

## THE *AGON* TOPOS IN PAUL AND HELLENISTIC MORALISTS

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The expression of emotion is an integral part of a speaker or writer's attempt to establish character, *ethos*, in a speech or text, for the emotions that accompany thought or action often reveals something about a person's character. A speaker or writer's expression of emotion may also serve to elicit particular emotions from an audience. A skillful rhetorician needs to know the connections between common human thoughts and emotions and how to effect those connections in language. Quintilian notes: "Arguments that deal with motives are best amplified by commonplaces on the emotions; they should not be merely asserted" (*Institutio oratoria* V. 12). The reference to the role of commonplaces, *topoi*, as means of connecting motives and emotion is significant. Walter Ong identifies two ways that a topos can function as a mean of amplification in an argument. *Cumulative* topoi are "collections of sayings (in effect, formulas) on various topics—such as loyalty, decadence, friendship, or whatever—that could be worked into one's own speech-making or writing."<sup>1</sup> *Analytical* topoi are standard ways of developing a proof or a line of thought on a given topic.<sup>2</sup> The type of topos Quintilian has in mind is most likely analytical, where a single topos provides the basis for connecting personal motive with emotion throughout a speech or text, not at a single point in it.

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London and New York: Methuen, 1982), 110-11.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

An example of a topos functioning this way is Paul’s use of analogies to athletic contests in Philippians. After expressing his thoughts and feelings about his own predicament at the time of the letter—his imprisonment and the knowledge of rival preachers seeking to add to his distress—Paul exhorts the Philippians:

Whatever happens, let your conduct be worthy of the gospel, so that whether or not I come and see you for myself I may hear that you are standing, united in mind and spirit, *side by side in the struggle* to advance the gospel faith, meeting your opponents without so much as tremor. This is a sure sign to them that destruction is in store for them and your salvation for you, a sign from God himself; for you have been granted the privilege not only of believing in Christ but also of suffering for him. Your conflict (avgw/na) is the same as mine; once you saw me in it, now you hear I am in it still (Phil 1:27-30 REB).

Paul is likely alluding to athletes competing in some form of combat sport, such as wrestling, boxing, or the ancient Greek sport known as the *pankration*, when he exhorts the Philippians to “struggle side by side” (sunaqlou/ntej) and “not to be terrified” (mh. pturo,menoi) of opponents.<sup>3</sup> His statement that the Philippians are engaged in the same sort of contest (to.n avuto.n avgw/na))oi[on) as he is currently engaged in suggests that his own circumstances, just described in 1:12-26, are in some way analogous to an athletic “contest.” Although there are no *agon* motifs or metaphors in this section, several things Paul says about himself appear to describe his engagement in a type of *agon*. For example, he speaks of his imprisonment as a challenge to the advancement of the gospel that he has overcome by preaching to those who hold him captive, and so has

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<sup>3</sup> sunaqlw might be translated simply “strive together,” without any suggestion that Paul intends to evoke the image of athletes in competition. But, this verb, like its root avqlw, can carry the connotation of competing for a “prize” (a=qlon), or “crown” (cf. 2 Tim 2:5: eva.n de. kai. avqlh/l tij( ouv stefanou/tai eva.n mh. nomi,mwj avqlh,sh)l. The conjoining of sunaqlou/ntej with mh. pturo,menoi suggests that Paul is drawing analogy to the internal control of emotions that is required of athletes in competition.

inspired others “to dare” (tolma/n) to preach the gospel “without fear” (avfo,bwj) (1:14). He elaborates further on the theme of fearless preaching when he says: “It is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be put to shame in any way, but by my speaking with *boldness* (parrhsi,a), Christ will be exalted now as always in my body, whether by life or by death” (1:20). Paul’s description of his boldness in the face of death parallels his exhortation to the Philippians to stand together firm and fearless in the face of their adversaries, and his avowal that he is ready to embrace death if necessary parallels his statement to the Philippians that it is necessary for them to suffer on behalf of Christ.

Several of the prominent themes in 1:12-30—fearlessness and boldness in the face of opposition and the necessity of suffering—are also topics that Hellenistic moralists frequently elaborate upon by means of analogies to athletic competition. Epictetus, for example, draws an analogy to athletic training and competition when describing the necessity of suffering in the pursuit of virtue:

In each separate thing you do, consider the matters which come first and those which follow after, and only then approach the thing itself. Otherwise, at the start you will come to it enthusiastically, because you have never reflected upon any of the subsequent steps, but later on, when any of the difficulties appear, you will give up disgracefully. Do you wish to win an Olympic victory? So do I, by the gods! for it is a fine thing. But consider the matters that come before that, and those which follow after, and only when you have done that, put your hand to the task. You have to submit to discipline, follow strict diet, give up sweet cakes, train under compulsion, at a fixed hour, in heat or in cold; you must not drink cold water, nor wine just whenever you feel like it; you must have turned yourself over to your trainer precisely as you would to a physician. Then when the contest comes on, you have to “dig in” beside your opponent, and sometimes dislocate your wrist, sprain your ankle, swallow quantities of sand, sometimes take a scourging, and along with all that get beaten. After you have considered all these points, go on into the games, if you still wish to do so; otherwise, you turn back like children [who sometimes play wrestlers, sometimes again gladiators, again they blow trumpets, and then they act a play (*Encheiridion* 29)].<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. also Epictetus, *Discourses* I 24, 1-2.

In describing his conduct in the face of opposition, Epictetus likens himself to a wrestler who welcomes opposition as a way of testing his virtue:

Is it possible, then, to derive advantage from these things?—Yes, from everything.—Even from the man who reviles me?—And what good does his wrestling-companion do the athlete? The very greatest. So also my reviler becomes one who prepares me for my contest; he exercises my patience, my dispassionateness, my gentleness (*Discourses* III. 20. 9).

Philo draws analogies to athletes training in advance of competition to show how the pursuit of holiness requires the endurance of suffering. Interpreting Jacob's wrestling with God as an allegory of moral struggle, he writes:

The word of God hears the plea and welcomes the athlete first of all as a pupil; then, when it has proved the suitability of his nature, it takes him on like a trainer and summons him to the gymnasium, grapples with him and compels him to wrestle, until it has produced in him irresistible strength (*Som.* I. 129-30).

Epictetus and Philo, moralists at different ends of the Roman Empire, both frequently use athletic analogies to describe the calling and course of the moral life. The example from Philo is noteworthy because it reveals how a Hellenistic Jew who is familiar with Greek athletic games can develop analogies based on that firsthand knowledge and experience. Philo, in fact, is a primary source for information about athletic training and competition in the Hellenistic world. He appears to have been a regular spectator at contests, and he believes that children—including Jewish children—benefit from the athletic training received in a Greek gymnasium.<sup>5</sup> The examples from Philo also illustrate how a writer's own knowledge and experience of the Greek games may influence the formulation and use of the *agon* topos. That is to say, in many instances of its use by Hellenistic

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<sup>5</sup> Philo, *Spec.* II. 229-30.

moralists, the topos is not a mere figure of speech, but a true metaphor, inviting the hearers or readers to see for themselves the points of similarity in the things compared.

Although Paul does not use the *agon* topos in 1:12-26, the analogy developed in 1:27-30 effectively picks up themes of the previous section, and thus functions as an *analytical* topos by giving structure to a line of thought. T. Engberg-Pedersen has recognized this same line of thought and argues that it continues in 2:1-18. In the exhortations of 2:1-4, Paul describes the common mind and spirit that the community should manifest in its “contest.” The hymn in 2:5-11 presents the mind of Christ, with particular emphasis on his acceptance of death, as an example of the common mind the Philippians should have in the midst of their struggle. Then follows Paul’s exhortation that the Philippians strive to make their salvation complete just as he does.<sup>6</sup> Engberg-Pedersen asserts that Paul’s purpose in this “line of thought,” and indeed his purpose elsewhere in the letter (explicit in 3:17-21), is to present himself as one who models Christ for the Philippians.<sup>7</sup> However, Engberg-Pedersen does not note how the *agon* analogy in 1:27-30 establishes a thematic link with the preceding section. Moreover, he does not observe how Paul uses an allusion to an athletic contest when he implies that the Philippians’ success in imitating him will secure honor for him before Christ:

It is by your holding fast to the word of life that I can boast on the day of Christ that I did not run in vain or labor in vain. But even if I am being poured out as a libation over the sacrifice and offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you (2:16-17 NRSV).

Paul’s statement that he has “not run in vain” (οὐκ εἰς κενὸν ἐδράμων) up to this point is an extension of the *agon* topos, although the analogy shifts from a combat sport

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<sup>6</sup> Troels Engberg-Pedersen, *Paul and the Stoics* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), 83.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

to race. Similar to the idea expressed earlier of contending together for the gospel, implied here is the idea that should the Philippians fail to bring their salvation to completion (as Paul exhorts them in 2:13), Paul will fail in his “contest.” His statement that he and the Philippians ought to rejoice should he die in his service to them appears to be a further development of the idea expressed earlier that Christ will be magnified in him both in life and in death (1:20). The implication here is that Paul’s death, viewed as a sacrifice in imitation of Christ, would serve to inspire those whom he has exhorted to bring their salvation to completion. The second use of the *agon* topos, like the earlier one, seems to function analytically as it links themes from the preceding exhortations, standing together resolute and fearless in the face of opposition, with the themes of this later exhortation, to finishing the race and becoming Paul’s ground for boasting.

In the process of linking these themes, the topos becomes the rhetorical device that connects Paul’s motive and emotions, and thereby engendering or strengthening the same motive and emotions in his audience. He calls upon the Philippians to *rejoice* in his suffering, and by imitating his example, to stand strong and fearless in the midst of their own adversity and secure their ground for boasting (1:26; 2:18). The implication here is that Paul’s suffering on behalf of Christ furthers the advancement of the gospel, as does the suffering of the Philippians. For this reason, he and they can rejoice together in the midst of their respective struggles. Moreover, Paul believes that dying in service to Christ and the churches he serves would bring his apostolic mission to perfect completion, even though he is not certain how his mission will end. Evoking the image of a race helps Paul make this point. Alluding to a race that he has already begun, he evokes the image of a runner is nearing the end of a race confident of victory, but not

taking victory for granted. Paul makes the same point about himself later in the letter with another allusion to a stadium race: “Forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus” (3:13b-14 NRSV).

Hellenistic moralists often use analogies to races in a stadium when describing the “course” (*dro,moj*) and “goal” (*sko,poj*) of the moral life. Philo, for example, explains the need for persistence in striving for one’s moral goals with this analogy: “It is difficult for those who like runners are starting on the course to godliness to finish the race without falling or stopping to recover their breath” (*Agr.* 177). Explaining how the good person who is persistent will ultimately prevail, Philo writes:

If on his way he does not become exhausted or give up and collapse, or carelessly swerve aside from the straight course but... completes life’s race without falling, when he comes to the finish, he will receive crowns and prizes worthy of his efforts (*Mig.* 133).

Stoics also use analogies to races in describing the course of the moral life from its beginning to its end. Seneca does this in exhorting a promising pupil:

I claim you for myself; you are my handiwork, When I saw your abilities, I laid my hand upon you, I exhorted you, I applied the goad and did not permit you to march lazily, but roused you continually. And now I do the same; but by this time I am cheering on one who is in the race and so in turn cheers me on” (*Epistle* XXXIV).

The example from Seneca is particularly noteworthy since the exhortation concerns a pupil’s relationship to a teacher who has been model of the moral life. As the pupil’s

progresses, the teacher and pupil become contestants in the same race, each exhorting the other to the finish line, and each drawing strength from the progress of the other.<sup>8</sup>

Paul appears to be drawing an analogy similar to those of Philo and Seneca in Phil 2:16. He emphasizes that his own race is unfinished and impresses upon the Philippians that he is strengthened by their progress—and will continue to be strengthened by their progress. And as a means of further inspiring them as they strive to finish their race, he says that he is prepared to give his life as a sacrifice. In this way, the analogy brings together themes from earlier in the letter: Paul's confidence in the Philippians' further progress in the gospel and the completion of their salvation (1:6; 2:13), his sense of responsibility for their continued progress (1:26), and the necessity of their suffering together and being sources of consolation to each other (1:29; 2:1). Here Paul's use of the race analogy is different from that of other Hellenistic philosophers. For him, finishing the race is not simply a matter of continuing in the same way as before, because the last stage of the race may involve unprecedented suffering, both for him and for the Philippians. There is no coasting in to the finish line. Here the analogies to a footrace and a combat sport such as boxing blend together, because for Paul finishing the race may cost him his life.

This is not the only place in his letters where Paul mixes these two athletic metaphors. At the end of 1 Corinthians 9, he exhorts his audience to run their race to completion as he strives to finish his own:

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<sup>8</sup> In *Epistle CIX*, Seneca writes: "The wise will help the wise, not, mark you, because of his own strength merely, but because of the strength of the man whom he assists. The latter, it is true, can by himself develop his own parts; nevertheless, even one who is running well is helped by one who cheers him on."

At the games, as you know, all the runners take part, though only one wins the prize. You also must run to win. Every athlete goes into strict training. They do it to win a fading garland; we, to win a garland that never fades. For my part, I am no aimless runner; I am not a boxer who beats the air. I do not spare my body, but bring it under strict control, for fear that after preaching to others I should find myself disqualified (9:24-27 REB).

An exhortation to imitate Paul seems implied here, but it not clear that everything Paul says about himself applies to the Corinthians.<sup>9</sup> The apologetic tone of Paul's self-description in the section preceding the analogy (9:15-23) and the particular emphasis in the analogy on his own hardship and suffering—willfully subjecting his body to suffering—suggests that Paul here is asserting his “qualification” to be an apostle. Who is contesting his status as a genuine apostle is not clear, but he does allude to the existence of such persons in 9:2. Paul then is not simply describing the type of self-restraint he wants the Corinthians to imitate in abstaining from idol meat, the subject of chapters 8 and 10. Such self-restraint hardly involves the physical hardship and suffering that Paul says he endures when he compares himself to a boxer who subjects his body to physical punishment. Instead, he appears to be elaborating on the hardship he endures as an apostle in order that he might prove himself a trustworthy servant of Christ, as he

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<sup>9</sup> The REB's translation of evgw. toi,nun ou[twj tre,cw w`j ouvkh avdh,lwj as “For my own part, I am no aimless runner” is preferable to the NRSV's “So I do not run aimlessly.” The intensive use of the pronoun evgw, with the emphatic post-positive toi,nun in 9:26 suggests that Paul is shifting the focus from the common prize which he and the Corinthians are pursuing to his own situation as an apostle. Note 9:27, where Paul implies that what he does “after preaching the gospel” (khru,xaj) might cause him “to be disqualified” (avdo,kimoj ge,nwmai). Yes, Paul wants the Corinthians to imitate his model of self-restraint, as the athletic analogy implies, but his point is that by serving as model of self-control he proves himself a genuine apostle.

expresses several verses earlier (9:16-17). This line of thought begins when Paul explains why he does not exercise all the rights or privileges that he enjoys as an apostle, particularly the right to solicit financial support from churches:

But I have never availed myself of any such right. On the contrary, I put up with all that comes my way rather than offer any hindrance to the gospel of Christ.... But I have never taken advantage of any such right, nor do I intend to claim it in this letter. I had rather die! No one shall make my boast an empty boast (9:12, 15 REB)

For Paul, anything he might do that would present a “hindrance” (evgkoph,) to the gospel would jeopardize his “ground for boasting” (kauch,ma). He says he would rather die than allow this to happen. He thus appears to be describing further the depth of his commitment to his mission in the closing of the athletic analogy when he says he subjects his body to suffering lest he do something that would prove him to be “unqualified” (avdo,kimoj) for the commission entrusted to him (cf. 9:17).<sup>10</sup>

Nothing in 1 Corinthians 8-10, nor elsewhere in the letter for that matter, suggests that the behavior that Paul intends for others to imitate involves suffering to the point of death. E. Käsemann describes Paul’s sentiments about death expressed in 9:15, and the insights he offers into his sense of apostolic calling in 9:16-18, as superfluous and obtrusive in an argument designed to present an example of self-denial and self-control

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<sup>10</sup> In 9:27, Paul states his reason for subjecting his body to pain and suffer in negative terms. He envisions the possibility that “somehow” (pwj) he might do something to “disqualify” himself (avdo,kimoj ge,nwmai) from the contest, thus forfeiting any prize. In the context of the preceding discussion, he is referring to anything he might do, or fail to do, as an apostle that would impede the progress of the gospel (9:12b), and thus prove himself unworthy of the commission with which he has been entrusted (cf. 9:17: oivkonomi,an pepi,steumai).

for others to imitate.<sup>11</sup> This description of Paul’s apostolic self-consciousness is not, however, an excursus in a line of thought. Instead, it marks the beginning of line of thought—an explanation of the motive behind his renunciation of the right to solicit financial support. This line of thought reaches its culmination in the athletic analogy where it is linked with the themes that open the chapter—Paul’s affirmation of his status as an apostle and his responsibility for the Corinthians’ progress in faith. There Paul asks the rhetorical question: “Are you not my own handiwork in the Lord?” (9:1d REB). His purpose in this line of thought is to establish the *ethos*—character reflected in his deeds and emotions—that marks him as a genuine apostle.<sup>12</sup> Although the *agon* analogy comes at the end, it provides structure for the line of thought by pulling together the major themes.

In 1 Cor 9:15-27, as in Phil 1:12-2:18, Paul uses analogies to athletic games to draw together proponent themes in distinct sections of self-description and exhortation to imitation, thereby giving structure to a line of thought. In both cases, a willingness to die for the gospel is one of the themes developed in the analogy. In 1 Cor 9:15-27, Paul’s focus is his intense sense of accountability for the salvation of others and his fear that something he might do will jeopardize the advancement of the gospel, thus depriving him of his ground for boasting. This is slightly different from the point Paul makes in Phil 1:20 and 2:16, where he suggests that dying in service to the gospel might contribute

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<sup>11</sup> Ernst Käsemann, “A Pauline Version of the *Amor Fati*,” *New Testament Question of Today* (trans. W. J. Montague; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969), 218.

<sup>12</sup> Note Paul’s answer to his rhetorical question: “If others do not accept me as an apostle, you at least are bound to do so, for in the Lord you are the very seal of my apostleship” (9:2 REB). The Greek word translated “seal” (*sfragi,j*) carries the connotation of authenticity.

directly to the advance of the gospel by inspiring others to sacrificial service, and thereby bring to completion his race and secure for him a “ground for boasting” on the day of Christ. The Philippians’ act of standing firm in their contest, with the help of Paul’s example and inspiration, will make them his “joy and crown” (4:1) when his contest is finished. Surprisingly, Hellenistic moralists who use *agon* analogies to describe the moral life seldom use it to describe the necessity of enduring suffering to the point of death as Paul does. In this way, Paul is not mimicking the moralists in his use of the *agon* topos. He is developing a topos popularized by others moralists to serve his own purpose, and does so by alluding to an aspect of the Greek games that other moralists do not focus on in their analogies—that dying in competition was one of the highest honors an athlete could achieve in the minds of athletes and spectators alike.

Unlike the later gladiatorial games of the Romans, fighting until one competitor died was never the goal of Greek “combat” sports such as wrestling, boxing, or the *pankration*. However, there is evidence that athletes did occasionally die while competing in these sports, and received honor for it. T. Scanlon notes that ancient sources report eight instances of athletes dying in competition. Since these accounts concern athletes with reputations for victory, one might reasonably assume that many other less renowned athletes also died in competition. One source is an inscription for the boxer Agathos Daimon of Alexandria (nicknamed “the Camel”) who died at Olympia at the age of 35. The inscription reads:

Boxing here in the stadium I died,  
praying to Zeus for either the wreath or death....<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Thomas Scanlon, *Eros and Greek Athletics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 304-305.

Although athletes and officials at the games took measures to prevent athletes from dying in competition, when a competitor did die, people might view it as an honorable and blessed feat, as Philostratus reveals in his description of an athletic scene painted on a vase:

You come to the Olympic festival itself and to the finest event in Olympia, for right here is the men's pankration. Arrichion, who has died seeking victory, is taking the crown for it, and this Olympic judge is crowning him.... Let's look at Arrichion's deed before it comes to an end, for he seems to have conquered not his opponent alone, but the whole Greek nation.... They shout and jump out of their seats and wave their hands and garments. Some spring into the air, others in ecstasy wrestle the man nearby.... Though it is indeed a great thing that he already won twice at Olympia, what has just now happened is greater; he has won at the cost of his life and goes to the land of the Blessed with the very dust of the struggle. Don't think this is the result of chance! There were very clever advance plans for this victory.... The one strangling Arrichion is depicted as a corpse, and he signals concession with his hand, but Arrichion is depicted as all victors all—indeed his blush is blooming and his sweat is still fresh, and he smiles, as do the living, when they perceive their victory (*Imagines* 2.6).

Philostratus' description of the spectators' reaction may not be exaggerated. Philo reports that the athletic games regularly stirred spectators to a point of ecstasy: "At the games you are under the influence of some maniacal drug; it is as if you could not watch the proceedings in a civilized fashion" (*Plant.* XXXII. 45). Scanlon describes the fascination of people in the Hellenistic world with athletic games as a form of *eros*, adding that when athletes died in competition it intensified this *eros* for the games in an antiphonal fashion. He explains:

Death and desire in Greek athletics...function antiphonally, in a kind of tension. Stopping short of death in all earnest competition is a principle common to both humans and animals to preserve one's species and yet establish a hierarchy. Athletic desire of some commonly sought goal supplies athletes, audience, and even coaches with the incentive to succeed at any cost, and preferably with some visible cost by which their victory will be distinguished.... Part of the interest in the Arrichion story is that he was praised despite having deliberately planned his own death to garner the greatest glory. This was within the norms of the contest since Arrichion, like each athlete, ultimately competed against himself and was

within the bounds of justice to embrace rather than fear his own death in the contest.<sup>14</sup>

Feats like Arrichion's were no doubt the exception in the Greek games, but their occurrence and the way they were recounted reveals how the games served as a public arena for the celebration of the society's values. If we are to believe Philostratus's account, the athletes, even those competing for sheer personal gain, were enacting the values of society in fashion that inspired spectators to emulate them there on the spot.

When Paul likens himself to an athlete in the context of expressing his willingness to embrace death, there is a clear parallel between his attitude toward facing death and that of athletes in the Greek games. He is willing to sacrifice himself for the sake of the gospel in order to secure a "ground of boasting" on the day of Christ, just as a competitor in a sport such as the *pankration* might risk death in order to attain a type of everlasting glory. Paul, though, does this with the understanding that at the same time he is inspiring his audience—his churches—to stand firm in the face of opposition as they progress in faith and obedience. Greek athletes may have recognized the inspirational affect their competition had on spectators, but few probably competed for that reason. Moreover, when Greek athletes competed in "sacred" games, there is no evidence that they saw themselves emulating a divine figure as they competed to the point of death. In contrast, Paul says of himself later in the letter: "My one desire is to know Christ and the power of his resurrection, and to share his suffering in growing conformity with his death, in hope of somehow attaining the resurrection from the dead" (3:10-11 REB). Then follows the

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<sup>14</sup> *Eros and Greek Athletics*, 318-19.

letter's final allusion to athletic competition where Paul says he has not yet attained this state of conformity, but "presses toward the finish line" (3:14).

Paul's establishment of *ethos* in Philippians does not depend entirely on the *agon* analogies he uses. Language referring to desire and thought also gives structure to the line of thought in which the *agon* analogies occur. For example, when expressing his confidence that Christ will be magnified in him either in life or in death, he deliberates out loud as to which is better, to live or to die:

For me to live is Christ, to die is gain. If I am to go on living in the body there is fruitful work for me to do. Which then am I to *choose*? I cannot tell. I am pulled two ways: my own *desire* is to depart and be with Christ—that is better by far; but for your sake the greater need is for me to remain in the body" (1:21-24 REB).

Paul's desire "to depart and be with Christ" expresses an *eros* somewhat similar to that of the athlete willing to embrace death in competition for the sake of glory. But, this desire is controlled by consideration of what is best for the community. That is to say, as Paul expresses his *eros*, he demonstrates how reason, in the form of a sense of providence, moderates this desire. When he speaks of the common *agon* in which he and the Philippians are engaged, he is elaborating on his statement that "it has been granted" (εὐκαρίσκη) to them to suffer on behalf of Christ. The verb here implies that he and the Philippians have been "called" into the contest in which they are engaged for a divinely determined purpose. A fusion of thought and emotion occurs around a notion of providence. In this regard, it is noteworthy that Paul introduces the Christ-hymn of 2:6-11 with the exhortation: "Let the same mind be in you (τοὺς καρδίας) <sup>15</sup> as was in Christ

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<sup>15</sup> REB misses the point by translating καρδίας "take to heart." In light of 1:29 and the statement in the hymn that Christ did not "regard" (ἠὲν, ἰσότητος) equality with God something to be grasped, Paul seems to be referring here to a state of mind that recognizes a person's place in a providential plan and directs the whole

Jesus” (2:5 NRSV). Paul establishes a Stoic-like *ethos* with these suggestions that there he and the Philippians are participants in a providential drama of salvation, and their recognition of this both strengthens and directs their desire to be participants.

By its very nature, projections of *ethos* by an author invite the judgment of readers, both ancient and modern. Modern readers, however, are not in a position to judge Paul the way his Philippian readers would for a variety reasons, one of which is that few modern readers can relate to the social *realia* to which Paul draws analogies, especially the athletic contests so popular in the Hellenistic world. Modern interpreters examining Paul’s use of the *agon* topos have warned against reading too much into the analogies, asserting that Paul never makes conscious reference to any specific athletic images from the ancient world.<sup>16</sup> But, how can one know what Paul consciously intends by any metaphorical reference? The language of the analogy and language surrounding it provide helpful clues, as shown earlier. Just as interpreters should be cautious not to read too much into a metaphor, they should not err by reading too little into it either, especially when the metaphor is rich with social and religious connotations. Given the fact that a Hellenistic Jewish like Philo recognizes the captivating aspects of the Greek games, and speaks approvingly of them, the rhetorical power of analogies to athletic games should not be underestimated in the letters of Paul. What interpreters must recognize is that athletic contests functioned much differently in Hellenistic society than

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being of the person to submit to that plan. Paralleling ἡγήσασθαι, φρονεῖν/τε probably means “to hold a view” like that of Christ who submitted to death on a cross. Having such a state of mind certainly engages the attitudes and emotions of a person, but Paul’s emphasis appears to be on the exercise of the mind.

<sup>16</sup> Victor Pfitzner, *Paul and the Agon Motif* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1967), 127.

they function in modern societies, particularly with respect to what Scanlon describes as the antiphonal relation between *eros* and death in the ancient games. Greek athletes enacted their values of their society in a manner modern athletes seldom do. As the Greek athlete strove to achieve his own glory in the stadium, he was competing in a “sacred” arena. As Epictetus observes, athletes who competed half-heartedly were subject to disciplining by judges in the form of public flogging.<sup>17</sup> Ironically, at the same time the Greek athlete was striving to achieve honor, he was the slave of a society that desired to see its values enacted in a public setting. It is noteworthy, then, that in the same letter where Paul expresses his willingness to die if necessary to secure his ground of boasting, he introduces himself as a “slave” (Phil 1:1).<sup>18</sup> The analogy to slavery introduces another social institution of the Hellenistic world, which if it exists in the modern world exists in forms different from what Paul and his readers knew. Judging Paul’s *ethos* is by no means off-limits to modern readers, but it does pose formidable challenges when that *ethos* is expressed through an interplay of analogies, each of which allude to social institutions peculiar to the Hellenistic world.

In summary, Paul’s purpose in Philippians—to present himself as a model of boldness and fearlessness in the face of opposition to the gospel—requires him to establish a certain *ethos* in the letter. This *ethos* comes to expression in language about desire and the rational direction of that desire. Although Paul establishes this *ethos* throughout the letter, he uses an analogy to Greek athletic contests in 1:27-30 to anchor a

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<sup>17</sup> Epictetus, *Discourses* III. 22. 51-54.

<sup>18</sup> Allusions to slavery precede the athletic analogy in 1 Corinthians 9: “For though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I might win more of them” (9:23 NRSV).

line of thought in which he expresses his motives and emotions as a servant of Christ, who emulates Christ's suffering in order that others might be emboldened to suffer themselves on behalf of Christ. To this end, Paul employs the *agon* topos in an *analytical* fashion, in a manner that resembles the way Hellenistic moralists use it, but not in the same way. Paul creates his own analogies based on an awareness of what athletic contests represented to many people in the Hellenistic world.