
*Agon in Nietzsche* is among the recent trend of works that consider agon a central concept of Friedrich Nietzsche’s philosophy (the other is Christa Davis Acampora’s *Contesting Nietzsche*). In this careful study, Yunus Tuncel shows how the thought of agon, although only explicitly the subject of Nietzsche’s reflections in the period 1870–1874, continues to organize all of Nietzsche’s later philosophy. Even though words denoting agon (Tuncel lists Wettkampf, Wetteifer, Wettbewerb, Wettspiel, Wettlauf, and Wettstreit) rarely make an appearance after this period, Tuncel argues that the thought of agon remains central to Nietzsche’s philosophy inasmuch as the latter is essentially undertaken as an agonistic struggle with the other value-creators of history (one need only think of Nietzsche’s polemics against Socrates, Plato, Jesus, Martin Luther or also implicitly with Immanuel Kant).

In the introduction, Tuncel sets up his project as the attempt ‘to explore the connection between Nietzsche and Greek agon by studying a variety of sources from ancient Greece on the culture of competition, how Nietzsche directly relates to this culture, especially in his early works, and finally how this influence appears in his later writings’ (p. 8). This project required Tuncel to examine a rich collection of sources, many of which would not have been accessible to Nietzsche. Each chapter of the book thus represents a freestanding attempt to elucidate specific aspects of the Greek culture of agon. The first chapter, titled ‘Mythic Context of Agon’, looks at some of the myths that relate to contests between mythic figures or the founding of contest sites. Chapter 2 and 3, titled ‘The Sacred in Agon’ and ‘Suffering, Destruction, and Transfiguration’, respectively, continue with this theme of looking at agon in the context of religion and responses to human suffering. Chapter 4, ‘Agon and War’, discusses the relation of agon to the culture of war-making in ancient Greece; without reducing either one to the other, Tuncel argues for a ‘chiasmatic relation’ between them that allows Nietzsche to ‘move back and forth from the symbolism of one to the other’ (p. 91). Chapters 5, ‘Agonal Feelings’, examines certain feelings in human beings (e.g., hate, ambition, and envy) that arise from the situation of competition and how those can be purified by directing them into the proper channels. Chapter 6, ‘The Question of Agonistic Unity and
Active Justice’, seeks to understand how the Greeks, though living in a culture characterized by agon, nonetheless regarded themselves or constituted themselves as a unity. The concept of ‘agonistic unity’ is very closely related to the concept of ‘agonistic justice’, which, Tuncel argues, is a precursor of Nietzsche’s concept of ‘active justice’ in his later works.

In Chapter 7, ‘From Agonistic Individuality to the Overhuman’, Tuncel discusses the emergence of a specific ideal of individuality in the agonal age – that of the agonistic individual. He identifies three different but related types of individualities – mythic, heroic, and agonistic – that Nietzsche discusses in his early works. Mythic individuality reflects the Titanic order where the individual does not have much role; the heroic is the Homeric individual who knows mostly war but not agon, who has not channeled his destructive urges into competition to excel; finally, the agonistic individual is both mythic and heroic, but has evolved into a higher being, as the mythic and the heroic take on different meanings. This chapter contains some of Tuncel’s most pertinent and astute remarks on the concept of individuality. Chapters 8, ‘Agonistic Power’, discusses Nietzsche’s ideas of the relation between agon and power, while chapter 9, ‘Agonistic Rhetoric’, focuses on elements of agon within Nietzsche’s own work. Chapter 10, ‘Agonal Education’, discusses the link between agon and the wider culture that both sustains agon and is shaped by it. ‘Agon lies not only in the words and deeds of the agonal individual, but also in the social, political and cultural formations that he is a part of . . . . When these formations collapse, the agonal culture collapses as well, since agon . . . lives and is fed by the dynamics of culture’ (p. 197). Finally, chapters 11 and 12, ‘Festivals and Spectacles of Agon’ and ‘Political Theory and Agon’, respectively, look at the political aspects of agon. Tuncel makes the wise choice of deferring this aspect to the end, even though it is one that, for most modern readers, would have appeared primary. Here he is concerned to work out the differences between modern ideas of competition or of sport (as embodied, for instance, in the modern Olympic Games) and ancient ones as a prelude to his concluding chapter, ‘The Decline of the Agonal Age and Its Significance’, which explores the various reasons that might have contributed to the end of Greek agonistic culture.

Tuncel makes a strong case for agon as the thread that links Nietzsche’s writings from the early to the late period. ‘Although his discussion of ancient Greek culture gradually loses its primary focus after this period, the spirit of ancient Greece is always present in his thought and writings, and almost all of his major areas that are developed later (including the eternal return, the Overhuman, and the will to power) can be traced back to it. This spirit, no doubt, includes the spirit of agonism” (p. 8). Each of the chapters constitutes a self-contained, yet detailed meditation on one aspect of Nietzsche’s philosophy of agon. I especially appreciated the discussion of ‘the macro- and micro-world
of the agonist’ in its relation to ‘the rise of the individual and the principle of individuation, the Dionysian state, the mythic, heroic, and agonal individuals, and the Overhuman’ (p. 139) (in chapter 7). Tuncel also casts a revealing light on the value of agon for Nietzsche as a principle and not just as a historical concept. An ‘important aspect of the agonistic philosopher is to hold, within his own self or his own world-view, the multiplicity of necessary forces of culture in their agonal togetherness’ (p. 254). In this sense, Tuncel argues that ‘The agonistic culture Nietzsche contemplates in his works can be gathered from his writings on culture and from his world-view. This is a culture, which brings and holds together its various expressions, its various forces in their agonal togetherness, where they are ranked as highest values and where the highest types are appropriated for its strife for the highest’ (p. 255).

For readers interested in the theme of ancient contests, Agon in Nietzsche contains significant information on ancient games and festivals. The author writes in the introduction that his interest in the topic was motivated partly by his youthful interest in athletics (p. 17), and this interest shines through in the extensive references to the context and modalities of ancient games. The author also tries to ‘draw parallels and show differences, in the ways agon is practiced, between our age and the agonal age of ancient Greek’, though, of course, ‘to understand today’s agonism is not the task he set himself in this book (p. 17). Tuncel weaves a significant level of historical detail on ancient contests (he quotes from Sinclair Bell and Glenys Davies on Greek festivals and games in general and from Ludwig Drees and M. I. Finley and H. W. Pleket on the Olympic Games more specifically; E. Norman Gardiner and Stephen G. Miller are his main sources for ancient athletics), often offering the appropriate contextualization and either confirming or viewing Nietzsche’s views of the Greeks through these discussions. Much of this information would not have been available to Nietzsche (for instance, ‘even Olympia’s full excavation by Ernst Curtius was not accomplished until 1875, three years after the publication of The Birth of Tragedy and after Nietzsche wrote “Homer’s Contest”, the last essay he wrote on Greek agon’, [p. 9]), so Tuncel’s book accomplishes the useful task of letting us judge the validity of some of Nietzsche’s pronouncements in the light of what is currently known about Greek contests and games.

Yet, as Tuncel emphasizes, the book’s primary function is not simply to assess the historical accuracy of Nietzsche’s views of agon; rather, Tuncel is motivated by the desire to understand, via Nietzsche, what is lost in a culture when the agonal spirit declines. Here, his conclusions are universally pessimistic: he does not consider modern competitive sports to be a suitable replacement for agon – ‘what counts [in them] is the excitement of the masses, a petty spectacle of scoring goals. This also explains why contests in art, poetry and music do not happen, because these would not appeal to the masses’ (p. 257). In general, according to Tuncel, ‘if we take Nietzsche’s vision and the ancient Greek culture
of agon as measuring sticks, . . . our contemporary culture . . . is far from being agonistic’ (p. 256). Instead of ‘sacred and sacrificial rites’, we have ‘false, senseless, out of context sacrifices’; instead of ‘agonistic justice’, we have ‘the modern idea of equality, which confuses non-equals and blends haphazardly the strong and the weak’ (p. 257). ‘Agonistic individualism is compromised to the demands of the populace for self-preservation, for mundane affairs, for sameness and equality; monolithicity rules’ (p. 257). Tuncel also finds that ‘there is no agonistic education that focuses on the production of great human beings’, while ‘contests rarely happen in a festive spirit; the actual event of competition is detached from its larger context’ (p. 257). These conclusions will doubtless challenge readers who view contests such as the modern Olympic Games as part of a single lineage deriving from the ancient games and urge us to rethink the proper place of agon in a culture and in sport.

Notes

1. Acampora’s book (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013) is structured around four major historical figures, Homer, Socrates, Paul and Richard Wagner, and engages in a historical reflection on them from the standpoint of Nietzsche’s agonistic philosophy. In contrast, Tuncel’s book focuses only or mostly on the agonal age of ancient Greece, its micro-dynamics, and how Nietzsche interprets it and how his inter-operation plays out in his more mature late writings. His reflection on history ends, to a large extent, with fifth-century ancient Greece (although there are some reflections about the later decline of the culture of agon).

2. See, for instance, his discussion in this chapter of an understanding of individuality that does not juxtapose freedom and causality: ‘the agonal individual sustains within himself both the mythic individual and the heroic individual; that is, he is both destiny and freedom at the same time. He has adjusted his individual freedom to the flow of eternal cycle instead of standing against it like a motionless soldier. Contrary to the common opinion that tragic man is all destiny, bound by destiny, he is, insofar as he is also an agonal individual, free to the extent that or because he knew and lived out his destiny and mortality. It was out of this freedom that many works of culture were created in the agonal age of ancient Greece from Homer to Socrates’ (p. 142).

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00948705.2014.1000339