

**Yunus Tuncel**

*Agon in Nietzsche.*

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A classical education and philological training gave Nietzsche an extensive knowledge of Greek literature and history. As an idealistic youth yearning for an alternative to the dominant values of nineteenth century Europe, he was also deeply attracted to a cultural vision he associated with the Greek tragedians and pre-Socratic philosophers. Not surprisingly then, central motifs of Nietzsche's writings can usually be illuminated by exploring the Hellenic spirit inspiring them. The Dionysian, most obviously, must ultimately be understood in relation to eternal return, the *Übermensch*, will to power, and the like. Yet Nietzsche's polemic regarding the rise and decline of Greek culture in his first book, which depends upon an imaginative understanding of the interaction between Dionysus and the Apollo, remains an indispensable perspective for understanding how the Dionysian functions in his mature philosophy.

The role of *agon* (or contest) is less explicit. However, Yunus Tuncel demonstrates Nietzsche's firm grasp on 'the multi-layered culture of *agon* in ancient Greece' and provides a 'holistic' account of how motifs and key conceptual emphases (on struggle, cruelty, overcoming, and transfiguration, for example) are shaped by Nietzsche's affinity with this signature Greek institution (10). *Agon in Nietzsche* offers a wealth of helpful cultural detail regarding religious cults, sport, education, and festivals of the sort that is often perceived as philosophically peripheral. But a distinction between two kinds of *agon* clarifies the overall argument. Our contemporary inclination is to treat it as a competition between individuals (or competing groups) focused on victory. Whereas according to Tuncel, Nietzsche consciously adopts the less teleological and victory-obsessed version used by Hesiod and Homer who conceived its primary meaning as 'an assembly where contest takes place' (11).

The main focus of the ancient Olympic Games, for example, was on the encounter of all those gathered – athletes, spectators, and judges – not a division of two sides oriented toward victory. So in establishing a modern Games, Coubertin was consistent with the spirit of the original event in asserting that the point of a contest is not to win but to participate, the goal not to have defeated one's opponent but to have fought well. Tuncel does mention the late nineteenth century movement to revitalize 'a culture of competition informed by ancient Greek *agon*' (10). Nevertheless, he does not assimilate Nietzsche into it, and resists the temptation to boldly cast him as a prescient critic of the now prevailing culture of globalized competition that aims to sort out 'winners' from 'losers' in business, sport, education, and other areas of life. Instead, his more modest aim is to 'piece together' Nietzsche's relevant ideas 'from ground up' (233) to evoke a distinctive cultural vision.

This approach is wise because an overly idealistic, neo-Olympian interpretation cannot capture the hard agonistic center of his vision. For instance, *Agon in Nietzsche* depends heavily on a seminal cluster of ideas expressed in 'Homer's Contest' (an early essay first made widely available in abridged form by Walter Kaufman in the *Portable Nietzsche*). There, Nietzsche not only claims that cruelty is an ineradicable feature of life, but also that it is justified as material for life's elevation and enhancement. Despite its terrifying face, cruelty must be deliberately channeled and shaped. Related feelings of jealousy, envy, and hatred also form part of the potent motivational mix deemed

necessary to spur creative achievement. Tuncel sums up the key point with admirable bluntness: ‘the genius of ancient Greece’ was ‘to create assemblies so as to allow expressions of cruelty’ in athletic, artistic, rhetorical, and other public performances (75).

In the process of exploring the deeply communal nature of these assemblies, however, Tuncel also undercuts an equally misleading – social Darwinist – line of interpretation. For one thing, competitors still fought to win and relished victory when they did. Yet the main source of a victor’s joy was glory for the *polis* to which he belonged (which casts a different light on Coubertin’s belief that patriotic fervor taints the true Olympic spirit). For another, Nietzsche’s analysis of motivation is alien to modern sensibilities, but that is precisely what leads him to underscore the importance of building a brake into the competitive structure to prevent a kind of Clausewitzian escalation. In other words, if one person (or group) became so dominant that they could annihilate all other competitors – the wrestler Miltiades is an ancient example – then ‘the contest collapses’ along with ‘the dynamics of culture that sustain it’ (114). Innovative communal structures were designed to accommodate potentially destructive psychic forces, but they required a mechanism for enforcing parity, so to speak.

As a function of the competitive structure operating as a whole, this braking mechanism effectively constitutes a form of justice. Paradoxically enough, Tuncel notes that as agonal feelings of hatred (envy, etc.) intensify within a contest, a sense of justice also increases (114). For the contest releases the destructive energies of individuals on the condition that they accept binding limitations and recognize others as equals, subject to those same limitations. Since they willingly participate, the binding comes from a contest’s ‘inner dynamics; it is not an external binding that comes from above’ (115). In the language of the mature Nietzsche, this is a condition for the flourishing of ‘active justice’ as opposed to the externally imposed ‘reactive justice’ symptomatic of a slave-like mentality (135). Still, impartial officiating of specific contests remains indispensable and judges act as requisite ‘measuring stick’ (129). This select group completes the assembly that is the unified agonal ‘spectacle’ (220). ‘The structure of *agon*,’ as Tuncel puts it, ‘carries within itself a court system, not so much in the legal sense but rather in the broad sense of the word as in the originary sense of holding court’ (130).

As these core ideas are deepened and enriched, from ‘Homer’s Contest’ to *Genealogy of Morals*, they retain a surprisingly strong religious dimension. Tuncel emphasizes that Nietzsche’s critique of Christianity should not obscure his sympathetic treatment of Greek polytheism (49). The latter exemplifies a ‘religion of life’ (20) in the sense that each Greek god ‘contributes a psychic quality to the collective ethos; their end (or collective) effect is the deification of the animal in human life’ (27). As opposed to ‘taming’ our animality, deification entailed channelling it through various forms of contest in a ‘breeding’ process (209) that encompassed both physical training and an education in the liberal arts. Greek *paideia* treated the two as facets of an integrated ‘art of transformation’ (201) that required cultivating specialized habits and the submission to disciplined practices over long periods of time. And contest was the primary vehicle developing, testing, and displaying ‘the highest types’ (208).

Tuncel makes two significant, closely related points. First, when ‘the sacred’ is not oriented toward an object or person but a ‘lived reality... with its own rituals’ (55), the latter can be conceived as ‘forms of *askesis*’ (59). So these practices form the substance of the daily regimen of very non-Christian but ‘pious’ individuals (200). Second, contestants perform in a public spectacle but their fight against others is emblematic of the overcoming of a traumatic *inner* struggle. For the

opportunity to ‘externalize’ (76) one’s delight in cruelty and the propensity to envy, hatred, and the like, prevents these potentially toxic forces from taking an inward self-destructive turn resulting in the psychic twin of a horrifying pre-Homeric fight devoid of rules and limitations. Then, the struggle and suffering that is an ineradicable feature of life would become overwhelming and we would succumb to terror or existential nausea (81). Externalizing these energies in well-designed contests, by contrast, amounts to ‘transfiguring’ them (76). Suffering is not made good (any more than it was previously evil) but a way has been found to overcome the weight of loss, hardship, and death, in order to achieve an exuberant ‘faith in life’ (21).

*Agon in Nietzsche* does have noticeable limitations. Tuncel never integrates art adequately into his account of *agon*. Greek music, poetry, and drama festivals were common, but he finds little to discuss because ‘when it comes’ to artistic contests ‘and how they were judged, we are still clueless’ (128). Regarding *Birth of Tragedy*, he makes a reasonable distinction between ‘enacting the suffering of gods on-stage’ (70) and the real suffering endured by athletic contestants. But this can scarcely justify his sharp separation between the ‘dynamics of suffering and joy’ operating within a ‘culture of competition’ and what happens in dramatic art (69). Also, Tuncel seriously engages the enormous philosophical literature on Nietzsche only once, in a weak chapter on ‘Political Theory and *Agon*’. Rather than drawing positively on other philosophers to develop his own views on justice and competitive structures, he tries to mediate an array of differing positions on Nietzsche’s view of democracy only to end up with a defensive and muddled complaint about not understanding ‘why attempts are made to hold Nietzsche to the standards of democracy’ (233). Finally, Nietzsche himself ‘entered into contest’ with iconic cultural figures (251). Indeed, *Ecce Homo* uses stylized hyperbole to proclaim a cultural battle of world historical significance in which the name ‘Nietzsche’ signifies the victory of the ‘highest type’. Yet Tuncel has little to say about how Nietzsche is faring in this fight even in a brief polemical epilogue. For the concept of *agon* treated in this book does not ‘semiotically condense’ a whole historical process (*Genealogy of Morals*). That said, it does provide an excellent overview of how Greek *agon* influenced Nietzsche and will be a valuable resource for more specialized philosophical studies.

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