

Political Fitness: Physical Education in Democratic Civic Education

Philip D. Bunn
*Covenant College**

I begin with a simple claim: Compared with the pride of place given to physical fitness in the writings of classic and classical thinkers on education, physical fitness today is deemphasized, both in the broader movement to recover a form of “classical liberal arts” education and in civic education specifically. This relative lack of attention paid to physical virtues has allowed for less savory actors to fill a void; the “vitalist” movement among the New Right today attracts adherents at least partially because of its claim to represent a recovery of robust masculine virtue, including, but not limited to, physical fitness and the accompanying aesthetics of athleticism.

It is not necessary to abandon this domain of human excellence to the so-called Pajama Boy Nietzscheans, however.¹ Those working in the broader Western tradition, and in the vein of American civic education specifically, have plentiful resources from which to draw to make democratic and persuasive cases for physical education as a vital component of any complete system of education. In making such a case, however, consideration must be given to the particularly American and particularly democratic dimensions of physical education in whatever form it takes.

*A previous version of this paper was presented at the Jack Miller Center’s “American Civics at 250” conference (Miami, 2025). The author would like to thank the participants of the conference for their incisive criticisms and feedback, which greatly improved the paper. Additionally, the author would like to thank Scott Brewer and Russ Greene, as well as the editor and reviewers of the *Political Science Reviewer*.

In making this case, this paper proceeds first with a reading of a section of Xenophon's *Memorabilia* on physical fitness as an instructive exemplar of the way physical education and the work of citizenship overlap in many older ways of thinking about education. It then turns to a survey and historical description of the former role of physical fitness in civic education in America, before concluding with a reflection on the prospects for democratic excellence in fitness. In short, those seeking to restore robust civics education in America today would do well to consider the physical part of the person in addition to the intellectual and reflect on what role a program for fitness as both a curricular component and a publicly supported project might play in a comprehensive method of educating the whole person for citizenship.

Importantly, the civic role of fitness is not entirely the same as the purported civic benefits of sports. Excellent works on the virtues inculcated by sport, especially team sport, can and have been written.² This paper is focused on a more narrow claim that fitness itself has a civic dimension and is an appropriate site of public concern. Fitness is notably on the decline, with measurable reductions in benchmarks like grip strength through the decades, as well as notable increases in obesity, heart disease, and more.³ If physical health and cognitive health are linked,⁴ public officials have plentiful reasons to care about the physical education of their citizens and would do well to study arguments made to this effect in the past.

Xenophon's *Memorabilia* and Political Fitness

A popular quote, attributed to Socrates, is often shared in internet meme format among fitness influencers and those of the "vitalist" persuasion mentioned earlier. As circulated on the internet, it reads, "No man has the right to be an amateur in the matter of physical training. It is a shame for a man to grow old without seeing the beauty and strength of which his body is capable."⁵ This quotation is, in fact, a somewhat jumbled reading of several actual lines said by Socrates in Xenophon's *Memorabilia*, "recollections" of Socrates's life and conversations by one of his most prominent students. Following a thorough attempt in the first book of the

Memorabilia to vindicate Socrates of the charges leveled against him by the city of Athens, Xenophon turns in the middle parts of the dialogue to accounts of how Socrates aided those in Athens who sought his reputed wisdom.

Chapter 12 of book 3 recounts a discussion on keeping physically fit between Socrates and his companion Epigenes. Socrates begins with a characteristically blunt comment, telling Epigenes, “You take amateurish care of your physique, Epigenes” (Mem. 3.12.1).⁶ More literally speaking, Socrates calls Epigenes an idiot—that is, an *idiotes* (ιδιώτης), a private person or an amateur. It becomes clear in the conversation that Socrates means to rebuke Epigenes, who has, by virtue of his concern for his own affairs, made himself visibly ignorant of athletic matters. In short, he has grown fat. His lack of care for his body is apparent to all who see him.

Epigenes’s defense is to turn Socrates’s accusation on its head: If he appears to be pudgy like an athletic amateur, that is because “I am an amateur” (Mem. 3.12.1). That is, Epigenes argues, if I appear to be ignorant of athletic training, that is because I am not someone who pursues athletics professionally, and so I have no need to be physically fit like an athlete. Epigenes assumes that having a professional role of an athlete would bring with it necessary physical demands, but because he has declined to pursue such a vocation, he thinks himself exempt from the difficult matters of fitness. His pursuits lie, perhaps, in the life of the mind in conversation with Socrates and his other companions and students.

Socrates responds to this hand-waving dismissal by appealing first to the general martial demands of citizenship. In the general matter of civic duty, Socrates argues, Epigenes is no more an amateur, properly considered, than those who are destined or “intend” to compete in the Olympics. This is because Athens might perhaps be invaded, and thus Epigenes’s citizenship would obligate him to come to her defense. Socrates explains:

Or do you count but a small thing the life and death struggle with their enemies that the Athenians will enter when the

time comes? Not a few, thanks to their bad conditioning, lose their lives in the perils of war or save them disgracefully; and many, for this same reason, are taken prisoner and then either pass the rest of their days perhaps in slavery of the hardest kind, or, after meeting with cruel sufferings and sometimes paying more than they have, live on, destitute and in misery. Many, again, by their bodily weakness earn a bad reputation, being thought cowards. Or do you care little about these rewards of bad conditioning and think that you can easily endure such results? (Mem. 3.12.1–3)

It is interesting to note, first, that Socrates begins with what we might call a broad, civic concern: Athens may be invaded, and so Athenians, particularly Athenian citizens, stand ready like those who are destined or intend (μέλλω) to enter into the Olympics. Surely it would be shameful for someone in the Olympic rolls to show up to his contest unfit, unready.⁷ In the same way, Socrates suggests, an Athenian citizen stands like a potential battle participant and ought not show up to the fight unprepared. Always standing ready to act in the city's defense, then, is treated as a civic obligation.

After this civic appeal, Socrates turns to an individualistic one. Surely it would be bad, Socrates suggests to Epigenes, to be disgraced in war, either through cowardice or through failure on the battlefield. Some men have by their flabbiness been made disgraces and slaves, where if they had paid mind to fitness they could have been spared. If one could stave off hardship in slavery, or perhaps the debt incurred from paying a ransom for freedom, simply by taking due care for regular upkeep of the body, surely this would be better than the alternative. It is the risk of future harm, to both the city and the individual, in other words, that serves as the primary motivator for this opening salvo of the case for physical fitness.

Socrates then asks Epigenes to consider the contrast between the unfit man and the fit man, and enjoins him to affirm that

[t]he results of physical fitness are the direct opposite of those that follow from unfitness. The fit are healthy and

strong; and consequently many save themselves decorously on the battlefield and escape all the dangers of war; many help friends and do good for their country and on that account they earn gratitude, get great glory and gain very high honors, and on that account they live henceforth a better and more pleasant life, and leave to their children better means of winning a livelihood. (Mem. 3.12.4–5)

Socrates begins at this point to make a more general case for physical fitness. Like good trees bearing good fruit, good bodies bear well under any circumstance. Yes, they may commend themselves well on the battlefield, and thus win honors, and these honors will then lead to a greater quality of life for their children and so on. But Socrates's point is that the benefits do not end on the battlefield or in the immediate gains from victory.

Here, there is a marked turn in the argument. What if Epigenes, or anyone else, is unpersuaded by the threat of war? What incentive do they have to pursue physical fitness, an activity that requires pain, toil, perseverance, self-denial, and, perhaps most important of all for an “amateur” in these matters, a sacrifice of time that could be spent in more pleasant pursuits? Socrates continues,

Because military training is not publicly supported by the state, you should not make that an excuse for being any the less careful in attending to it yourself. For you may rest assured that there is no kind of struggle [nor any kind of activity] in which you will be worse off by keeping your body in better shape. For in everything that men do the body is useful; and in all uses of the body it is very important to keep the body in as optimal condition as possible. Even in the process of thinking, where the use of the body seems minimal, everyone knows that grave mistakes can often be traced to bad health. And because the body is in a bad condition, loss of memory, depression, bad temper, and insanity often assail the mind so violently as to drive whatever knowledge it contains clean out of it. But a sound

and healthy body is a strong protection to those who have it, and at least there is no danger then of such a calamity happening to them through physical weakness: on the contrary, it is likely that their sound condition will serve to produce effects the opposite of those that arise from bad condition. And surely a man of sense would submit to anything to obtain the effects that are the opposite of those mentioned in my list. (Mem. 3.12.5-7)⁸

Here, then, is the crux of the argument. Epigenes is remaining amateurish in physical training because he does not think he has a professional responsibility to do otherwise. Socrates has argued first that the work of a citizen—readiness for potential invasion—would make being an amateur in fitness shameful should such exigencies arise. And it would be shameful not just because the man could fail to protect the city but because he could be killed or enslaved as a result of his lack of preparation for such an outcome. But here Socrates appeals not to the event of invasion, however likely or unlikely, but to the happiness of the individual more generally. In every situation, Socrates argues, keeping your body in better shape makes your work better. To borrow Aristotelian phrasing, if a virtue or excellence is something that “brings that thing of which it is a virtue into a good condition and causes the work belonging to that thing to be done well” (NE 2.6.1106a15–20),⁹ then on this account exercise, maintenance of physical fitness is obviously a virtue for a human being. It brings that of which it is a virtue (the human being, or specifically his body) into a good condition, and it causes the work of the human being to be done well, whatever work he sets his mind and body to.

Importantly, the virtues fostered by proper physical education are not just physical but also intellectual. “Grave mistakes” of the intellect “can often be traced to bad health,” which brings with it “loss of memory, depression, bad temper, and insanity,” none of which facilitates excellent intellectual activity. Like sickness and disease, then, physical weakness seems to bring the whole person into a worse condition, from which it is more difficult to live well as a human

being. Thus, Socrates concludes, any “man of sense” would prefer to be healthy rather than sick, fit rather than flabby, which requires Epigenes not to neglect care for his body but rather to take care like an athlete that his body can be ready for whatever tasks he pursues.

At the close of the chapter, Socrates returns again to the idea of shamefulness or disgrace. Here we find the completion of the semi-apocryphal popular quote mentioned earlier:

Besides, it is a disgrace to grow old through sheer carelessness before seeing what manner of man you may become by developing your bodily strength and beauty to their highest potential. But you cannot see it if you are careless, for it won't come of its own accord. (Mem. 3.12.8)

The conclusion of the argument presents the idea that it is a “disgrace,” or “shameful” (αἰσχρός), to “grow old through sheer carelessness” or neglect (διὰ τὴν ἀμέλειαν). Here, old age is associated with the flabbiness Epigenes possesses, whereas strength and beauty are associated with youth. Through neglecting his physical fitness, Epigenes has, in a sense, grown old before his time; he has adopted a physical form that surely would not be shameful for an old man, who can no longer maintain the level of physical activity a young man could, but it is a form out of sorts with his age and place in life, and so it is a disgraceful, shameful thing.

Perhaps most important is that like any other virtue, physical fitness requires active attention; carelessness will not bequeath excellence. In some cases, the importance of this active regard for fitness is expressed through public support for physical training. Although Socrates says in *Memorabilia* that the state does not “sponsor” military education, it is nonetheless true that ancient Greek city-states provided state-sponsored physical education through the Didaskeleion, for young boys, and the gymnasium, for more advanced education.¹⁰ As Paik Wooyeal and Daniel Bell argue, it seems that the public necessity of physical education of young men and, in some cities, young women, was roundly uncontroversial: “Plato was an implacable critic of Athenian-style

society and politics, but his defense of physical education in *The Republic* does not differ widely from the actual practice of Athenian society at the time.”¹¹ The authors clarify, however, that unlike city-states like Sparta, which might be characterized as viewing martial readiness and physical fitness as a good unto itself, Plato in *The Republic* suggests that physical fitness is preparatory for the exercise of the mind.¹² Taking this characterization of *The Republic* as accurate, we see significant overlap between Plato’s and Xenophon’s Socrates on this point and can trace two facets of the argument in favor of physical training: Physical fitness brings goods with it, like general health and well-being, but it also perhaps more importantly prepares the mind to do its work well. A good citizen in any occupation, pursuing any sort of life, is thus benefited by caring for their fitness.¹³

The Amateur American Body

Acknowledging these virtues and broadly agreeing with the arguments presented by Xenophon’s Socrates, at least in substance if not by influence, the history of America itself bears witness to the importance of physical education for a distinctly American civic educational enterprise. The conditions of colonization in the North American continent surely contribute to an ethos in praise of hardiness; early settlement was a deadly enterprise, and from the colonial period to the revolutionary period to westward expansion and beyond, living on the edges of civilization was no easy task. It is not difficult to imagine why simple historical, physical, and material circumstances would lead to an emphasis on physical education. Like Xenophon’s Socrates, however, the thinkers in the American tradition who pay mind to physical education make clear that the benefits are not solely martial.

A constant theme throughout Thomas Jefferson’s letters, for example, was one that could have come from Socrates’s speech in Xenophon directly: that a healthy body makes for a healthy mind, or that “[i]f the body be feeble, the mind will not be strong.”¹⁴ In 1749 Benjamin Franklin, no paragon of physical health himself, authored a series of “Proposals Relating to the

Education of Youth in Pennsylvania” in which he encouraged chartering an academy for the education of the young that would pay attention not only to intellectual matters. Instead, such an academy should ensure “[t]hat to keep them in Health, and to strengthen and render active their Bodies, they be frequently exercis’d in Running, Leaping, Wrestling, and Swimming, &c.”¹⁵ In his authorial notes on this section, Franklin appeals to such eminent authorities as John Locke, Francis Hutchinson, and no less a historical figure than Charlemagne to demonstrate that physical fitness was often thought coequal with lettered education. He attributes a quote to one Mons. Rhodéz that Henry the Great of France “was not permitted by his Grandfather to be brought up with Delicacy, who well knew that *seldom lodgeth other than a mean and feeble Spirit in an effeminate and tender Body*.”¹⁶

But as the exigencies of history have changed, so too predictably have the general standards of fitness for the average American. As Wooyeal and Bell argue that perhaps the baseline way of life in Warring States-period China made state-sponsored education less necessary than it had been in ancient Greece,¹⁷ it is equally likely that the living conditions of the early American republic contributed to a generally robust populace. So, too, we can imagine over time as fewer Americans worked in agricultural labor and as material prosperity increased, more attention might need to be paid to fitness itself. Indeed, we see seeds of this in the administration of Teddy Roosevelt. Historian Ryan Swanson has documented how Roosevelt’s own history as a feeble young man led to his overt emphasis on physical training and readiness, both within the American military and in the public at large.¹⁸ Roosevelt’s administration saw the first baseball World Series, and he is credited for the founding of the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), and more.¹⁹

In 1973 an extensive fire at the National Personnel Records Center destroyed the bulk of official military personnel files of soldiers who were discharged from 1912 to 1960.²⁰ Because of this, there is much missing information that might have been useful to

researchers interested in the mental and physical effects of World War I and World War II on veterans. Despite the loss, however, we are able to infer some important information about the decline of physical fitness in America through policies and programs undertaken following World War II. In the aftermath of World War II, amid a newly recovered economy, many Americans grew more sedentary. Some report that military officials complained to President Eisenhower that the fitness of men conscripted both into World War II and the Korean War was subpar. In response to these and other concerns, Eisenhower founded the President's Council on Youth Fitness in 1956. In his executive order establishing the council, Eisenhower noted "recent studies" that "revealed disturbing deficiencies in the fitness of American youth."²¹ While the matter of youth fitness was properly a "responsibility of government at all levels, as well as the responsibility of the family, the school, the community, and other groups and organizations," the President's Council was to undertake coordination and administration of federal fitness-related activities, "so as to assure their maximum effectiveness and to provide guidance and stimulation."²² It was under the later Lyndon B. Johnson administration that the President's Council undertook a national fitness survey and established the Presidential Physical Fitness Award "for exceptional achievement by 10- to 17-year-old boys and girls."²³ The award remained in place for many decades, given to those who met certain standards of excellence on the regular test in various domains.

The history of this award is perhaps instructive for the history of thinking on physical education broadly in America and suggestive for recommendations for alternative approaches going forward. It was during the Clinton administration that the council undertook a campaign focused, not on physical excellence, but on bare-minimum physical activity with the twin slogans "Get Off It!" and "Get Up, Get Out."²⁴ This trend continued into the George W. Bush administration, when the "President's Challenge expands to three areas and the Presidential Active Lifestyle Award is made available for children and youth." This award, in contrast to the

more traditional award for exceptional achievement, was awarded to those who demonstrated consistent physical activity, not those who demonstrated exceptional achievement in physical feats. The democratization or leveling of the program culminated in the year 2012, when the Barack Obama administration instituted the Presidential Youth Fitness Program, which officially removed the award for highest-achieving students and instead gave students a program for activity in bracketed clusters of ability, with awards given for consistent performance within ability level rather than objective excellence.

Paradoxically, or perhaps predictably, removing focus on excellence and deemphasizing the advantages of high achievement in favor of more generalized programming did not have the effect of raising general fitness in the American population. If the Clinton, Bush, and Obama administrations expected the equalization and democratization of the program to be widely beneficial for student fitness levels, they were surely sorely mistaken. These trends match broader ones that, one could say, democratize physical fitness standards across all domains of American life, even those that are more traditionally martial. One could compare, for example, early twentieth-century physical training manuals for the armed forces to the standards used today and find a marked decline in expectations. The 1950 Naval Aviation Physical Training Manual, for example, recommends competitive gymnastics training as part of a complete strength and conditioning regimen.²⁵ The 1946 War Department's FM 21-20 field manual for physical training recommends a five-day-per-week strength and conditioning schedule with multiple domains per day (e.g., conditioning, running, and guerrilla fighting) increasing in difficulty on a twelve-week schedule.²⁶ While the modern military has made small, "symbolic" tweaks to its fitness standards in response to pressure against a trend of lowered standards, the current standards compared with past training recommendations are starkly minimal.²⁷

Outside of martial concerns, this general disregard or discouragement of reward for excellence can be observed in the methods and approaches to physical education of children in the education

system. Compare, as anecdotal evidence, two publications on the ways that physical education teaches civic and social virtues, the first a journalistic piece, published in *The Clearing House* in 1941, the second a reputedly scholarly report on character education in gym class, published in *The Journal of Education* in 2006.²⁸ In the 1941 piece, the author Roland Keene, a principal of a community high school in Illinois, reports of a supervisor overseeing a gym class where the gym teacher's methods surprise him. The boys in class are given a ball and are left to their own devices without rules or referees. After a brief period of chaos, the boys organize a game of basketball and start reliably calling their own fouls and resolving their own disputes. The supervisor questions why the teacher allows them to play this way, to which he responds: "I am, as you suggested, eliminating the referees in order to get the boys to learn the principles of sportsmanship. I want them to cooperate with each other and actually to practice good sportsmanship. I want them to become self-reliant. If these boys are to make good citizens, they must learn to manage their own affairs. They must have social experiences and contacts that involve real decisions."²⁹

Keene goes on to report a stirring conversation between a gym class teacher and a history teacher in a supervisory meeting. Much to his surprise, the supervisor finds the gym teacher and the history teacher have significant, overlapping agreement on the purpose of education proper. It is to prepare young people for lives as good citizens by "building up within pupils the proper attitudes and ideals that make for good citizenship."³⁰ This is accomplished, both teachers agree, in gym as well as in social studies, and sometimes perhaps better.

But, Keene questions, is there not a risk that competitive sporting will leave out the underperforming students, the ones who actually need the physical activity more than the more natural athletes? "Don't you think our curriculum in sports places too much emphasis on competitive activities," he asks. "No," the gym teacher responds, "I don't believe so. Experience in competition isn't going to hurt our young people, especially in this day and age. But for that matter, we are giving training and cooperation also.

Even in our competitive group sports, cooperation, more commonly referred to as teamwork, is vital to success.”³¹ The supervisor, the gym teacher, and the history teacher thus find common agreement that education is designed to produce the proper attitudes in children that fit them for citizenship, and they are best fit to do this when they are physically fit, learn to cooperate, and simultaneously intellectually learn the principles in the classroom.

Contrast the observations of Keene with the recommendations championed in *The Journal of Education* some sixty years later. In place of competitive events, inclusive events are encouraged so that all children might participate as much as possible. The author contends that in contrast to earlier eras of gym class that are often painful memories for adults, “[t]oday, effective physical education programs and teachers do not only reward the proficiently skilled players, but they also encourage healthy, cooperative, and competitive games, physical activities, and adventure-movement initiatives instead of the traditional competitive, sport-based and elimination games.”³² The author cheerfully asserts that physical education has “matured beyond” a focus on motor skills exclusively and now recognizes “the impact on character education teaching opportunities.”³³ Thus, the older, harsher, embarrassing practices “have been replaced with kinder and more inclusive learning activities and methods.”³⁴ One must ask, of course, if these kinder and more inclusive methods have achieved the aims put forward by these advocates of “character education teaching opportunities.”

In summary, the author writes that character education is “teaching children about basic human values, including honesty, kindness, generosity, freedom, equality, and respect, with a goal to raise children to become morally responsible, self-disciplined citizens.”³⁵ Surely these are noble goals. One must ask, however, where in this character education the virtues specific to physical training intervene, if children are being taught toughness or courage alongside these admirable democratic virtues. One must ask, as well, if the move from the earlier, unstructured, rough-and-tumble gym class of Keene’s reporting to the kinder, gentler gym class of Sullivan’s accounting has resulted in fitter, freer children.

Empirical studies of the health of Americans, represented by the amount of physical activity, rates of obesity, and incidence of various diseases among both children and adults, seem to suggest the answer is no.³⁶

The latter approach, in contrast to the earlier civically minded approach, is signified of late by a recent “call to action” put forward by the Physical Activity Guidelines Advisory Committee of the United States Department of Health and Human Services. Every ten years, the committee says, “the US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) reviews the body of evidence for physical activity and health outcomes and provides updated guidance on the amounts and types of physical activity necessary to get and stay healthy.”³⁷ Reporting on their “listening session” with experts across various physical education topics, the committee reports that “[t]hroughout the session, there was an overarching focus on equity.”³⁸

In Keene’s accounting, there is surely a kind of equality between the gym class participants. None has been designated a leader or been placed in charge of the games to be played; instead, negotiations take place, leaders emerge, followers participate, and all are ultimately engaged in the process of civic development as the teachers describe. The boys in gym class are putting into practice the ideas that the history teacher hopes they will learn, and the boys in history class have ready-to-hand examples that will make the civic virtues taught in history class more tactile and intelligible to them. In the later accounting, excellence seems almost discouraged by default.

In loosening standards to attempt to raise general fitness, we seem to be engaging in a kind of race to the bottom that accomplishes neither goal, with predictable consequences. The aforementioned rise of obesity is concerning for both Socratic reasons: People are unfit to defend their homes if called on to do so, and they are also negatively affected in their day-to-day physical and mental lives. In order to assure minimal, equal participation, opportunities for students to excel through competition are diminished, and comparisons between those who are more fit versus

those who are less fit are looked on with disfavor. And, for all it promises, this approach seems at the very least unable to stem the tide of rampant feebleness, and at worst to sacrifice the virtues inculcated by that civic model.

Equality in Fitness or Equality in Fatness?

It is sometimes remarked that Tocqueville's concern with the inevitable march of democracy, the spreading dogma of equality, is whether equality will be experienced as an equality in liberty or an equality in servitude. The French Revolution during the Terror and the American prison system provide easy examples of equality in servitude; American society generally might, on its best days, represent the prospects of equality in liberty. Observing the history of civic-minded physical fitness, we today might ask a modified, if slightly uncouth question: In the future, will we experience equality in fitness, or equality in fatness? Efforts to democratize public fitness campaigns along lines of "equity" have, it seems, at the very least failed to achieve their lofty aims.

Here I must be careful, as causality in society-wide fitness trends is difficult to establish, or at least the causal arrow might easily be turned around. Surely the United States' military's declining standards, for example, are responses to declining fitness in the public generally, rather than primary drivers of that decline. But surely government policy calling citizens to higher things at the very least incentivizes some sort of directional behavior. While one would be unwise to hastily discount the material circumstances that underlie the sedentary lifestyles and horrific diets of the modern American, it would be equally unwise to discount the possibility that the United States Department of Health and Human Services' emphasizing equity over excellence has had some negative pressure on incentives to rise to excellence in fitness.

Again, Xenophon's Socrates is instructive. In his dressing-down of Epigenes's laxity in caring for his body, he begins with appeals that might sound "republican" or classical, appealing to the citizen's role in protecting the political community from

external threat and the duty to be prepared for such an occasion if called on to fight. If Socrates were to stop there, we might view his injunctions as we view the Spartan program of education: a historic artifact, perhaps a curiosity, but certainly not a model for democratic fitness standards. But Socrates does not stop there: instead, he appeals to the self-interest, rightly understood, of the individual. Is it not better for your body to be in a better state so that all your living might be better? Is not physical health a precondition, or at least an aid, to psychological and intellectual health? Let us presume that Epigenes has let himself grow pudgy in pursuit of philosophy, as companion of Socrates. Here, too, Socrates says, physical fitness will be an aid, for the weak and infirm have short memories and wandering thoughts—in other words, according to the definition of a philosopher Plato's Socrates provides in book 5 of the *Republic*, a physically unfit person will not make a good philosopher. Socrates's intuitions are supported by more recent empirical literature on the cognitive benefits of fitness. Surely, we can say with Socrates, we want our citizens to be good, happy, and healthy, for their benefit and the benefit of the political community.³⁹

In engaging in discourse around the topic of fitness, one risks falling into step with a host of loud public voices making quite different sorts of arguments. But those engaged in the education of the young need not abandon the topic of physical excellence to the vitalists and “perverts” who have claimed it. The tradition that gives rise to the American republic, the tradition within which students will be educated should they be given what can properly be called a civic education, gives grounds to call young people to physical excellence as a democratic virtue. Such a project would require reform at both the intellectual and the curricular level, first in thinking anew of the purpose and place of physical education within a broader educational project, building on the concerns articulated here, then by cataloguing the virtues cultivated by fitness and lost in its absence, then finally in restructuring what sort of physical education is offered in service of those aims.

Notes

1. C. Bradley Thompson, “The Rise and Fall of the Pajama-Boy Nietzscheans,” *American Mind* (2020). <https://americanmind.org/salvo/the-rise-and-fall-of-the-pajama-boy-nietzscheans/>.
2. See, e.g., Richard Avramenko and Thomas Bunting, “Sportsmanship and Politics: Xenophon on *Ponos* and Democratic Competition,” *Perspectives on Political Science* 47, no. 3 (2018): 142–53, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10457097.2017.1338092>; Thomas David Bunting, *Democracy at the Ballpark: Sport, Spectatorship, and Politics* (SUNY Press, 2021).
3. Elizabeth Fain and Cara Weatherford, “Comparative Study of Millennials’ (Age 20–34 Years) Grip and Lateral Pinch with the Norms,” *J Hand Ther* 29, no. 4 (2016): 483–88, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jht.2015.12.006>; Johannes Beller, Alexander Miething, Enrique Regidor, Lourdes Lostao, Jelena Epping, and Siegfried Geyer, “Trends in Grip Strength: Age, Period, and Cohort Effects on Grip Strength in Older Adults from Germany, Sweden, and Spain,” *SSM—Population Health* 9 (December 2019): 100456, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssmph.2019.100456>; Karsten Keller, Volker H. Schmitt, Omar Hahad, Christine Espinola-Klein, and Lukas Hobohm, “Increasing Obesity Rates Worldwide from 1976 to 2016: The Obesity Epidemic,” *J Clin Med* 15, no. 1 (2026): 394, <https://doi.org/10.3390/jcm15010394>.
4. Kaihang Liu, Wei Zhao, Congcong Li, et al., “The Effects of High-Intensity Interval Training on Cognitive Performance: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis,” *Sci Rep* 14, no. 1 (2024), <https://doi.org/10.1038/S41598-024-83802-9>.
5. See, e.g., “‘It Is a Shame for a Man to Grow Old . . . ,’” 2015, accessed July 28, 2025, https://www.reddit.com/r/quotes/comments/3i4xkg/it_is_a_shame_for_a_man_to_grow_old_without/.
6. Unless otherwise noted, *Memorabilia* quotations are from Xenophon, *Memorabilia, Oeconomicus, Symposium, Apology*, trans. O. J. Todd and E. C. Marchant, rev. Jeffrey Henderson, Loeb Classical Library (Harvard University Press, 2013).
7. As a contemporary analogue, consider the shame that accompanies those who show up for a scheduled, sanctioned fighting event and “miss weight,” demonstrating failure to have appropriately prepared for their event. The stakes in such contests are reputation, money, and glory. The stakes in the political context are all these and more.
8. Translation from Loeb, with modification indicated in brackets. The Loeb translation renders the sentence “For you may rest assured that there is no kind of struggle, apart from war, and no undertaking in which

you will be worse off by keeping your body in better shape.” “Apart from war” appears to be an editorial addition, perhaps meant in the archaic sense of “in addition to; as well as,” but not necessary in the Greek and not clarifying in the English.

9. Quotations from Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Susan D. Collins and Robert C. Bartlett (University of Chicago Press, 2011).
10. Paik Wooyeal and Daniel A. Bell, “Citizenship and State-Sponsored Physical Education: Ancient Greece and Ancient China,” *Review of Politics* 66, no. 1 (2004): 10, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670500042455>.
11. Wooyeal and Bell, “Citizenship and State-Sponsored Physical Education,” 12. Interestingly for my purposes, Wooyeal and Bell note that the public support for physical education in Athens seems to spring not from direct military necessity but from their ideas of citizenship, from what is required of those who are full members of the political community. The citizenship ideal of the Greek polis is not found, for example, in city-states in the Warring States period in Chinese history, and thus those Chinese cities lacked public institutions for physical education. Although the authors concede some material conditions, such as the baseline fitness of the agricultural workers in the Chinese cities, might explain some of this disparity, the driver, they argue, is the concept of citizenship.
12. Wooyeal and Bell, “Citizenship and State-Sponsored Physical Education,” 12n21.
13. One could perhaps attempt to catalogue and describe, here, all the virtues advanced or aided by physical fitness, participation in competitive sports, and so on. Courage, particularly, seems to be aided by some sort of physical readiness. The most obviously martial of the classical virtues, courage need not be exercised yet often is exercised in dominantly physical contexts. Putting one’s life on the line, or “risking life and limb” on behalf of something, is undoubtably easier to do with earned confidence resulting from physical training. But the virtues learned in these physical contests need not be purely martial, as discussed later in this paper. For extended discussions of these and similar topics, see Richard Avramenko, *Courage: The Politics of Life and Limb* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2011); Avramenko and Bunting, “Sportsmanship and Politics”; Bunting, *Democracy at the Ballpark*.
14. “Thomas Jefferson to Thomas Mann Randolph, Jr., 27 August 1786,” Founders Online, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-10-02-0226>.

15. "Proposals Relating to the Education of Youth in Pennsylvania [October 1749]," Founders Online, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Franklin/01-03-02-0166>.
16. Italics original. This quotation, the National Archives notes, is actually quoted from Obadiah Walker's *On the Education of a Young Gentleman*. See "Proposals Relating to the Education of Youth in Pennsylvania [October 1749]," Founders Online, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Franklin/01-03-02-0166>.
17. Wooyeal and Bell, "Citizenship and State-Sponsored Physical Education."
18. Ryan Swanson, *The Strenuous Life: Theodore Roosevelt and the Making of the American Athlete* (Diversion Books, 2019).
19. Rodney K. Smith, "A Brief History of the National Collegiate Athletic Association's Role in Regulating Intercollegiate Athletics," *Marquette Sports Law Review* 11, no. 9 (2000), <https://scholarship.law.marquette.edu/sportslaw/vol11/iss1/5>.
20. Walter W. Stender and Evans Walker, "The National Personnel Records Center Fire: A Study in Disaster," *American Archivist* 37, no. 4 (1974), https://www.archives.gov/files/st-louis/military-personnel/NPRC_fire_a_study_in_disaster.pdf.
21. Eisenhower, "Executive Order 10673—Fitness of American Youth," 1956, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/executive-order-10673-fitness-american-youth>.
22. Eisenhower, "Executive Order 10673."
23. "History of the Council," <https://odphp.health.gov/pcsfn/history-council>. Public honors for physical achievement certainly bear echoes of classical methods of honoring the excellences of athletes and warriors.
24. "History of the Council."
25. V-Five Association of America, *Gymnastics and Tumbling*, Naval Aviation Physical Training Manuals (United States Naval Institute, 1950), https://www.crossfit.com/legacy-pdf/cf-journal/Gymnastics_tumbling/gymnastics_tumbling.pdf.
26. War Department, *Physical Training* (US GPO, 1946), <https://theleanberets.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/1946-FM-21-20-PT-US-WAR.pdf>.
27. Steve Beynon, "Tweaks to Army's Physical Fitness Test Are Relatively Modest," *Military.com.*, May 8, 2025, <https://www.military.com/daily-news/2025/05/08/tweaks-armys-physical-fitness-test-are-relatively-modest.html>.
28. Roland Keene, "Physical Education: Opportunity for Teaching Citizenship," *Clearing House* 15, no. 5 (1941): 297–300, <http://www.jstor>.

- org/stable/30186807; Eileen C. Sullivan, "Character Education in the Gymnasium: Teaching More Than the Physical," *Journal of Education* 187, no. 3 (2006): 85–102, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42744102>.
29. Keene, "Physical Education," 298.
 30. Keene, "Physical Education," 298.
 31. Keene, "Physical Education," 300.
 32. Sullivan, "Character Education in the Gymnasium," 86.
 33. Sullivan, "Character Education in the Gymnasium," 86.
 34. Sullivan, "Character Education in the Gymnasium," 86.
 35. Sullivan, "Character Education in the Gymnasium," 100.
 36. See, e.g., Ross C. Brownson, Tegan K. Boehmer, and Douglas A. Luke, "Declining Rates of Physical Activity in the United States: What Are the Contributors?," *Annu Rev Public Health* 26 (2005): 421–23, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.publhealth.26.021304.144437>; Andrew K. Yegian, Steven B. Heymsfield, and Daniel E. Lieberman, "Historical Body Temperature Records as a Population-Level 'Thermometer' of Physical Activity in the United States," *Current Biology* 31, no. 20 (2021): R1375–R1376, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cub.2021.09.014>; Matthew A. Ladwig, Christopher N. Sciamanna, Brandon J. Auer, Tamara K. Oser, Jonathan G. Stine, and Jennifer P. Agans, "When American Adults Do Move, How Do They Do So? Trends in Physical Activity Intensity, Type, and Modality: 1988–2017," *Journal of Physical Activity and Health* 18, no. 10 (2021): 1181–98, <https://doi.org/10.1123/jpah.2020-0424>.
 37. My thanks to Russ Greene for pointing to this call to action and for making the additional point that such calls for "equity" in national-level guidance come amid a historic difficulty in military recruitment because of obesity and other related health issues. Katrina L. Piercy, Alison Vaux-Bjerke, Malorie Polster, et al., "Call to Action: Contribute to the Development of the Third Edition of the Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans," *Transl J Am Coll Sports Med* 10, no. 1 (2024), <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC11926852/>. See also Centers for Disease Control, "Unfit to Serve: Obesity and Physical Activity Are Impacting National Security," 2022.
 38. Piercy et al., "Call to Action."
 39. In addition to the studies mentioned earlier, see also Laura Mandolesi, Arianna Polverino, Simone Montuori, et al., "Effects of Physical Exercise on Cognitive Functioning and Wellbeing: Biological and Psychological Benefits," *Front Psychol* 9 (2018): 509, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.00509>.