Heather Reid, *Athletics and Philosophy in the Ancient World: Contests of Virtue.* London and New York: Routledge, 2011, pp. xii +124 £24.99 (pbk) ISBN 978-0-415-66950-4

This book by Heather Reid examines ancient sport, from Classical Greece to early Rome, but from a very ‘modern’ perspective and with a very modern purpose: to enter into a dialogue with modern sport so that we may both better understand our own sport culture and think about how to improve it. As Reid puts it in her introduction, ‘What I am trying to do is enable a foundational understanding of ancient sport and philosophy that makes a sincere dialogue with modern practices both possible and fruitful’ (2). Her guiding focus, for both the ancients and for us, is the question – and it is very much in question – of a possible connection between athletics and the inculcation of virtue. The claims that athletics is a rich arena for the inculcation of virtue, as well as the claims that athletics is conducive to many of the worst qualities of human conduct, have been made from ancient times to the present. Reid’s book aims to enable us to enter into that discussion more thoughtfully and fruitfully. In that she is clearly successful.

After an introduction, the book contains three parts. Part I, entitled ‘Athleticism and Arete: From Aristocracy to Democracy’, introduces us to the general claim that in ancient Greece sport early on did indeed become associated with the inculcation of virtue. In this part as well, Reid begins to develop an important theme: that although sport may have developed in Greece (and even earlier in Egypt) largely as an aristocratic pastime, it very soon began to exhibit a certain democratic tendency as Greeks began to realize that those who were not necessarily aristocrats were often the athletic equals to aristocratic athletes, indeed, sometimes even their superiors. There thus began a dialectic between the ‘aristocratic’ origins of athletics and its democratic tendencies, a dialectic that Reid develops in the three chapters of Part I, ‘Athletic Heroes’, ‘Olympia: Running towards Truth’, and ‘Boxing with Tyrants’.

Part II, entitled ‘Sport as Training for Virtue in Classical Greek Philosophy’, examines the way athletics became connected with virtue in ancient Greece, and it does so by examining, again in three chapters, how three of the titans
of ancient Greek philosophy, Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, raised and examined the question of the possible connection between athletics and the inculcation of virtue. One dimension of this connection on which Reid often concentrates, especially in the chapter on Socrates, is the connection (and, though perhaps not often enough, the differences) between the competition of athletics and the competitive aspect of Socratic philosophizing. The three chapters of Part II are aptly titled respectively ‘Wrestling with Socrates’, ‘Plato’s Gymnasium’, and ‘Aristotle’s Pentathlete’.

Part III, entitled ‘Learning from Watching Ancient Roman Spectacles’, turns to ancient Rome, and looks at the question of the connection between virtue and athletics through the eyes of three of that period’s most important philosophers, Epicurus (and more generally, the Epicureans), Seneca, and Marcus Aurelius, in three chapters entitled ‘The Epicurean Spectator’, ‘Seneca’s Gladiators’, and ‘The Circus and the Cosmopolis’. Perhaps the most important theme of this part is the transition that Reid traces from the Greek emphasis on the participating athlete to the Roman concentration on the spectator and the phenomenon of spectatorship. One might say, then, that for Reid the question of the connection of virtue and athletics from the standpoint of the Greek experience focused on the phenomenon (and so the possible virtue) of athletic experience, whereas for the Romans, the focus was more on what the spectator might learn about the connection from watching the athletes compete.

A final chapter, ‘Implications for Modern Sport’, leads us toward some of the important questions that Reid sees raised by the ancients for our own sport culture.

Before I begin a discussion of the philosophical import of this book, I want to praise Reid for the absolute wealth of information she presents, almost along the way, about ancient sport both in ancient Greece and Rome. From her discussions of the ancient Olympics and the educational role of the Greek gymnasia (including Plato’s and Aristotle’s) to her stimulating discussions of the Roman gladiatorial and other athletic spectacles, Reid loads us up with fascinating and pedagogically valuable information about ancient sport. This contribution by itself would make the book well worth the price and one valuable and eminently suitable for undergraduate students as well as scholars of sport and sport history. Were I still teaching courses in the philosophy of sport to undergraduates, I would certainly use this book.

Let me turn now to a brief discussion of the philosophical import of Reid’s book. To that end, I will begin with some reflections on the previously mentioned transition that Reid traces from the Greek concern primarily with athletic experience to the Roman emphasis on the spectator, the pleasure the spectator experiences and what he or she might learn from what they see. Reid makes an admirable effort to be as generous as she can be toward the Romans. Her connecting of the Roman spectators viewing what goes on in the
arena, watching the action (and the carnage!) from a distance and not at risk themselves, with the Epicurean virtue of ataraxia, and especially the Stoic emphasis on what the spectator (especially if he happens to be Seneca!) can learn from watching the extent to which the gladiators – at least, possibly, some of them – exhibited the Stoic virtue of accepting their station in life and making what they can of it, surely makes some sense and is worth thinking about. But in the end – and this is what I would want to ask Reid – don’t we have to say that the Roman emphasis on spectatorism is part of the problem of modern sport culture rather than part of the solution? In an age when many, many more people spend much, much more time watching sports rather than playing, don’t we have to conclude that this is ‘Romanism’ gone looney? And, precisely in the name of the possible virtue that one might learn from active and serious participation in sport, don’t we have to do everything we can to urge people to get off their ‘Roman’ butts, get away from their ‘Roman’ TV screens, and join the Greeks on the fields and courts of competition? Hooray for the Greeks! Boo Romans!

Second, I want to raise a question or two about the guiding philosophic theme of Reid’s book, the question of the relation – or to be more precise the possible relation – of athletics to virtue. For the most part, Reid is appropriately cautious in her claims about this. Indeed, one of the strengths of her book is her exhibition of the extent to which so many of the negative aspects of modern athletics (money, cheating, social stratification) had already turned up near the beginning of athletic competition. Nevertheless, it is clear that Reid wants to make as strong a case as she can that athletics at least can be an arena for the cultivation of important virtues. To cite only one of many examples, on page 74, responding to Aristotle’s implied views on sport, Reid says, ‘Being motivated by what is beautiful and noble may not be characteristic of athletes (at least not in Aristotle’s eyes), but athletic training can and often does push us beyond the simple motives of pleasure and pain toward finer, more elevated goals, including the cultivation of virtue’ (my emphasis). In many ways, the phrase I emphasized here, ‘can and often does’, embodies an important theme of Reid’s position. For ‘can and often does’ clearly emphasizes the possibility that athletics can indeed be an instrument of virtue education. And the ‘can’ implies, but only implies ‘but might not’. So what about all the problematic aspects of athletic culture that Reid herself acknowledges and documents throughout her book?

Can we not say that the evidence is in on this issue? Yes, sport can, given the right conditions, be an instrument of education to virtue. We all know instances of this. But we all also know instances – all too many of them – where somewhat different conditions (local culture, coaches, parents, agents, etc.) turn athletes into prima donnas if not criminals and athletics into theaters of viciousness. So the issue becomes, does it not, what are those conditions
that do make athletics a potential arena of virtue education, and how can we encourage those conditions and limit the more negative ones?

Though Reid’s book does not address this issue in depth that one might hope, it does set the question up in a very rich way, and lays the groundwork for her – and for all of us – to address the issue in a more thoughtful way. This is a valuable book, both for scholars of sport and, pedagogically, for use in the classroom.

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A sporting contest would seem to be both complete in itself and yet, by its very nature, public and accessible. That is to say, there is nothing lacking or inadequate about a contest such as a pick-up basketball game that is played entirely for its own sake and witnessed only by the participants themselves. Indeed, this scenario undoubtedly describes the great majority of contests played throughout the world. Furthermore, it must be admitted that sporting contests are, at least in one sense, rather trivial affairs; they typically present to the contestants an array of unnecessary challenges and govern their activities through artificial rules. The challenges and the stakes of sports have little to do with the real issues of life. These two claims – the inessential role of the spectators, and the trivial character of the sporting contest – would seem to imply that spending time and energy watching sports is doubly suspicious, and quite possibly a waste of time.

But such a dismissal is evidently wrong. For as long as people have played sports there have been others who come to watch, bringing with them a variety of perspectives, emotions, and appreciations of the action. Indeed, even an unsympathetic observer would have to be impressed by the extent and the depth of this interest. A curious relationship obtains between players and spectators; it is neither symmetrical nor codified, but it imparts some kind of meaning to each side. We might say that the spectators transform a contest into an event. Philosophers have studied this phenomenon quite profitably, especially in recent years, although relatively little attention has been directed