as this only can safeguard and promote the noble element of rivalry (Giannakis, 2000). The nature of the sport of wrestling requires the demonstration of superiority, the victory over the other and not causing pain or destruction.

According to Pindar, the effort, toils, and pain of the same athlete are the prerequisites for gaining victory. The essence of “agonistic becoming” consists in the wholeness of the grid of functional psychosomatic axes of the human entity: the physical-somatic efforts coexist absolutely with the inner processes (intellectual, emotional, mental, spiritual) like cleverness and resourcefulness, valor and also “cunning” [*νόος*(*noos*), *φρόνη*(*frin*), *thymos*(*θυμός*),*μῆτις* (*mitis*)] (Pindar, trans. 1990).

Clearly wrestling is a dynamic and tough sport, as it is characteristically mentioned by Homer (Homer, trans. 1924). However, the somatic conflict is only one dimension of the wrestling. The elements of spirituality and morality are in an active interaction with the body element, creating a privileged field of noble competition that brings together (a) the power and the high technique of the wrestling with and spiritual concentration and uplift; and (b) the mental dedication to the goal (victory) with the moral virtues of bravery, respect to the opponent and the sanctity of the rules. Wrestlers, in their attempts to make their athletic strength and superiority de facto visible, manage something unique: to develop in the palestra huge amounts of power, but without this involving the destruction of opponent. This skillful and decent manifestation of strength is the specific distinction that makes wrestling unique compared with other action and heavy sports. The particular technique handles that are applied to a wrestling match basically do not aim to cause pain to the opponent—as, for example, the beatings in the sport of boxing—but they do aim to make the superiority of the wrestler evident. To achieve their purpose, wrestlers need—in addition to power and technique—to be guided by ethical values and have great spiritual vigor to understand the significance of their opponents and the importance of the contest itself: so, this is the only way

to be crowned winner in the minds and souls of the others, to become a hero and one participant of the divine substance.

The psychosomatic dynamism, combined with high technical promotes moral values, gives in the sport of wrestling a moral and aesthetic quality of high standards. The strength here is manifested with completeness and intensity but, above all, decency. The effort to win is intense and “refined” in the sense of the practical and aesthetic value of wrestling: We speak for all of the vigorous holds used by wrestlers to prove eventually their superiority rather than to eliminate their opponent.

### The Pedagogical Value of Wrestling

The interaction of the body element with the moral, spiritual, and intellectual makes wrestling a great educational tool. The exercise of young people with this sport, affect all levels of human existence. Wrestling activates the full potential of an athlete and accomplishes also to make him or her face his physical and mental boundaries, finally to overcome his or her own self (Plato, trans. 1967). The wrestler is learning to face up to him- or herself and respect his or her own substance simultaneously with the respect to each other.

In the ancient Greek world, this effort for self-overcoming, in combination with the respect to the gods and opponents, were leading to victory giving to athletes and their cities eternal glory: a typical example is Ermisianaktas, a wrestler from Colophon in Asia Minor, who, according to the relevant epigram (300 BC), was honored by his city, after his victory at the Olympics, touching this way immortality (The Packard Humanities Institute, 2016).

According to Pindar, for winning the coveted victory is necessary for the athlete to have the separate inner valence, the unique courage that enables him to defy the dangers of a competitive action. On the basis of the ancient Greek model, the bravery that should characterize the athlete in conjunction with the sacred need for the acquisition of glory [*δόξα*(*doxa*)], which is naturally accompanied by the corresponding fear of nonacquisition of glory[*ἀδοξία* (*adoxia*)] eventually motivate him (the athlete) to contest (Pindar, trans.1990).

Thus, it can be said that the cultivation of moral virtue of manly courage (Aristotle, trans.1944), is a structural element of the sport of wrestling giving it a great moral-pedagogical dimension: Success is impossible in this sport, like life itself, without promoting bravery. We dare to say that strength and technique probably accompany the dominant inner element of valor on the road to victory. As well, glory as a supreme ideal elevates the quality of sporting

competition beyond the level of conventional reality of matter, in the sphere of the Sublime (Pelegrinis, 2004, p. 611). In addition, Man can creatively try to enter, through the power of the Greek ancient ideal of athletics and especially of wrestling, on a pedagogical course of self-knowledge and ontological ascent (Kameas & Albanidis, 2014), as this is defined by Pindar's dictum, "become such as you are, having learned what you are," (Pindar, trans.1990), and the Nietzschean exhortation, "you have to become what you are" (Colli & Molinari 1988; Sarikas, 2004, p. 163).

## CONCLUSIONS

The psychosomatic consummation of Man through education was the main challenge for the ancient Greek thinking. Thus, the harmony among body, mind, and intellect was the basic subject of the philosophical meditation. In this direction, Plato, one of the greatest philosophers of all time, notes in his work named *Timaeus*:

μία δὴ σωτηρία...μήτε τὴν ψυχὴ ἄνευ σώματος κινεῖν μήτε σῶμα ἄνευ ψυχῆς, ἵνα ἀμυνομένω γίγνησθον ἰσορροπῶ καὶ ὑγιῆ...» (Plato, trans. 1925).

...the one means of salvation is this—neither to exercise the soul without the body nor the body without the soul, so that they may be evenly matched and sound of health... (Plato, trans. 1925).

In this integration course of human existence, the choice of athletics and especially of wrestling as a leading pedagogical factor by the ancient Greeks, cannot be considered as accidental: There is a fact that Palestra was the main educational area (campus) in ancient Greece. The Greek philosopher Aristotle (Tseller & Nestle, 1980; Veggeti, 2003, p. 206), Plato's student (Kenny, 2005, p. 43), argues that the pedagogical process should begin with physical exercise in Gymnasium, where the sport of wrestling dominated:

ἐπεὶ δὲ φανερόν πρότερον τοῖς ἔθεσιν ἢ τῷ λόγῳ παιδευτέον εἶναι, καὶ περὶ τὸ σῶμα πρότερον ἢ τὴν διάνοιαν, δῆλον ἐκ τούτων ὅτι παραδοτέον τοὺς παῖδας γυμναστικῇ καὶ παιδοτριβικῇ: τούτων γὰρ ἡ μὲν ποιᾶν τινα ποιεῖ τὴν ἕξιν τοῦ σώματος, ἡ δὲ τὰ ἔργα (Aristotle, trans. 1944).

And since it is plain that education by habit must come before education by reason, and training of the body before training of the mind, it is clear from these considerations that the boys must be handed over to the care of the wrestling-master and the trainer; for the latter imparts a certain quality to the habit of the body and the former to its actions (Aristotle, trans. 1944).

Thus, this ancient agonistic-athletic model, where wrestling was featured prominently, should timelessly become a shining example and a guide for any similar human effort. The great German philosopher of the 19th century, Friedrich Nietzsche, who was a lover of ancient Greek culture (Matsoukas, 2009, p. 699), shows us the way:

...Greeks...the most humane people of antiquity ... we will try to learn from the Greeks and will teach guided from their examples. This will be our work (Bennie, 2001, p. 451; Nietzsche, 1975, p. 15; Sarikas, 2008, p. 119).

Wrestling is an authentic expression of the ancient Greek ideal of decency, strength, and promotion of morality and valor. Therefore, wrestling can possibly teach directly and effectively values and principles and also forge the courage of Man in all its forms, elements, which are the linchpins of a system of education. Thus, wrestling within the ancient ideal of fair play is a timeless standard of high-level pedagogical practice (Hernández-Muñoz & García-Romero, 2006; Herrmann, 1995).

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