CHAPTER TWO
THE AGON MOTIF IN GREEK AND HELLENISTIC PHILOSOPHY

1. FROM XENOPHANES TO ARISTOTLE

It is significant that the more important gymnasia, for example the Lyceum and the Academy, also became centres of intellectual training and philosophy, in which such leading philosophers as Plato and Aristotle taught. It is the philosophers who not only reflect the decay of the original spirit of the games as a result of the growth of professionalism, but also seek to discover the true meaning and purpose of the games and athletics or, as in the case of the Cynics and Stoics, coin a new picture of the entire life of the sage as an Agon, retaining the terminology of the public games.

In tracing the evolution of what may be termed a philosophical concept of the Agon, a picture which reached the peak of its popularity and fullest form in the diatribe and the representatives of late Stoic moral philosophy, it is necessary to bear in mind the decay of the spirit of the games. It is only against this background that the polemic and the criticism of the tragedians and philosophers against the games and athletics in general on the one hand, and on the other hand their defence against the philosophers on the part of those seeking to retain the original glory of the games, is understandable.\(^1\) The very exaggeration of the importance of the sports in early Greek education later became fateful for their evaluation. At the same time the fame attached to the panhellenic games and the exaggerated desire to have a share in this fame led to a professionalism which, by means of its specialization and minute regulations for training and diet, destroyed the noble ideals of the games and converted athletics into a trade, in the vulgar sense of the word.\(^2\)

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\(^1\) The defence of gymnastics by Flavius Philostratus is no doubt prompted by the attacks of the Cynics and Stoics. Similar motives may well lie behind Lucian's 'Anacharsis'.

In the sphere of education the Sophists provided the reaction by demanding from their pupils exertion on the intellectual plane.\textsuperscript{1} Sports were still played and remained an essential part of the curriculum of the gymnasium but ceased to be the first object of the ambition of the youth.

While the tragedians of the fifth century occasionally lash out in vitriolic attacks against the athletes,\textsuperscript{2} we find other voices pointing to something higher and more important than the glory to be won at the games. The famous elegy of \textit{Tyrtaios} already reveals a rejection of the old ideal of the nobility which was largely determined by the games, and stresses over against the achievements which an athlete might perform in the contests the true \textit{ἀρετή} of the warrior. The relevant lines run:

\begin{center}
\begin{quote}
Οὐτ’ ἂν μνησάσιμην οὔτ’ ἐν λόγῳ ἄνδρα τιθείμην
δυτε ποδῶν ἀρετής οὔτε παλαισμοσύνης,
οὔτ’ εἰ Κυκλώπων μὲν ἔχοι μέγεθος τε βίην τε,

νικηφή δὲ θέων Ὀρθικιον βορέθην,

οὔτ’ εἰ πάπαν ἔχοι δόξην πλὴν θουρίδος ἀλκής
οὐ γὰρ ἀνήρ ἀγαθὸς γίγνεται ἐν πολέμῳ.


\end{quote}
\end{center}

This is however not merely a return to the hero-\textit{ἀρετή} of the Homeric epic, for here manly virtue is newly orientated in the citizen’s obligation to the Polis. A similar Polis-consciousness can be detected in the elegy of \textit{Xenophanes} which marks the beginning of a development towards a philosophical picture of the Agon.\textsuperscript{3} In this passage the poet claims in the name of ‘philosophy’ that his \textit{σοφία} is better than all the glorious victories in the games:

\begin{quote}

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\textsuperscript{1} Aristophanes in his attacks on the Sophists in Clouds 1002ff., ascribes the decay of gymnastics to the rise of Sophistry with its verbal Agones.

\textsuperscript{2} Cf. Euripides Frg. 282\textsuperscript{N}: κακῶν γὰρ ὄντων μυρίων καθ’ Ἑλλάδα οὐδὲν κάκιον ἔστιν ἄθλητῶν γένους; also Sophocles Aias 1250.


\textsuperscript{4} Xenoph. Frg. 2B (Diels I p. 128, line 7ff.).