

Fighting for Sophia. The Intimate Relationship between Martial Arts and Philosophy as a Way of Life

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Abstract: *This article investigates two related questions. Firstly, we take an intercultural approach and investigate how martial arts and philosophy as a way of life are connected in classical Greece and feudal Japan. Secondly, we develop insights about the role of martial arts in these contexts and investigate how they can contribute to a more active and “spiritual” approach to philosophy. Using examples from ancient and contemporary martial arts practices, we suggest that martial arts can and perhaps should be seen as a supplementary activity that aids philosophers in their quest to find wisdom. Although martial arts and philosophy have been discussed in an academic context before (e.g., Priest and Young 2014), a search of the literature revealed few studies that thematise martial arts and ancient, intercultural philosophical-pedagogical practices. This paper sets out to better understand these relationships, and potentially inspire philosophers, teachers, and academics alike to look for possibilities for including the practice of martial arts in a contemporary pedagogical approach to philosophy.*

*The article proceeds as follows. First, we introduce the concept of philosophy as a way of life, and spiritual exercises as the practical manifestation of a life lived philosophically based on the work of Pierre Hadot. Next, we discuss the category of active exercises and relate these to the Greek concept of *agon* (strife). We then connect these insights to Plato’s educational ideals in relation to athletics and martial arts. Our focus in this section is on the link between wrestling and philosophy in the classical world, which is found in a desire for virtue and wisdom. We continue with a discussion of Japanese swordsmanship through the work of Yagyū Munenori, and the relation it bears to philosophy as a physical, spiritual, and educational practice aiming at virtue. Finally, we discuss an educational example from the Netherlands where philosophy and martial arts are meaningfully integrated in school curricula, before closing with some suggestions for future research.*

Introduction

Through the ages, philosophy has become a profession that primarily consists in raising and addressing questions within highly specialised contexts. In classical Greece, however, philosophy was not a job, much less a hobby. It was an existential practice and pedagogical effort of self-(trans)formation.

What is often forgotten is that philosophy can be traced back to this educational spirit. Almost all philosophical texts from the pre-Socratics to the Neo-Platonists can be interpreted in light of the living context in which they were written, namely as guides to the *practice* of philosophy.

The ancient Greek pedagogical effort is often referred to as *paideia*. Although the term is derived from the Greek word *pais*, which means “child”, it is not limited to childhood education only. Regardless of one’s age or social position in life, philosophy endeavoured to form one’s character with the aim of becoming virtuous (Hadot 2020, 46, 50). Therefore, philosophy in the ancient sense cannot and should not be seen as something separate from pedagogy, which is also why we will consider these two aspects—philosophy and pedagogy in all its branches—conjointly moving forward.

In our attempt to understand and interpret philosophical ideas in both classical Greece and feudal Japan, and the ways they are related to martial arts, we rely on the work of philosopher and historian Pierre Hadot and his theory of existential practices. Using a combination of historiographic-hermeneutic scholarship and philosophical-philological argumentation, Hadot not only offers a model for reading and interpreting ancient texts, but also a model for practising philosophy itself, despite the fundamental differences between us moderns and the ancients.

Spiritual exercises

Let us start by noting that Classical Greek (and Roman) philosophy as a way of life was often inspired by warrior virtues such as courage (ἀνδρεία or *fortitudo*), temperance (σωφροσύνη or *temperantia*) and toughness or perseverance (καρτερία or *perseverantia*, M. Lamberti, 2021). According to Hadot, philosophical virtues such as these were trained through so-called “spiritual exercises”.

The adjective “spiritual” refers to the idea that philosophy was considered by the ancients as a choice that commits a person’s entire life and soul (Hadot 2020, 34, 59; Hadot 1995, 82). Spiritual exercises can be defined as voluntary, personal practices meant to bring about a transformation of the self.¹ As such, they form part

¹ Hadot 2011, 87. More recently, Sharpe and Ure have defined it as follows: “What is at issue is a cognitive, mnemonic, imaginative, rhetorical or physical exercise consciously chosen and undertaken by an agent with a view to the transformative effects the undertaking of this

of a paideutic quest for self-realization and entail a complete transformation of one's point of view, attitudes, convictions, and consequently, one's actions. The idea was to first change the way one *looks* at the world, before changing one's *being* in the world (Chase 2013, 297).

Spiritual exercises are not complementary to, but constitutive for the practice of philosophy (Hadot 2011, 22). They formed part of daily life and were practical in so far that they required exertion and routine; they needed to be done to have an effect, which is what makes them form part of a *lived philosophy*. Although we have only limited knowledge about how spiritual exercises were carried out in antiquity, Hadot mentions several examples. These include inner detachment regarding anything external, inner preparation for future unfavourable scenarios, the examination of consciousness, and the disciplining of judgment, desires, and inclinations.²

At the heart of these exercises is a choice to live philosophically, which means to live according to a certain principle, often associated with a certain school of thought such as Platonism, Aristotelianism, Epicureanism, or Stoicism. Regardless of the different philosophical schools, however, all spiritual exercises are, one way or another, a means towards an ethical end: virtue (ἀρετή). One category of exercises that deserves special attention here is the category of the active exercises (γυμναστική), which are directly connected to the practice of martial arts.

The Greek art of transformation

Active spiritual exercises were meant to instil habits in the soul that followed from certain fundamental maxims, such as indifference to indifferent things, self-mastery, fulfilling the duties of social life and other forms of practical behaviour. They were often related to abstinence and physical hardship and served to test and strengthen an individual's independence from external matters (Hadot 1995, 84–86). These exercises often consisted in athletic activities, especially in classical Greece, where athletics were practiced more vigorously than in any other civilisation at the time (Poliakoff 1987, 2). Although Hadot—regrettably—does not seem to take much interest in the nature of physical spiritual exercises, there are credible avenues to speculate as to what these exercises might have entailed.

Sports were usually practiced in the gymnasium by well-off men aspiring to become virtuous. The gymnasium, derived from the Greek *gumnazesthai*—which refers to both physical and mental exercise—was a large complex that included a running track and various athletic areas (Kennell 2021, 498). Footraces, long jumping,

exercise will have upon the practitioner's way of experiencing, desiring, eating, or thinking" (Sharpe and Ure 2021, 5).

² See for an outline of the different categories of spiritual exercises Hadot 1995, 84–87. See also Sharpe and Ure (2021, 5–7) for a list of twelve 'species' of exercises.

discus and javelin throwing were all common activities, but the Greeks were particularly fond of martial arts such as wrestling,³ boxing, and *pankration*.⁴

Martial arts were practiced at the *palaestra*. The Greek word *palaestra* derives from the verb *palaio* or *palaiein*, which means “to wrestle”. *Palaestra* was also the name of the daughter of Hermes, who along with her father is credited as the mythological inventor of wrestling (Corcoran 2016, 219 n62). But it was Hermes who was seen as the general patron of the sport, which is why his statue was commonly found in the *palaestra*.⁵

Since Greek athletics from the 8th century on were done in the nude, the athlete first entered the *apodutērion* (lit. “undressing room”). Apart from undressing, many other activities took place here, including physical preparations—such as oiling and use of the strigil,⁶ relaxing activities, and even intellectual activities, for which the wide benches provided ample opportunity. When Socrates met with the youth of Athens in the *palaestra*, it was probably in the *apodutērion* that they conversed.⁷ What is more, it is likely that Socrates and Plato first met at the *apodutērion* (Poliakoff 1987, 12–13).

Apart from athletic ability, eloquence, and academic excellence—what Hadot refers to as “spiritual gymnastics” (1995, 102)—were also seen as signs of virtue. Accordingly, teachers of rhetoric and scholars of liberal arts frequented the gymnasium by invitation of the *gymnasiarchoi*,⁸ along with other *paidonomoi*⁹ such as martial arts “coaches”, weapons instructors, and music teachers (Kennell 2021, 505; Tuncel 2007, 202).

Greek Gods and mythological heroes were the first to serve as the embodiments of virtue, particularly in the form of might and magnificence (Reid 2020, 16). Their struggles (ἀγώνες) with other gods, heroes and mythical creatures, and their physical strength and agility inspired athletes to mimic them. As Heather Read points

³ The first martial art to become part of the Olympic games in 708 BCE (Tuncel 2007, 71).

⁴ *Pankration* literally means “all (πᾶν) strength (κράτος)” sometimes also translated “complete victory”. In *pankration* everything was allowed except for eye gouging, biting, and attacking the testicles. Just like in boxing, a bout ended when one of two athletes gave up or could not continue. Wrestling had different rules, see Poliakoff 1987, 23 ff.; Poliakoff 2021, 222–223.

⁵ Hermes was also the God of trade, wealth, and luck. Other than Hermes, one would typically find Eros and Heracles as the main divinities present at the gymnasium (Tuncel 2007, 204).

⁶ Cleaning instrument used to scrape oil, sweat and dirt from the skin after bathing or exercise.

⁷ This is true for *Euthyphro* 2a (we use the Stephanus pagination in referencing Plato); *Charmides* 153a–b, 155d; *Euthydemus* (a *pankratist*) 271c–272b, 277d; *Lysis* 203–204a; *Theaetetus* 144c, and possibly *Sophist* and *Politicus*. The tradition of going to the gymnasium to win young men over to philosophy was already implemented by Pythagoras a century earlier (Reid 2012, 43–44).

⁸ Elected official in charge of the buildings and education.

⁹ Appointed assistants.

out, however, the difference between the Gods and heroes on the one hand, and mortals striving to become God-like on the other, is that the former were born strong and beautiful, whereas the latter had to train to become virtuous (Reid 2020, 16). The key concept that relates virtue to athletic training is that of *agōn* which translates to “strife” or “competition” *inter pares*.

Agon

The first instances of agon in spoken and written form are found in mythical, poetic, and sacred contexts through the works of poets like Homer, Hesiod, Simonides, and Pindar.¹⁰ In the *Works and Days* of the Greek poet Hesiod (8th century BCE) we are introduced to two versions of the goddess Eris. In one version she is responsible for inciting hatred and encouraging pernicious wars. This version is hated by all. A different version of the goddess is responsible for encouraging those experiencing jealousy and envy to use these feelings to bring out the best in themselves. This goddess, says Hesiod, is a gift from heaven.

This is also the view Nietzsche defends in *Homer’s Contest*, a foreword to one of his unpublished books (Nietzsche 1996). We can find this second Eris—whom Nietzsche calls Neid (“envy”)—everywhere in ancient Greek culture in the form of agon. The divine power motivating participants to compete in and win in Pan-Hellenic events such as the Olympic Games—the *Olympiakoi agones*—is unmistakably Neid.

What made the Homeric Greeks so different, claimed Nietzsche, was their ability to transfigure innate impulses of aggression and antagonism—i.e. *anti-agon*—into a value-creating culture (see Tuncel 2007, 80, 82). For the Homeric Greeks, agon was not merely about actual fighting.¹¹ Rather, it was about how conflict was approached: where Eris encourages destructive conflict at the cost of others, Neid calls forth the greatest deeds in the form of friendly competition. These deeds may be motivated by jealousy and envy, but the Greeks saw this not as punishment but as the workings of a benevolent goddess. It is thanks to this form of jealousy that honour, civilisation, and greatness were brought forth.

According to Nietzsche, the works of Plato offer a telling example of this. Although Nietzsche criticized Socratic rationality for its opposition to his Dionysian worldview, he also recognizes in *Twilight of the Idols* that Socrates and Plato invented a new kind of agon (see Tuncel 2007, 240; see also Corcoran 2016, 125, 220 n80).¹²

¹⁰ The first philosophers to associate with the term were Heraclitus (see Fragment 42) and Empedocles who considered love and strife to be of equal cosmological importance (Tuncel 2007, p. 116).

¹¹ Cf. Thrasymachus’ anti-philosophical motive in the *Republic*. Socrates likens his attitude to the attitude of a pankratist who, contrary to the spirit of agon, wants to win at all costs (*Republic* 338c–d).

¹² As Tuncel shows, Nietzsche developed his own agonistic philosophy through which he tries to think past different ‘forces of culture’ that seem to oppose and cancel each other out.

The artistic qualities of his dialogues, result from the educational rivalry between the rhetoricians, the Sophists and the dramatists of his time.¹³ This rivalry leads Plato to assert something like: ‘Look, I can also do what my great rivals can, and I can do it even better’. It seems safe to assert that Plato’s agon with his rivals resulted in a new understanding of virtue, one that still relies on (athletic) skill, but also transcends it to a higher moral plane: the desire for wisdom.

Richard Patterson agrees with Nietzsche that the philosophical life envisioned by Plato is ‘life’s greatest agon’,¹⁴ (*Gorgias* 526d–e) but he rightly offers an additional motivation based on his reading of the *Republic*. It is not only the competition between philosophy and poetry, or philosophy and sophistry, tragedians and rhetors that makes Plato’s philosophy agonistic; agon furnishes the inherent nature of the philosopher’s life itself (Patterson 1997, 329–330).

With the above in mind, it was probably no coincidence that Socrates’ philosophical endeavours often took place in the palaestra. After all, gymnasia and *palaestrae* were seen as institutes for training virtue. It is also no coincidence that Plato frequently alludes to wrestling in his dialogues. Although Socrates almost certainly engaged in some actual wrestling as well, he is best known for his dialectical agon—the struggle for true knowledge—of which the goal was not to become a better speaker or debater, but a wiser person (Reid 2020, 24–25).

Indeed, Plato’s main agonistic approach was dialectic, but it was arguably not the only approach to living a philosophical life. Some even argue Plato’s views and writings were shaped by his earlier years as a wrestler, inciting him to acknowledge a relationship between the body and the soul, and ultimately, extrapolating the idea of strife to other dimensions of life in the polis (Reid *et al.* 2020, 12). Let us therefore look closer at some of Plato’s dialogues to see how a philosophical way of life, at least in part, might take shape through the practice of wrestling.

Think of spirituality and rationality, joy and suffering, destruction and creation, victory and defeat—or in Nietzschean terms: the Apollonian which, simply put, stands for order, and the Dionysian which represents chaos and intoxication. To Nietzsche, these opposing forces presuppose each other in a continuous and revitalising battle. They do not perish in destruction, dissolve in Socratic rationality or Hegelian dialectics, much less in a prescriptive ethics that promises happiness for all, but constantly reaffirm and supplement each other in a culture of agon, to uplift and enhance humanity so that it can respond to the needs of our times (2007, 58–59 n27, 112, 258).

¹³ According to Tuncel, the sophists may have been proficient in so-called argument contests, but such contests eventually contributed to the decline and displacement of agon due to the hubris of the intellect and contempt towards the body, rendering the once so great athlete a ridiculous and foolish character (2007, 241). As a likely consequence, Plato in *Euthydemus* (271c–272b) associates sophistry with pankration, which is not meant as a compliment (see Corcoran 2016, 120–121, 126, 135).

¹⁴ All Plato translations are from PDL (2022).

Wrestling in Plato's Republic

Of the martial arts that were practiced in ancient Greece, wrestling probably appealed the most to the Greeks. This can be reasonably explained in part by the fact that although an immensely tough practice, it was less violent and injurious than boxing and *pankration*. Michael Poliakoff suggests it was even expected in Greek society that 'an accomplished and educated man' would engage in the act of wrestling as an adult. Consequently, it was a common sight to see even elderly men training in the palaestra as part of a lifelong endeavour (1987, 23, 99, 223).

Among the younger men was Plato, who was a wrestler. In fact, according to ancient biographer Diogenes Laërtius:

[H]e learnt gymnastics under Ariston, the Argive wrestler. And from him he received the name of Plato [from *platus* meaning "broad"] on account of his robust figure. . . . Others again affirm that he wrestled in the Isthmian Games. (*Lives* 3, 4)¹⁵

Plato's own experience with the martial arts likely accounts for the many references to wrestling in his work. He repeatedly refers to wrestling to explain in martial terms his own educational goals.¹⁶ Especially in portraying the figure of Socrates, as Plato does, for example, in the *Phaedrus* (236b–c) or *Theaetetus* (162b), and in drawing attention to his act of engaging in dialogue in terms of fair play and cooperative agon (Corcoran 2016, p. 126). It is important to highlight the aspect of fairness and justice in agon, as it was a quality that any athlete had to possess to compete (Tuncel 2007, 127 n9). Agon was not based on total annihilation by any means, but rather on honourable deeds and equal opportunity. In Nietzschean language: 'It is not on account of their hostile, war-making nature that the Hellenes came together to compete, but rather on account of their Dionysian sense of belonging' (Tuncel 2007, 144).

Plato does not deal very extensively with the practice of wrestling in the literal sense, but in *Laws* and the *Republic* we find some significant passages, specifically in Plato's answer to the question of how human beings are to be raised to facilitate the functioning of the ideal state. The basic education of this new warrior class (φύλακες) consists in both gymnastics and music. The most capable students will later enrol in a program for elite guardians which consists in mathematics, astronomy, and dialectics.

In Book 3 of the *Republic*, Socrates explains that the goal of music and gymnastics is to harmonize and create order in the high-spirited and knowledge-

¹⁵ Translation from Perseus Digital Library (PDL, 2022).

¹⁶ E.g., *Alcibiades* 106e, 107e, *Euthydemus* 277d, 278b, 288a, *Gorgias* 515e, *Laws* 795b–c, 814c–d, *Protagoras* 336c, 338b, 339e, 342b–e, and finally, see *Theaetetus* 162b, 167e and 169b where Theaetetus likens philosophical dialogue to wrestling.

loving parts of the soul (*Republic* 411e). In relation to gymnastics, he notes that ‘devotees of unmitigated gymnastics’ run the risk of overstraining their high-spirited part of the soul, which could result in becoming hard and harsh (410d). Although Plato uses the much broader term *gumnastikē* (“athletics”), it is not hard to see how martial arts, if not practiced with some degree of reflection about why and how to train and practice it wisely—or supplement it with music education, as Plato suggests—could potentially turn one into a violent person.

As Reid argues, this relationship between the body and soul exposes two vital doctrines behind Plato’s physical philosophy. The first is that the origin of human movement is found in the soul, rather than in the body, but that the body can serve to train the soul (2020, 19–20). We return to this point in more detail shortly. The second is that virtue manifests itself as a healthy and harmonious soul. Since virtue and wisdom are not innate and do not come about without strife, they need to be continuously trained and exercised both physically and intellectually.

Music and gymnastics probably had much in common with the values of *gymnasia* at the time, which generally focused on military training (see Kennell 2021, 500). For Plato, training in combat sports and engaging in training bouts with weapons served to test one’s courage, physical endurance, and pain tolerance, to ultimately prepare citizens to ‘fight for their lives, their children, their goods, and for the whole State’ (*Laws* 830d–831a; Poliakoff 2021, p. 229).

Plato did *not* intend to train guardians for the sole purpose of military activity, however, let alone for the exclusive purpose of athletic competition.¹⁷ Instead, he wanted to raise future and just leaders of the polis. Soldiers and athletes who are only drilled to perform on the battlefield or in sports respectively, can hardly be expected to know how to carry out civic responsibilities justly and therefore, wisely; all their time is invested into highly specialised skills. Nevertheless, the view that skill (τέχνη), whether in athleticism, warfare or rhetoric was enough to acquire virtue was prevalent among popular rhetors such as Isocrates (Reid 2020, 20).

Plato clearly thought otherwise. He valued having a strong command in language, otherwise he would not have bothered writing so comprehensively, much less about the art of dialogue. But being a good speaker or writer is not enough to be considered a virtue-seeking human being, and thus, a philosopher. And vice-versa, being a strong athlete or a warrior is not enough to be considered a philosopher either. After all, Plato took inspiration from the mythical Spartan lawgiver Lycurgus (*Laws* 630d; *Phaedrus* 258c; *Republic* 599c), but nowhere does he propose imitating the

¹⁷ Apparently, Pythagoras already told his disciples that participating in sport, not winning, is the most important thing. “This was . . . a highly atypical position in Greek thought, except for the philosophical schools, who [often] found the training and self-sacrifice of the athletes to be . . . of far greater value than sport itself”. (Poliakoff 1987, 141). In relation to Pythagoras and athletics, see also Reid *et al.* 2020, 3–4.

Spartan pedagogic model (ἀγωγή). What Plato misses in such rather one-dimensional and skill-based approaches is a lack of care for the soul and thus, the Good.¹⁸

The reason that Plato warmly recommends wrestling for training the youth, is that it is directed towards strength and health of both body *and* the soul. In the *Republic*, one of the required characteristics of an ideal guardian is found in the endowment of perseverance (καρτερία) and general laboriousness (φιλόπονον). However, the ideal student should not just love gymnastics or other labours of the body, he should love all kinds of toil and should show perseverance in all circumstances. To Plato, “toil-lovers” are those who love both physical and spiritual challenges.

Toil and physical exercise were not meant to merely make one stronger or fitter, or a better athlete. Just like music, the focus is on the soul, which is meant to become braver and more spirited, particularly in the period where the body is developing from boyhood to manhood (see *Republic* 403e, 410b–c, 411e, 498b–c; *Laws* 896c; *Alcibiades* 130a; see also Tuncel 2007, 202–203).

In *Laws* Plato writes:

But the exercises of stand-up wrestling, with the twisting free of neck, hands and sides, when practiced with ardor and with a firm and graceful pose, and directed towards strength and health,—these must not be omitted, since they are useful for all purposes (*Laws* 796a–b).

Noticeably, for Plato, the highest form of wrestling is upright wrestling, mainly due to its aesthetic qualities. But wrestling styles also determined a certain educational value. According to Clinton Corcoran, the different styles of wrestling described in Plato’s dialogues are intended to parallel good and bad forms of philosophizing. The style of upright wrestling contributed to citizenry and virtues such as courage and endurance, and key values such as fair play and cooperation (2016, 120–122; see also Poliakoff 1987, p. 115: ‘Winning mattered greatly, but so did honesty’).

A virtuous and beautiful soul manifests in both bodily health but also in a certain kind of “beautiful movement”. Beautiful movement of the body is the sort of movement or action which is rational and oriented toward the Good (Reid 2012, 60–61). As such, the Platonian educational ideal became that of athlete-philosopher or the *kalokagathos*, being both beautiful—*kalos*, which we can here relate to the practice of upright-wrestling—and Good—*agathos*, which is primarily—not exclusively—related to the practice of dialectics. Underlying the concept of *kalokagathia* is the metaphysical view introduced earlier that physical movement comes from the soul. The Greeks understood the body as something more akin to a corpse than a living entity. Therefore, it had no accountability over its movements; this agency was allocated to the *psyche* or the ‘seat of reason’ (Reid 2012, 5).

¹⁸ See for differences between Plato and the Spartan attitude to education, Jaeger 1947, 233–234, 253–254. See also *Laches* 182e–183b.

Educating the Philosophical Warrior

We can begin to appreciate how (upright) wrestling gained a philosophical purpose, particularly in the education of the guardian. The link is found in a concern about virtue, and the concern about virtue coincides with the ‘overarching concern for the cultivation of the Good’ (Corcoran 2016, 121–122). The deep wish to become good can be broken down into countless different approaches. After all, to become an expert at anything, one will have to exercise different aspects of a practice. Spiritual exercises can be seen as “approximations of the Good”¹⁹, that serve to divide a certain practice into “sub-practices” because the entire practice is too complex to exercise or learn as a whole. If one wants to become an expert martial artist, one will have to practise all sorts of qualities such as stamina, technique, modesty, strength, maintaining (breath) control and mental stability. One engages in exercises to train something as thoroughly as possible, on the road to overall mastery.

Wrestling and philosophy can both be seen as agonistic arts that share a concern for a perfection of order and form. Philosophy strives for perfection of form in the sense of what Corcoran refers to as “correct philosophic logomachy”, which points to the proper spirit, rules, and actions in dialectic argument and Socratic protreptic. The Socratic endeavour presupposes free and honest exchange where participants help each other in progressing the discussion and developing ideas. This is contraposed against “quarrelsome sophistic debate” (also known as *eristic*²⁰), the sole aim of which is victory and therefore, need not to be taken seriously (*Theaetetus* 167e; Corcoran 2016, 126).

Perfection of form in wrestling—and arguably, other martial arts—could refer to maintaining control and balance between conflicting forces, while adhering to the rules, certain customs, and traditions. Again, the focus is not so much on winning, as this mainly depends on variables such as strength, skill, experience, and even intelligence. However, Socrates submits that the intention of an expert who seeks to be just, will not amount to outdoing another expert, just like a musician is not trying to play more in tune than another who is already playing in tune, or a doctor who seeks to outdo another doctor in a medical procedure (*Republic* 349e–350b; Patterson 1997, 327–328).

The point is that it does not necessarily follow from winning that one practices a certain art in an honest, that is, a good, or true way that expresses the right motives to engage with the specific art in the first place. In this sense, wrestling can be seen

¹⁹ We are indebted to Professor Corcoran for this phrasing.

²⁰ See Patterson 1997, 328 for the difference between *eristic* and *elenchus*.

as something more than a martial metaphor;²¹ it is rather a spiritual aid or a model to protreptic, because it shares with philosophy a deep concern for virtue and the creation of an ordered soul (Corcoran 2016, 125, 132, 134). Through the practice of spiritual exercises such as wrestling and dialectic, the guardian learns to approximate the truth which serves to distinguish between the Good and all else, which in turn, aids him/her in making the right and just decisions.

As such, wrestling and philosophy can be argued to share a similar aim, but they are exercised differently. Wrestling and other martial arts emphasise and train such virtues as courage, endurance, integrity, and self-knowledge in a way that dialectic by itself, due to the lack of a physical dimension, cannot. In martial arts, sparring, for instance, generally ends in one of two participants being submitted by the other. One cannot bluff or cheat his/her way out of a sparring session as Socrates is comically accused of doing in Aristophanes' *Clouds*. In the practice of martial arts, the truth is in the pudding, one cannot take refuge in words, which can be a humbling and insightful experience. This is even more the case in competitive bouts in which athletes test their abilities against each other.

For wrestling and dialectic to be philosophically meaningful, however, both must be exercised simultaneously competitive (agonal) and cooperative, with the concern for the Good acting like a compass (Corcoran 2016, 137). This means, among other things, that participants of wrestling and philosophical dialogue partake according to the rules of fairness and admit their defeat or ignorance when a given situation calls for it, instead of trying to greedily "cheat" one's way out. Similarly, they will also attempt to act gracefully in the case of victory, as, for example, Dutch judoka Anton Geesink did after his victory at the 1964 Summer Olympics in Japan.²² The point is to treat the exercise itself, whether dialectic or wrestling, as part of the quest for self-realization and an opportunity to further reflect on one's points of view, attitudes, desires, and convictions, to continually bring one's actions both in and outside the exercise in tune with any newly and collaboratively acquired insights.

Let us now look at bit closer at Japanese swordsmanship to see how philosophy as a way of life and martial arts are related in the Japanese martial tradition. Despite the many cultural and historical differences between Greece and Japan, it will turn out that here too we find an active spiritual approach to philosophy.

²¹ Reid argues Socrates' approach has much in common with their methods (2012, 6, 44–53). See also Corcoran 2016, 122–123, 126, 131. Finally, consider Socrates' own comparison to the athlete Heracles (*Apology* 22a).

²² Instead of celebrating his victory with his team, he insisted on adhering to etiquette (礼に始まり礼に終わる) by first bowing to Kaminaga Akio, thereby expressing his gratitude and respect to his opponent and the tradition of the martial art.

Philosophy of the sword

Japanese martial arts such as *kyūdō*, *kendō* and *jūjutsu* can be said to have originated in contexts of war, but they all developed the act of killing into a spiritual art of (self-)education.²³ The common point between philosophy and martial arts (*budō*) is found in the inquiry for truth in life and oneself as part of it. Central to this quest is an attitude that seeks to examine oneself. Many are familiar with Socrates' call to 'know thyself' (γνῶθι σεαυτόν). But Socrates was not the sole advocate of this maxim; a similar suggestion is found in the work of Japanese swordsman and philosopher Yagyū Munenori (柳生宗矩, 1571–1646).

Munenori was appointed as a retainer by the shogun Tokugawa Ieyasu after he and his father, Yagyū Muneyoshi (柳生宗厳), performed the so-called *Mutō-dori* ("swordless sword fighting", 無刀取り) in front of the shogun. During his participation in the conquest of Aizu, the Battle of Sekigahara, and the Battle of Osaka, Munenori also demonstrated his ability in espionage and negotiations. This resulted in his appointment as a military strategist by both the second shogun, Tokugawa Hidetada and the third shogun, Tokugawa Iemitsu. As such, the school associated with Munenori, *Yagyū Shinkage Ryū*, became the official style of the Tokugawa shogunate.²⁴

Today Munenori's influence in the world of martial arts is still felt through his philosophy.²⁵ Born towards the end of the Warring States period, Munenori lived in an era when the military pacification of Japan had ended, and the rule of law had come to be maintained by the Tokugawa government. It was during this era of relative peace that Munenori transformed swordsmanship—a killing technique that had already become largely useless and started to be neglected—into a martial art for spiritual and human development, education and good political leadership (*shūshin*, 修身). What Munenori did is redefine the *raison d'être* of swordsmanship in the age of peace.²⁶

Two existing philosophies that greatly influenced Munenori were Zeami's theory of Nō theatre and the Zen teachings of Takuan Sōhō (沢庵宗彭). In fact, Munenori was so devoted to Nō that he was bitterly criticized by the latter, who was his teacher, despite being younger than him. Regardless, Munenori found commonalities between Nō dance and sword movement, the most important of which

²³ In the 16th century, the spiritual dimension of fighting was outsourced to technology, more specifically: guns. It could be argued that fighting in the everyday sense lost its spiritual dimension this way, and merely became an act of killing. The martial, and thus philosophical aspect of the practice became obsolete in firing a gun.

²⁴ Munenori is regarded as the only person who rose from the rank of swordsman to that of a feudal lord.

²⁵ On the influence of Munenori's (and Takuan Sōhō's) philosophy on Japanese modern thought, see Kasai 2006a.

²⁶ In relation to the historical and cultural aspects of *kendō*, see Bennett 2015.

was the fundamental nature of music in both.²⁷ While the skill of a Nō performance lies in the *coordination* of music and dance, Munenori points out that the victory or defeat with the sword lies in the contrary; in *upsetting* the rhythm of the opponent:

For both dance and chanting, you will be unable to perform if you do not know the entire song. You should understand the Entire Song in the martial arts as well. You should especially see through your opponent and ascertain the action of his sword. Know this through to the bottom of his mind and you will have the mind that has memorized the Entire Song well. If you know the demeanor and action of your opponent well, you will gain freedom in your own devices (Yagyū 2012, 33).

Through his long association with Takuan, Munenori also incorporated Takuan's teaching of "sword and Zen unification" (*ichinyō*), thereby transforming swordsmanship into a certain pedagogy.²⁸

But Munenori is arguably best known for the distinction he makes between *katsunin ken* ("a sword that gives life", 活人剣) and *setsunin tō* ("a sword that kills", 殺人刀) in his *Hyōhō Kadensho* ("Biography of the Master of the Art of War", 兵法家伝書). A sword that kills is usually regarded a tool against humanity because of the simple reason that it serves to take lives. However, if used in a context where many people are suffering due to the evil of one person, it can also be employed to save many lives. As a result, Munenori does not consider the art of war to be a method of killing people, but rather as a way to destroy evil. This is what Munenori calls "one kill, many lives" (一殺多生), a principle that could, on the surface, be called a utilitarian ethic.

However, Munenori's *katsunin ken* has a more specific meaning—well known by swordsmiths—that has to do with the way in which one "harmonizes the distance" (*ma'ai*, 間合^{ゝゝ}) from the enemy. Munenori:

Though a man intends to strike you and advances to do so, keep him at a certain interval, above all remain calm and allow him to advance, and then allow him to strike. Thus, even though your opponent has an intention to strike and goes through the motions of striking if you maintain a certain interval. He will not make contact. The sword that makes no contact is a dead sword. You then go over his dead sword, strike, and defeat him (Yagyū 2012, 22–23).

This approach requires one to see through the distance relative to the opponent. One lets the opponent strike first, before dodging the strike by maintaining a certain

²⁷ Although a one-on-one comparison would be premature, it is worth noting here the conjunction of music and martial arts also found in Plato (see above).

²⁸ Takuan's *Fudō chi shinmyōroku* (不動智神妙録) was written in response to Munenori's request to admonish him (Takuan 1986). Cf. Kasai 2006b.

distance. This interval between the swordsman and the opponent nullifies the strike, while cutting the opponent off at the same time. Drawing out and inviting the opponent in this fashion is possible only by making a first move within the mind. Getting the opponent to move like this is *katsunin* in action; one first gives the opponent an opportunity to move, which can be met by striking the opponent, or alternatively, motivating and inspiring the opponent to strike again.

The crucial point is that Munenori's method of "winning" by drawing out the opponent, rather than cutting down the enemy with speed and force, can be applied to more peaceful and cooperative relationships in everyday life. This is the philosophical and pedagogical meaning of *katsunin ken*. Here, *katsunin* is to exquisitely elicit the opponent's behaviour in a way that benefits the opponent. After all, in a peaceful context, an "opponent" might just as well be a student instead of an adversary. As such, it could be argued that Munenori's teaching fits with a more agonal approach to contemporary education, which approximates what Max van Manen means by "pedagogical tact". Pedagogical tact describes how teacher-student relations possess an improvisational and ethical character. Good teaching is driven by the daily activities of educators which are pedagogically conditioned by sensitive insights, active thoughtfulness, and the creative ability to act appropriately in the immediacy of the moment.²⁹

Where Takuan theoretically solved the ultimate unity of purpose between Zen Buddhism and the sword, Munenori suggested that in the practice of swordsmanship, the practitioner learns pedagogical tact to educate others and improve one's own character in the process. The act of killing then becomes an act in which practitioners do not try to eliminate each other but engage in friendly and cooperative strife which ultimately serves an existential endeavour: the quest for wisdom.

Although the question of how martial arts such as Greek wrestling and Japanese swordsmanship may instil moral qualities on its practitioners is a difficult one, and may never be answered satisfactorily, we close by briefly discussing an educational initiative from the Netherlands, spearheaded by the "ecosopher" and former *kendō* champion Henk Oosterling in 2007, that we think is promising in incorporating martial and philosophical features discussed above in a present-day agonistic pedagogical model.

Rotterdam Skillcity

In contrast to the privileged men who trained in the ancient Greek gymnasiums, or the elite *bushi* in feudal Japan, Rotterdam Skillcity (RSC) is an innovative educational programme aimed at children from socially and economically challenged neighbourhoods in the city of Rotterdam. RSC connects thinking and acting, or reflection and action, abbreviated in the neologism "reflection". Reflection is an extra-

²⁹ Van Manen 2015.

curricular program, taught in addition to the regular curriculum. It is meant to help children and adolescents to navigate life sustainably, and to take care of themselves, others, their immediate environment, and the world (Oosterling 2020, 89).

The educational curriculum consists of five key transitional components: Martial arts (specifically judo and aikido), Health, Nature, Technics, and Philosophy. During classes, children *learn by doing* about a healthy, balanced, and sustainable lifestyle. Examples of educational activities that develop skills that lead to sustainable choices in life are (1) growing and preparing food for one's classmates and oneself, (2) understanding of technique and nature, (3) knowledge of how to use social media responsibly and (4) sparring physically (judo) and mentally (philosophy).

During the martial arts lessons, the emphasis is on orientation in movement. Judo and aikido are so-called relational martial arts, which means that children not only use but also respect the energy and power of the other. To be sure, they learn to fight, but like what we may refer to as a philosophical approach to Plato's wrestling and Munenori's swordsmanship, the emphasis is not on winning or defeating an opponent. The idea is that children learn to cooperate and take control of what happens in the here and now, in the present moment (cf. van Manen 2015). This also enhances their sense of belonging to a community where individuals are encouraged to sustain each other.

Taking control and cooperating within a community is further exercised in the philosophy curriculum, grounded in both the "Socratic paradigm" and the Philosophy for/with Children movement. Philosophy lessons are meant to help students articulate their way of thinking in relation to existential questions (e.g. who am I? what is health?) and subjects from daily life (e.g. why is it important to do physical exercise? Where does my food come from?). Teachers work with children through everyday dilemmas and questions—including issues that arise during the martial arts classes—and relate these to philosophical themes that are taken from different cultures over the world. Special importance is attributed to network thinking, which emphasizes the relational and helps students to enhance their "relational autonomy".³⁰

The many questions that children have, especially in relation to current events and their personal experiences, are thematised during the philosophy lessons. By engaging in philosophical dialogue, children increase their communication and argumentative skills. More importantly, they learn to think, determine their position, empathise with others, and have dialogues in an ambient of mutual respect. Where the practice of martial arts helps children to navigate more physical conflicts, the philosophy lessons allow them to focus mentally and socially: to gain insight into emotions and arguments in order to relate in a more balanced way to others.

³⁰ The idea that we are all nodes in networks and owe our identity and autonomy to the degree in which we are connected to others. Philosophically speaking, this refers to ontological relationism, the idea that everything that is, exists in connection to something that is (exists) connected to something else, and so on.

Fighting for Sophia

The aim of the RSC curriculum is something Oosterling refers to as “physical spirituality”, which integrates and valorises the mental, physical, and social into an interconnected awareness. Physical spirituality is exercised through the practice of martial arts and philosophy, which transform our views on life and our modern lifestyle. Like Hadot’s spiritual exercises, physical spirituality implies an integral approach to care for the soul that includes often separated physical, social, and mental aspects. These exercises require a lifelong effort aimed at transforming the way we relate to ourselves, others, and the planet.³¹

Final thoughts

Both in classical Greece and feudal Japan, martial arts can be considered as spiritual exercises. Although wrestling and sword fighting can both be violent and even deadly, both practices rather served an opposite purpose: the development and promotion of virtue as part of the overall quest of wisdom. What remains to be seen is *how* the practice of arts such as wrestling, swordsmanship, judo and aikido can instil moral qualities in its practitioners’ souls. One does not simply become a philosopher by practicing martial arts, after all.

More research is needed to investigate how so-called “life skills”—such as courage, humility, respect for others, perseverance, self-confidence, and sense of community—are acquired through the practice of certain martial arts, and how they positively transfer to everyday pedagogical contexts (Chinkov and Holt, 2016). In addition, theoretical-philosophical frameworks are needed that intend to explain how personal development occurs from this specific practice (Blomqvist Mickelsson 2021, 1550). A Platonic “aesthetics of motion” that further investigates the meaning of order in wrestling, for instance, might prove promising.³²

What we hope to have revealed through the intercultural examples of ancient and contemporary martial arts, and the philosophical-educational example of RSC, is that the practice of martial arts can be something more than an easy metaphor when it comes to thinking about how to live a philosophically grounded life. The practice

³¹ Recent research carried out between 2017–2019 shows judo, aikido and philosophy help the children to be more balanced and resilient during the regular subjects. The researchers expect that students enrolled in the RSC program will need less individual support both in class, and outside of class, particularly in relation to mental and physical problems. Furthermore, they expect students will repeat years less often and will be sent to special primary education less often. On the longer term, they expect students to have better perspectives for their futures by gaining access to higher education. In addition, and as a consequence of more self-confident and resilient character traits, it is expected that students will cause less nuisance, engage less often in vandalism and criminal behaviour (Veen *et al.* 2020).

³² This was suggested by Professor Corcoran in a private email exchange on October 13, 2022.

of martial arts, we argued, should be understood as a supplementary and perhaps even integral activity that aids philosophers in their quest for wisdom. However, to become philosophically meaningful, these arts would have to be exercised in a pedagogical and agonistic spirit.

What Plato and Munenori add to the fighting skills of a soldier are the cultivation of moral virtues. The incorporation of martial arts as a philosophical way of life means to exercise them in a way that fuels the eternal search for wisdom. This was true in Classical Greece and in feudal Japan, and there is good reason to suspect that this still holds true today, regardless of one's cultural background.

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