
Review

Nietzsche's *agon* for politics?

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Agon in Nietzsche

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Contesting Nietzsche

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In the last decades, Nietzsche's conception of *agon* has been the source of an important current in political theory, namely, agonistic democratic theory. Proponents of democratic agonism take for granted that *agon* is a political concept. Recently, two works on the concept of *agon* in Nietzsche have cast into doubt its political character. What is gained and what is lost in our understanding of Nietzsche and of contemporary political theory by shifting the locus of *agon* away from politics?

Agon in Nietzsche offers a detailed study of ancient Greek sources on the culture of competition and how Nietzsche connects to this tradition of contest, particularly in his early period of writing (1870–1874), but also in his later writings. According to Tuncel, the spirit of ancient Greece is always present in Nietzsche's thought and writings and he shows how central ideas like eternal return, overhuman and will to power can be traced back to the spirit of ancient agonism (p. 8). For Tuncel, *agon* is a dynamic that essentially makes possible Greek 'culture', to which the Greek idea of politics belongs as one component among others. Hence *agon* cannot be reduced to politics. Where then does *agon* find its roots? Tuncel begins his book by arguing that *agon* has a decidedly religious root. In the first two chapters of the book, 'The Mythic Context of Agon' and 'The Sacred in Agon', Tuncel argues that Nietzsche derives his notion of *agon* from Greek polytheism and from its conception of the sacred. Greek polytheism is 'open-ended, hierarchical, creative and playful' and can be conceived as 'hierarchically overlapping agonistic circles from the gods down to the mortal competing forces' (p. 28). Tuncel holds that what motivated Nietzsche throughout his writing career was 'to combat the reduction of the sacred to the confines of



everyday morality and rational theology', as well as its 'further obliteration by scientific rationality and its philosophically shallow idea of secularism' (p. 59).

The religious origin of *agon* is again visible in Tuncel's discussion of the cathartic effects of *agon* as a form of cultural transfiguration throughout Chapters 3–5. Here *agon* functions within a general scheme of giving meaning to life by explaining suffering and giving a sublimated form to potentially destructive passions and affects. In 'Suffering, Destruction and Transfiguration' (Chapter 3), Tuncel shows how *agon* provides a cultural context that allows for the externalization of 'destructive animal instincts' (p. 74). As such *agon* prevents the internalization of the destructive human tendencies such as revenge, resentment and ultimately 'bad conscience' (p. 76). In 'Agon and War' (Chapter 4), Tuncel discusses how in Greek agonistic culture, but also in Nietzsche's own writings, war is transformed into *agon* and, in 'Agonal Feelings' (Chapter 5), he treats hate and love, ambition and envy as feelings inscribed in and cultivated through contest and how contest keeps these feelings in measure thus avoiding their inherent dangers of destruction or excess.

Tuncel reaches the political meaning of agonism, starting in Chapter 6, 'The Question of Agonistic Unity and Active Justice', with a discussion of how competition unified ancient Greeks and their cities around agreed upon rules, customs and laws. But here the potential limitations of keeping Nietzsche's agonism tied down so closely to the Greek understanding of it become more and more apparent. Tuncel argues that Nietzsche's own conception of 'active justice' goes back to the idea of 'agonal justice' of the ancient Greek culture of competition. In fact, Tuncel's analysis of justice puts emphasis on a conception of unity that seems philosophical, rather than political, because it privileges unity over equality: equals are such because they participate in one and the same ethical substance, for example. The work of 'agonal justice' 'is part of the lived reality of the agonal individual and his world-view which enables him, on the one hand, to manifest his individuality as a striving individual in struggle with his opponent, on the other, to be part of a unity that cultivates such an individuality' (p. 115). The modern conception of political equality does not depend on a previously accepted unity of ethical substance or communal value. Tuncel understands Nietzsche's critique of modernity as arising from his philosophy of *agon*. According to this philosophy, the problem of modernity is precisely its 'inability to form unity' in which the individual can give form to its singular distinction (p. 118). The question that would need to be put here is whether Nietzsche himself holds on to such a concept of unity in the sense that Tuncel reconstructs for the Greeks, or is he not rather interested in its moment of collapse and the birth of something quite different. In recent political theory, working out of the Nietzschean paradigm of will to power, Esposito has argued that what is needed is a non-metaphysical, non-substantialist conception of unity. Tuncel seems to come close to Esposito's idea of *communitas* when he writes that what holds people together is 'a locus that pertains to all and none' (p. 123).

From a modern perspective, it is clear that Greek culture wrestled with the problem of individuality and perhaps, if one follows Hegel's well-known analysis, collapses under its pressure. Tuncel discusses how the Greeks employed *agon* in order to make a place for individuality without allowing it to overcome their cultural form or unity. Chapters 7 through 10 offer interesting discussions of the Greek 'agonistic individualism', especially as this is found in their ideals of rhetoric and *paideia*. Tuncel emphasizes that both in the Greek *paideia* and in Nietzsche, *agon* is not only about the making of the higher individual through exercise and fighting among equals, but also about community making (p. 199). But this privilege of community is what could be further questioned: on what basis is it asserted by the Greeks? Tuncel convincingly argues that what distinguishes Greek *paideia* and Nietzsche's conception of education is openness towards animality: rather than taming the 'beast' within man, they promote a morality of breeding where animality is cultivated, revered and held up as a symbol for imitation (p. 209). 'Festivals and Spectacles of Agon' (Chapter 11) shows that competition must be understood within the more general context of the life of a culture, where contest took place in the form of festivals and spectacles, both central themes in the Greek world and in Nietzsche's work. The festivals and spectacles of *agon* provide an opportunity to let loose the human being's animal self thereby entering into union with other, nature and animal life (p. 214). This leads one to ask whether, at least for Nietzsche, there is not an outside to culture, namely, animal life, that stands beyond the cultural imperative of unity that otherwise *agon* is called upon to recreate.

Given the overall religious and cultural reading of *agon* that Tuncel offers in this book, it comes as no surprise that in 'Political Theory and Agon' (Chapter 12) he also directs his critical energy to dismantle the politico-theoretical reading of *agon* found in contemporary democratic theorists. Tuncel is particularly critical of the attempts to hold up Nietzsche to the standard of democracy (p. 233f). Instead, he claims that one needs to understand Nietzsche's ideas and his critique 'from the ground up and try to put the pieces together for a social and political vision' (p. 234). Unfortunately, Tuncel remains silent on what this social and political vision may be.

In contrast to Tuncel who reads Nietzsche's conception of *agon* out of its ancient Greek sources, Acampora develops the notion of *agon* primarily out of a reading of Nietzsche's philosophy. The main argument put forth in *Contesting Nietzsche* is that Nietzsche's views of the *agon* shape what and how he argues in the field of philosophy. However, the consequence of this thesis appears to be that Nietzsche's philosophy is ultimately reducible to a theory of value, a value philosophy, whereas for Tuncel the creation of values is just one aspect of *agon* in Nietzsche. According to Acampora's interpretation, *agon* offers Nietzsche the guiding thread to conceive of the distinction between culture and nature by viewing agonistic interaction as generating values that can be shared and truly bring about a sense of common purpose and community; as well as how this general orientation of evaluation and its transmission and reproduction of values differed from Nietzsche's contemporary

culture (p. 9). For Acampora, *agon* 'served as a site for the production of meaning, for making and remaking the social order and cultural fabric' (p. 36) by channelling and sublimating the human being's tendencies to aggression and resistance (p. 4).

What is the common root that holds together the political or social function of *agon* as taming of aggressiveness that makes possible community, and the function of providing a value for life that allows us to bear the fact of suffering and meaninglessness of life itself? The answer given by Acampora turns on the centrality of Homer and the idea of struggle at the heart of tragic art. In 'Agon as Analytic, Diagnostic, and Antidote' (Chapter 1), she begins by laying out Nietzsche's agonistic framework based on a detailed analysis of Nietzsche's 'Homer's Contest'. In Chapter 2, 'Contesting Homer: The Poiesis of Value', Acampora shows that Nietzsche considers how Homer reevaluates the significance of human existence by replacing the conception of human life as essentially a form of punishment from which only death can provide relief (the wisdom of Silenus). Homer is an exemplary affirmative revaluator who achieved this distinction by introducing a means of social and cultural organization that facilitated the pursuit of positive higher values, namely, excellence through contest (p. 9).

In Chapter 3, 'Contesting Socrates: Nietzsche's (Artful) Naturalism', Acampora follows Nietzsche's critique of Socrates and Plato according to which their sublimation of *agon* into philosophical dialectics diminishes contestability, constricts the possibilities for agonistic engagement and fixes in advance the potential outcomes, such that the regenerative potency of agonism was lost (p. 11). In contrast to Platonic metaphysics and Socratic dialectics, Nietzsche upholds a philosophical form of artistry that Acampora designates as 'artful naturalism', based on a productive contest between art and science (p. 12). Furthermore, Nietzsche views Socrates as shifting the field of agonism from the social and public to the psychic and private thus diminishing the communal benefits of agonism. Socrates destroyed the basic elements for the contest at the heart of tragedy when he drove out Dionysus and transmogrified Apollo (p. 83). Socrates replaced tragedy by a form of contestation that is ultimately self-destructive and liable to a particularly intense form of self-directed violence (p. 83).

Such violence is precisely what lies at the heart of 'Contesting Paul: Toward an Ethos of Agonism' (Chapter 4) that takes up Nietzsche's contest with Paul and his adoption and spiritualization of struggle in Christianity. Acampora holds that 'the model of Christian agony encourages a form of struggle that debilitates those who emulate it' (p. 110). The death of *agon* under Paul is for Nietzsche 'the assassination of any form of nobility: it obliterates distinction, difference and the very basis for genuine respect' (p. 122). What is at stake in Nietzsche's contest with Paul is the development of moral values, specifically in their relation to epistemic values, and the processes and organization involved in generating these values (p. 12). In this context, Acampora discusses our current conceptions of guilt and responsibility as well as the more general problem of agency and Nietzsche's critique of

conceptions of intentional agency. She claims that a reconceptualization of moral agency is required to overcome the Pauline economy of guilt and debt and to redeem us from the suffering and pain it inflicts on human beings (p. 13). However, it is unclear whether for Acampora the critique of Paul is functional to an ethical understanding of *agon* as generator of communal values that precede and perhaps cannot cope with the irony of the modern ideas of equality and subjectivity.

The book culminates with a discussion of Nietzsche's conception of subjectivity in 'Contesting Wagner: How One Becomes What One Is' (Chapter 5). For Acampora, Nietzsche's famous formula 'to become what one is' refers to an idea of the subject as a dynamic 'order of rank' between a multiplicity of drives and this organization is 'political' (p. 160). The 'becoming' refers to how one goes about ordering the drives that one 'is', and in this way turning contingency into necessity and attaining the 'love of destiny', *amor fati*. Acampora argues that for Nietzsche there are essentially two ways of ordering drives: through love and through war. It is with respect to love that the contest with Wagner's ideal of selflessness helps Nietzsche develop his own conception of 'ideal selfishness' [Selbstsucht] as a form of care of self that is intended to give place to the procreation of great deeds and thoughts.

Acampora's detailed discussion of Nietzsche's conception of selfishness is stimulating, particularly when she attempts to link it with Nietzsche's conception of responsibility. Ultimately, Acampora models 'responsibility' on the relation between a mother to a child, basing herself on the image that Nietzsche uses to exemplify the relation of the subject 'pregnant' with the thought or deed that will overcome it (pp. 176–178). Here, Acampora could have pursued her discussion of natality as political, for instance, by relating it to Arendt's claim that actions are rooted in the condition of natality. Arendt's theory of action was clearly influenced by Nietzsche. Likewise, when Acampora next discusses the other mode of becoming who one is, namely, through a praxis of war, of agonism with others who are valued as enemies, the political meaning of war as an ordering of rank does not clearly come through. Thus, the original claim that such organization of drives is always 'political' remains undeveloped.

Much like Tuncel, Acampora emphasizes that 'what motivated and nourished' Nietzsche's 'interest in these facets of Greek culture was the social and public good of competition, not the ways in which competitive institutions celebrated individuality and personal accomplishment' (p. 6). In other words, Nietzsche saw in the Greek *agon* a dynamic that made possible the unity or ethical substance of a peculiar culture and its values and meanings, and how this same dynamic allowed this culture to proliferate its values and meanings in the agonistic encounter with other cultural formations. By the end of *Contesting Nietzsche* one wonders how this discussion of *agon* fits together with Nietzsche as the philosopher who questions the value of values, not as the philosopher who theorizes how value is culturally produced and reproduced. What seems to be missing in Acampora's wide-ranging discussions of his philosophy is perhaps a more basic horizon within which Nietzsche discusses value and agency, namely, the horizon of nihilism, on the one hand, and of



trans-human life, on the other. Is *agon* ultimately a device that contains, for relative short periods of time, the encounter of nihilism and the drives of life, or, does it also cover up the abysses that make it possible?

In conclusion, these two admirable studies offer many arguments and much textual evidence to understand the productivity of *agon*, both for Nietzsche's philosophy and for Greek culture, but neither shows definitively that Nietzsche's philosophy or his politics are themselves contained by the dynamic of *agon*. On the side of philosophy, Nietzsche seems just as much interested in what elements of life bring down the machinery that creates values and gods in given communities, as in what makes these machines work within given cultural formations. Thus, perhaps, Socrates' destructive activity and the emergence of the ascetic ideal ultimately tell us more about the nihilistic components of reality and life than Homer's establishment of Greek culture. On the side of politics, it is unclear whether Nietzsche ever was satisfied with a return to a Greek conception of individuality, contained within the imperatives of cultural unity or substance: this would impoverish what he had to say about the productive ways in which one can adopt and overcome modern equality and subjectivity.

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