



## THE OLYMPIC GAMES

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**W**hat ideas will stay after the Paris Olympics? Philosophy and culture are the greatest legacy of the ancient Olympics. Can we compete?

The philosopher who created and theorized the notion of relativism, Protagoras, and Pericles, the leader of Athenian democracy in the classical age sat together and talked about sport. They talked about a javelin thrower who had killed someone who crossed the path of the projectile. Such conversations and debates are reminiscent of Platonic dialogues where the powerful and famous would discuss philosophical questions.



The debate is reflected in the writings of Antiphon of Rhamnus (5<sup>th</sup> century BC). His tetralogies are debates from the point of view of the prosecutor and defence. Tetralogy 2 describes an accidental death killed by a javelin thrower.

The options are:

- 1) [prosecution] the thrower is guilty of accidental murder
- 2) [defence] the victim is guilty of being in the wrong place
- 3) [prosecution] the gods are guilty as well as the thrower
- 4) [defence] the trainer who called the victim is the responsible: the victim is his own murderer.

These ideas are stepping stones in the ancient Greek theories of causes. The javelin as cause of death was known as the instrumental cause accepted by Plato (six causes) and rejected by Aristotle (four causes). Divine intervention is an interesting religious point of view still debated today in many countries. The idea that the trainer's calling of the boy is the ultimate cause is also interesting. The javelin throwing event became a cause of philosophical debate.



Antiphon went on from being a lawyer (or rather a speech writer logographer) to leader of the oligarchic revolution which overthrew Athenian democracy in 411 BC. He was the teacher of Thucydides whose *History of the Peloponnesian War* between Athens and Sparta is a pillar of European culture to this day.

Antiphon was an opponent of Alcibiades. The latter was the larger than life protagonist of the time. He appears in Plato's *Symposium*, where the nature of love and eros are discussed (the term platonic love defines what is discussed in this text). It appears that Socrates and Alcibiades were more than just friends.

Alcibiades also participated in the Olympic games. He won more prizes than any one before him (Plut. Alc. 11) as Thucydides makes him say in speech (Thuc. *Hist.* 6.16.2). The victory ode for Alcibiades was written by Euripides, one of the three greatest tragedy writers of all time (together with Aeschylus and Sophocles).

σε δ' αἰέσομαι, ὦ Κλεινίου παῖ.  
καλὸν ἂ νίκα: κάλλιστον δ', ὃ μηδεὶς ἄλλος Ἑλλάνων,  
ἄρματι πρῶτα δραμεῖν καὶ δεύτερα καὶ τρίτα,  
βῆναί τ' ἀπονητί, Διὸς στεφθέντα τ' ἐλαία  
κάρυκι βοᾶν παραδοῦναι.  
(Euripides *Epinicium in Alcibiadem*)

*Thee will I sing, O child of Cleinias;  
A fair thing is victory, but fairest is what no other Hellene has achieved,  
To run first, and second, and third in the contest of racing-chariots,  
And to come off unwearied, and, wreathed with the olive of Zeus,  
To furnish theme for herald's proclamation.* (tr. Perrin)

Victory odes for the Olympic games are written by one of the greatest lyric poets: Pindar. Fourteen of Pindar's *Olympian Odes* survive.

The question remains: what philosophy, jurisprudence, history, oratory, poetry will the Olympic games of 2024 bring which will remain for the next 2500 years?