

EDITED BY
HERMAN SIEMENS & JAMES PEARSON

**CONFLICT
AND
CONTEST IN
NIETZSCHE'S
PHILOSOPHY**

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Contents

Notes on Contributors	ix
Acknowledgements	xiii
Abbreviations and References for Nietzsche's Writings	xiv
Translations of Nietzsche's Writings	xviii
Introduction <i>Herman Siemens and James Pearson</i>	1
Part 1 Nietzsche's Ontology of Conflict	
1 Nietzsche on Productive Resistance <i>Herman Siemens</i>	23
2 Unity in Strife: Nietzsche, Heraclitus and Schopenhauer <i>James Pearson</i>	44
Part 2 Conflict and Culture: Nietzsche's Agon and the Greeks	
3 Competition and Democracy in Burckhardt and Nietzsche <i>Ritchie Robertson</i>	73
4 Competitive Ethos and Cultural Dynamic: The Principle of Agonism in Jacob Burckhardt and Friedrich Nietzsche <i>Enrico Müller</i>	89
5 <i>Amor Agonis</i> : Conflict and Love in Nietzsche and Homer <i>Lawrence J. Hatab</i>	105
6 Agonistic Communities: Love, War and Spheres of Activity <i>Christa Davis Acampora</i>	122
Part 3 Ethos and Conflict: Nietzsche's Warriors and Warrior-Philosophers	
7 Nietzsche on the Pleasure of the Agon and Enticements to War <i>Michael J. McNeal</i>	147
8 <i>Aidōs</i> , the Warrior-Pathos of Nietzsche's Noble Philosopher <i>Florian Häubi</i>	166
9 'You Will the Eternal Recurrence of War and Peace' (GS 285) <i>Isabelle Wienand</i>	180
10 Philosophy as Terrorism: The Notion of 'Attentat' <i>Guillaume Métayer</i>	189

Part 4 Conflict and Contestation in Language, Rhetoric and Style

11	Agon and Politics in Nietzsche's Early Writings on Language <i>Nicolas Lema Habash</i>	211
12	Hyperbole and Conflict in the Slave Revolt in Morality <i>Frank Chouraqui</i>	234
13	Why War Imagery? Loving Life as an <i>Experiment des Erkennenden</i> in <i>Die fröhliche Wissenschaft</i> <i>Jonathan Agins</i>	253
14	The Aphorism as the Site of Conflict in Friedrich Nietzsche and Ludwig Hohl <i>Alexandra Sattler</i>	264
	Bibliography	279
	Subject Index	288
	Name Index	299

Agonistic Communities: Love, War and Spheres of Activity

Christa Davis Acampora

Introduction

Significant attention has been devoted to Nietzsche's interest in the agon, including forms of conflict and contest. The scholarly literature includes analyses of how Nietzsche distinguishes creative from destructive modes of activity among agonists. It is clear that he thinks certain social and cultural goods are *produced* in agonistic interactions, and that agonistic engagements may be productive means for reproducing values and creating them anew.¹ However, there has been significantly less attention devoted to the general structure of such engagements and the relationships that emerge and evolve in these contexts, including assessing whether such relations can generate the products Nietzsche links with them if they take the form he imagines them to have. My interest here concerns dimensions of agonistic organizations that are broadly *social* rather than strictly *political*, although the latter are obviously relevant and would benefit from further analysis in their own right.²

Furthermore, I am more concerned with *how* the agon might organize social relations more generally than I am with any of its specific products. Discussions in the critical literature tend to follow Nietzsche in conceptualizing and analysing agonistic relations largely in terms of dyadic structures – that is, involving two opposing entities or principal parties. In this chapter, I explore and assess the extent to which Nietzsche's conception of agonism anticipates or requires a broader, more complex domain of activity *in order to exist at all*, and even more so in order to generate the products he associates with it. Thus, the main focus here is the context of agonistic relations, the geography and geometry of the idealized sphere of activity that Nietzsche explicitly and implicitly evokes in his discussions of the agon, how it is organized, and upon what it depends.

Here, I use the term agon loosely to describe various kinds of competitive engagements and, occasionally, forms of struggle more generally. However, I think it is important to remember that, particularly early on, Nietzsche very clearly distinguishes agonistic struggles from other forms of conflict. While we might have the word 'agon' stand in for the idea of contest generally and perhaps even when discussing notions of conflict and struggle, it is important to preserve (or at least be mindful of the fact that)

in *Homer's Contest* and elsewhere, the agon is very much a product of human creativity and ingenuity, a complex set of practices and activities that organizes and manages the conflict and struggle inherent in human (and natural) life more generally.

The locus classicus for Nietzsche's agonism is his analysis and explication of the *odium figulinum*, or potter's hatred, in Hesiod's *Works and Days*, as it appears in Nietzsche's *Homer's Contest*. In the first section of this chapter, I review Nietzsche's text to consider the nature and structure of the relationships he envisions. Assessments of Nietzsche's agonism commonly assume that agonistic relations are fundamentally dyadic in nature, that is, that they largely, if not exclusively, involve two parties facing off and opposing each other. The apparent exclusivity of such relations and their separation from practical life are common themes in the critical literature. I review some of these concerns in the second section of the chapter. Re-examination of the structure of agonistic relations in light of what they are supposed to produce reveals that interactions between individual agonists emerge from a broader field of relations. And this broader field, I argue, is essential for realizing the agon's productive features – how it is able to produce values, reinvest values and recreate them, thereby serving as the engine of culture that Nietzsche (along with others) imagines. These additional features, I argue in Section III, are all *social* phenomena. They are dependent on the community that supports and makes possible such engagements insofar as they create the *institutions*, foster the *development* of the direct competitors, serve as judges and create the conditions for reaching a *decision*, and embody and uphold these *judgements* in carrying forth and reproducing the values produced in the specific contest. All of this is required for meaningful victory – and this is dependent on a field of activity that is much broader than the immediate place and moment of engagement. Further, when Nietzsche goes on to describe the deterioration of the agon, it is clear that his explanation is not so much that there arose an enemy of agon, who succeeded in shutting it down, but rather that the culture became unable to support and sustain its agonistic institutions: Agon wanes when the societies that had embraced it can no longer produce agonists, when they cannot muster the relevant capacities for judgement and become unable to carry forth the products of agonistic engagement.

In what follows, I argue that Nietzsche, like some of his critics, tends to characterize agonistic relations in terms of a dyadic structure. (This is evident even in Nietzsche's own figuration of himself as an agonist.) However, it is clear that the products he links with agonistic activity are broader social and cultural phenomena that not only benefit the larger social order but also *require* it in order to come about at all. This illuminates a social dimension of Nietzsche's philosophy that tends to be overlooked, in part because Nietzsche himself may allow or even encourage us to ignore it. This suggests there is an explicit and implicit social dimension of Nietzsche's work that is available for further exploration, critique and analysis.

I

To appreciate the general structure of the agon on Nietzsche's account, we can begin with his most focused discussion, which is found in his *Homer's Contest*.³ Right

from the start, we may notice that in titling the piece *Homer's Wettkampf*, Nietzsche associates the contest with a single personal name. What the name 'Homer' designates is related to the classical philological concern with the so-called 'Homeric Question' and how Nietzsche saw his own research as relevant to engaging and transforming that question.⁴

It is *Homer's* contest because Homer himself (or, more precisely, the distinctive Homeric perspective) heroically overcomes a highly compelling and widely held pessimistic view. Understanding what Homer contested and how he became victorious, what it means *that* he was victorious – these are the concerns that occupy Nietzsche's attention, not whether this or that passage should be regarded as spurious and the product of an ambitious rhapsode. Further, there is concern about how this bears on the view of the ancient Greeks that was common in Nietzsche's day depicting them as exemplars of urbane humanity. The contest is significant for Nietzsche, because it allows expression of desires we might typically regard as inhumane – perhaps even *inhuman*, destructive – but channelled and redirected for cultural purposes that are potentially productive. This is evident throughout *Homer's Wettkampf* and in each of the subsequent contexts when Nietzsche alludes to that broader theme.

Nietzsche's concern is also broader than just *Homer's* contest – that is, the one in which that particular perspective competed – because Nietzsche thinks that *contest itself*, at least in the ancient context in which it appears as so pervasive, proves to be a highly effective mechanism for transforming values. So, in titling his brief essay *Homer's Wettkampf*,⁵ Nietzsche hopes to foreground the features of this transformative device. With all of this in mind, we are now ready to more closely examine how Nietzsche presents the contest and its *structural* features – that is, we want to observe the definitive features of the contest, the forms of relation that make it what it is, and how it differs from other forms of interaction.

Nietzsche's *philological* evidence for his hypothesis that a competitive ethos played a monumental role in the organization of ancient Greek life originates in his discussion of a philological debate about the authenticity of the opening lines of Hesiod's *Works and Days*. Nietzsche offers a loose translation of lines 11–26, focusing on the ethical milieu of the *odium figulinum*, or 'potter's hatred'. In short, Nietzsche claims this section reveals that there are two kinds of 'hatred' at work in the social economy of ancient Greece: One is responsible, in the extreme, for war and physical violence. The other similarly motivates overcoming opposition but by spurring people to *outdo* – to *better* or *best*, rather than to annihilate – whatever might appear as superior. Nietzsche suggests, with scholars who are his contemporaries as well as those who come later, that this orientation is generalized outside of the context of a specific, formal contest. Speaking of the twin sister of the Eris goddess who is responsible for war, Nietzsche writes, 'She drives even the unskilled man to work; and if someone who lacks possessions looks upon another who is rich, the first will hurry himself to sow and to plant in the same way as the other and to order his house well.' So, the war-goddess has a twin who is responsible for a form of envy that directs broader social interactions and sentiments: 'Neighbor competes with neighbor, striving for wealth.' This overarching orientation towards superiority, Nietzsche claims, 'is good for humankind', because it motivates a form of development that is productive; it is broadly enriching (KSA 1.786).

If we pause here to look at the structure of this interaction, we can notice that it does, indeed, appear to have a dyadic structure: 'the *potter* resents the *potter* and the *carpenter* resents the *carpenter*; *beggar* envies *beggar* and *singer* envies *singer*.'⁶ At its broadest level, that is, its expression in social interactions more generally, the agon appears to be essentially comprised of (and contained within the conflict of) two elements in opposition: potter versus potter, carpenter versus carpenter, and singer against singer – even the beggars compete. In Hesiod's presentation, which Nietzsche cites, the focus is on a 1:1 relation.

Of course, Nietzsche also thinks that, thanks to Homer, mortals can acquire a highly valuable good that eludes the gods: they can be heroic, they can risk their lives. This will be part of the genius of the Homeric poetic innovation: through contest, humans can make their lives supremely valuable, perhaps surpassing that of the gods. By risking more, they stand to gain more in terms of worth and merit. However, such gains also run the risk of attracting unwanted attention from the gods. This is because their inability to earn this high value does not prevent them from trying to do so or destroying the human being who achieves it on account of envy of it. Nietzsche repeatedly returns to the ways in which the notion of envy of the gods serves as a boundary condition and indication of a very different form of relation between humans and gods (as compared with the Christian account) (see for example WS 30).

But we might observe something that Nietzsche does not highlight: here, Hesiod represents the perspective of the spectator, which finds two principals in conflict, vying for supremacy. When Nietzsche goes on to remark on the brake on his form of conflict, the envy of the gods, he retains the dyadic structure of two elements in tension: the products of conflict must be tempered by the need to avoid the envy of the gods. Should one emerge from one's conflict with another mortal as too great a victor, as having received too much glory, then one risks being drawn out of a contest with mortals and into a contest with gods, and this, of course, is a contest that mortals can never win. When Nietzsche flags relevant examples, he repeats the dyadic structure: He offers the cases of 'Thamyris with the Muses, of Marsyas with Apollo' and 'the moving fate of Niobe' as evidence of 'the horrible opposition of *two* powers who must never fight with each other, human and god' (KSA 1.787; emphasis added).

Again, for the purposes of examining the structure of the agon, it is important to notice that time and again Nietzsche presents his reader with 'two powers' – two powers opposed or two powers who *must not* enter into opposition. Even when the opposing powers are not specific individuals, such as Homer and Hesiod, they are two collective powers, such as the Greeks versus the Persians. In these cases, the opposition is localized in the specific conflict of two powers, even though other powers, sometimes many others, as in the case of artistic contests, may also vie to compete in the contest for ultimate supremacy. The main point is that the substance of the conflict, the real source of interest, is the opposition of two ultimate powers.

Furthermore, if we examine the ways in which Nietzsche applies these ideas later in his own work, as he figures monumental developments in human culture, particularly in Western civilization, as products of competing values, we can see that he localizes them in key figures, such as, for example, the Apollinian and Dionysian in *The Birth of Tragedy* and elsewhere, whose contest drives the development of art, and the

Socratic and the Homeric in *Beyond Good and Evil*, whose contests drives the pursuit of morality. Here again, the structure appears to be dyadic: ultimately, two powers compete for supremacy and entitlement to be the standard bearer for excellence in that domain.

Elsewhere, I have argued that out of his examination of different contestatory and oppositional engagements, Nietzsche considers various ways of being opposed.⁷ Roughly speaking, he distinguishes destructive from creative forms of opposition, which loosely equate to pursuing victory by *rising above* one's opposition, or emerging as victorious by *suppressing* one's opponent. If we were to elaborate these examples, examine them in detail, we would observe a similar pattern, which is essentially dyadic: two powers are opposed and how they oppose one another matters in terms of the ends that they are each pursuing.

Those who criticize Nietzsche's agonism very often seem to overlook this point. But even those who acknowledge it share the general inclination to treat Nietzsche's agonism as dyadic in its structure. If we consider those who are wary of Nietzsche's agonism, we find that they, too, largely regard it as dyadic in nature, and this is at least part of what causes them to be concerned about it. Thus, in the most familiar examples and discussions of agonism, it would appear that the *general structure of the agonistic relation* is dyadic: fundamentally, it would seem, two elements comprise it.

II

A current of scholarship aligns Nietzsche's agonism with efforts in contemporary political theory.⁸ Generally speaking, these contributors argue that there are philosophical and theoretical resources available in Nietzsche's works that may contribute to the development of a more robust form of agonistic democratic theory, or political agonism.⁹ Since virtually none of these scholars argues that Nietzsche is an *advocate* of democracy or democratic theory – and several have taken great care to elucidate the grounds on which he stands opposed to it – the purpose of scholarship in this vein is to hermeneutically highlight, sometimes to isolate, certain themes, concepts and arguments that might be applied and utilized by others in the construction of views that were not necessarily Nietzsche's concern.

For some, agonistic views generally and Nietzsche's views in particular hold promise for tackling two concerns that contemporary political theorists aim to address: (1) managing conflict among those with divergent and sometimes incompatible or even irreconcilable differences and (2) reaching a decision among competing views, particularly when no foundational basis for doing so is available. Several general goals follow from this. One includes finding ways to allow for and even cultivate the diversity of interests and forms of expression in pluralistic societies without devolving from political participation to physical violence. Another involves identifying how to make such contention productive, how to allow it to *ground* or *found* common goals in political action. With respect to the first goal, *more contention* – that is, *proliferation of venues* for contention – and *greater access* to opportunities for contention are favoured, so Nietzsche's apparent positive assessment of the expansion of agonistic opportunities

appears promising. With respect to the second, the ways in which the agon may provide moments for *decision* allow the exercise of judgement and provide conditions for collectively recognizing excellence in the eyes of those who maintain the agonistic institutions themselves – this all holds promise for an agonistic founding of value in the absence of agreement about absolute or foundational values and world views.

This current of Nietzsche scholarship also attracts critics. Some reject the methods, the legitimacy of using Nietzsche's writings in this way; others reject the value or utility of his specific views, or find that more useful resources are available in other sources. I will focus on the second of these concerns, since I think such uses can have philosophical merit and value even as I acknowledge that developing them requires care. The general thrust of the kind of criticism I wish to examine holds that Nietzsche's views about agonism are too impoverished to contribute to solving problems that political agonism seeks to address, and, further, that they may actually *promote* harmful and destructive conflict, perhaps even violence on a massive scale.

Concerns about the broader social implications of Nietzsche's admiration for and instigation of contest and conflict spur certain kinds of criticism, which often take one of two general forms: (1) it reflects his idealized romantic individualism and, at best, occludes a view of a broader social good or (2) it promotes unproductive or, worse, violent and destructive activity. I am not especially concerned about directly defending Nietzsche on this front – more robust philosophical treatments of the social are surely found elsewhere – but I do think that critics of Nietzsche's agonism regard him as *especially deficient* in attending to the social implications of his views. Again, my interest here is not to defend Nietzsche or ward off his critics. Certainly, Nietzsche can be wrong about a good many things. Rather, I want to consider whether the criticisms track assumptions about the structural nature of the agonistic relationship along the lines of what is described above. And, if that is the case, then I wish to consider whether such concerns might be mitigated, if not dissolved, in light of elaboration of a broader field of relations in agonistic exchange. What might be gained is not necessarily something of a win for Nietzsche as much as it might help disclose potentially fruitful features of agonistic theories more generally.

Nietzsche's advocacy of *one will* (BGE 208)¹⁰ might appear to suggest that one constituent member of a potentially contentious field dominates all others and whips them into submission: one wins then reigns. Such a view of mastery focuses on the relative strength of *one will over another* (or over all others). But if we look at the broader field of relations, it may be that the forms of mastery arising from agonistic engagements emerge as products of the relations among the various contenders, not in the imposition of one will and the ultimate absence of contention. If 'mastery' more properly belongs to the whole rather than any one constituent, then we need to inquire further into the nature of the larger field in which such expressions of power manifest.

Even proponents of the agon can be keen to emphasize the 'tyrannical' aspirations and pleasures arising from the perspectives of its most immediate participants, and this might be regarded as inimical to a vibrant political organization.¹¹ While I understand that a desire to win, to be victorious, to become the bearer of the standard is crucial for maximizing agonal tension, I disagree that this need be or even commonly is the exclusive aim. If we look at familiar examples of agonistic engagement, we can see that

a commitment (and even a positive desire) to preserve the agonistic institution must be part of the competitive ethos also affirmed by primary participants. It is what is entailed in having respect for the rules and conditions of participation. And having respect for rules and conditions goes beyond good sportsmanship. Any experienced participant knows that in the event that a participant fails in this way, disregards the rules, thwarts or undermines them, one thereby undermines the very conditions of any entitlement to meaningful victory, to recognized superiority. The fact that it might be terribly difficult to do at times, that is, both desire to win and desire to preserve the institution even if it means not winning or not winning for all time, does not diminish the importance of this key feature, and this highlights the fragility of potentially productive agonistic relations.¹² Indeed, the fact that such relations can be difficult to achieve and sustain has been used as a reason to not prefer agonism in applications in political contexts.

Another criticism of Nietzsche's agonism might target the fact that it might appear to be that a somewhat limited number of participants could genuinely vie for superiority, and that this exclusivity both limits participation and has a tendency to simply reiterate or reinstate the same (or similar) values, which might be hostile to democratic pluralism. Here, I think the focus of attention solely on the immediate contenders overlooks the formation of judgement that constitutes such moments, and this could be more constructive than what some might recognize. Decisions in agonistic engagements may be broadly held. This is to say that the judgements that form the basis of decision for outcomes may endure and serve as important points of comparison and decision for further contests and may be applied in other completely unrelated contexts. This may be because the judgement produced in such cases is acknowledged as legitimate, genuine or authentic, not as an arbitrary measure but rather as one originating in a particular performance or occurrence that involved and engaged the community in an exercise of judgement. Such decisions, thus, may serve as models and measures, and provide terms of evaluation, far beyond the particular engagements in which they arise. They are not preformed and then imposed on others. The point is that a larger commitment to agonism – or an agonistic ethos – may ensure that any reigning performance in the agon maintains its superiority or mastery only by virtue of and so long as it sustains challenge or opposition. Thus, we might expect that opposition could be welcomed and even cultivated, if not robustly by primary or first-order contenders then by parties supporting and benefiting from the agonistic institutions. It is possible to see that a broader field is animated by a dynamic of contention even though the victorious primary participants would prefer and even might try to claim title to indomitability or invincibility so that their claim to superiority may prevail.

Some critiques of Nietzsche's agonism regard it as inclined towards unchecked power and, ultimately, violence on a mass scale. It is supposed that, when applied to a political context, participation would be limited to 'the finest of men', 'high-spirited aristocrats', who would be separated and segregated so as to dwell in a sphere unto themselves. What they would do there is engage in 'intensely competitive' 'artistic-political' contests, 'using the mass as fodder for their creative enterprises' and accepting 'with equanimity' the resulting 'prospect of widespread destruction and loss of life'.¹³ In critiques that follow this line of reasoning, it is important that the

only apparent brakes to the power of these elites are the threats of rival challengers. That is, the competitors Nietzsche envisions are a privileged few who are restrained by no force other than those immediate challengers to their authority; they abide no 'systematic regime of discipline'.¹⁴ In these cases, the general characterization of the agon is sharply dyadic: competitors alone oppose each other directly in a contest limited only by the imposition of greater power by the opposing party. Such conflicts are completely isolated from the broader social and political spheres except insofar as – since Nietzsche is supposed to envision the substance of the agon as tied to a creative vision of the social and political (but only in terms of the advantage of the stronger, perhaps) – those *comprising* the social are the material of those visions. Others, in short, are largely passive substance for the competitors who are otherwise in no way beholden or even responsive to society.

In critiques of this sort, the agon is supposed to be comprised of peer-competitors whose eligibility is established by birthright, perhaps conceived as spiritual in kind. It is assumed that the competitors themselves determine the rules of engagement, which are maintained solely by force and the authority of the reigning victor. It is important to observe here that the agonistic space conceived by such critics is defined in terms of the location of *these specific engagements alone*, and because such competitors require certain liberties and freedom from care and concern, the space is remote and separated from society. Thus, such critics see Nietzsche's agonists as concerned with the social only instrumentally insofar as the mass may provide material for their artistic-political projects that they create in competition with each other. They have no other responsibilities to society nor are they in any way responsive to its needs, demands or potential challenges. The agonistic ideal attributed to Nietzsche in these views is limited to the squaring off of a select few, largely to the detriment of society. Their engagements are irrelevant at best and, at worst, devastating.

Some are less concerned with world domination by Nietzsche's would-be agonists than with the apparent triviality of his contests. Such views regard his agonism as reducing to 'a heroic, manly *agon*';¹⁵ an 'anachronistic romance', contrived for the expression of 'surpassing bravado', and motivating him to challenge 'the illustrious predecessors whom he arrogantly designates as his rivals'.¹⁶ In the words of one prominent critic, the "noble warrior" motif ... is little more than a decadent romance.¹⁷ Because it restricts eligibility to competitors who have the luxury and inclination to pursue 'heroic ideals',¹⁸ it is largely an exercise of 'male bonding'.¹⁹ In this case, Nietzsche is supposed to be seeking to create an agonistic community of 'swash-buckling' 'warrior-genealogists' who will ultimately perfect and complete the goal of his philosophic vision by contesting him.²⁰ Nietzsche's imagined opponents are pale and vapid despite what he might suggest in his ruminations about future philosophers and worthy readers. Moreover, it might appear that Nietzsche himself fights dirty, laying numerous traps to ensnare those who might genuinely oppose him, and he makes use of the very same techniques and strategies that he professes to oppose when he engages those he designates as exemplars of resentment and revenge.²¹ If the criticisms are apt, it would appear that the aims and activities of the agon are removed from meaningful, practical life. Moreover, even for those directly engaged, it would not appear to be particularly productive.

In the criticisms sketched above, the focus is on various deficiencies and risks inherent in Nietzsche's agonism conceived in terms of a relationship of one party to another, or several parties of a similar kind against another kind similarly constituted – a kind of dyad. Nietzsche's agonism is regarded as mainly envisioning peer-to-peer face-off, with such fellows occasionally uniting together against the mass or herd. But regardless of whether the agon is configured as a brutal grudge match or a bromance, in both cases, significant social relationships are limited to the noble (or bestial) elites, in which the principal form of recognition is one of a more-or-less equal contestant meeting another. Even I admit to an inclination to focus on this particular dimension in my prior research. In examining the contests in which Nietzsche regarded himself as involved, I have focused on those who seem most immediately and directly locked in conflict – Nietzsche *and* his contestant or opponent. And, typically, when we take interest in other contests, competitions or even military conflicts, we tend to focus on *who fights whom*. But, if we want to understand the conflict, game or war, I am not sure we come to that limit correctly.

Whether one wants to argue for or against Nietzsche's agonism, it is important to locate *what* one is arguing about. Critics of Nietzsche's agonism generally characterize his conception of the agon in terms of a simple dyadic relation of two opposing powers. An initial look at his view might suggest this is sufficient. But I think there is evidence that Nietzsche had in mind something more complex, and that he recognized that the goods that he thought agonistic engagements could potentially produce require and emerge out of a broader complex of relations. If this is correct, I believe it suggests a concern and interest in the social that is easily overlooked in his works. Additionally, attention to the way in which the social is disclosed is important here because it could have some implications for one aspect of a theory of action that might be developed out of (though likely beyond) Nietzsche's views.

III

Elsewhere, I have offered extensive textual evidence to show that what Nietzsche positively observes about the agon in its ancient context is its ability to *produce* values.²² Institutionalized agonistic engagements test specific qualities. In arranging for competition, they organize the terms of engagement and anticipate, on the basis of prior engagements, what will count as excellence – that is, they determine what may emerge as victorious. Successful contestants instantiate, vivify or reanimate those values. Superior competitors may even redefine such terms so as to revalue excellence relative to the contest in which it is produced. Such contexts are, importantly, not isolated peer engagements. Individual perspectives of the direct participants do not define the terms of evaluation: the judgements and decisions of the broader community do so. This is what it means to *win* – namely, to satisfy the success conditions as defined and determined by the community or institution that makes the contest possible. Thus, the sphere of activity or field of relations is broader and more complex than what might appear in the activities of the contestants alone. To catch a glimpse of this, we can have a second look at Nietzsche's *Homer's Contest*.²³

At the beginning of his brief text, Nietzsche introduces his topic as germane to our conception of humanity more generally and our observations of traits of humanity in particular peoples. The ancient Greeks, he suggests, were not some superhuman exception, and what is admirable in them is not that they are lacking what is base or inhuman. What he finds especially interesting is that they differed with respect to what he describes as their 'ethical colouring': different values organized their society on macro- and micro-levels. That difference in social organization is what accounts for the fact that they produced the tremendous cultural legacy available to us today.

What Nietzsche finds particularly admirable is not, in fact, simply the production of great heroes who fight their peers. In the text, we do not find Nietzsche extolling the virtues of Achilles or Hector. Instead, he is trying to understand what could account for the production of the *stories* of Achilles and Hector, what might have led to the creation of those *characters* and the literature in which they are found, and what value system gives rise to such accounts. Nietzsche considers what it was about the culture that allowed it (or, impelled it) to produce such art, what needs that art satisfied, and what effects such art had on the culture that produced it. There are several important considerations Nietzsche stipulates. If we consider what preceded Homeric literature, we cannot see it as a natural evolution in terms of a progressive development. Something new happens with Homeric literature; Nietzsche argues that it represents a break, a radical shift, particularly in how it reflects an assessment of the ultimate value of human life. Moreover, attending this larger vision is a different array of evaluative concepts, which is evident in the different assessment of envy. Accounting for *this* is Nietzsche's focus.

The different evaluation of envy is not an isolated matter, and its implications are vast. It is, Nietzsche says, 'worth inscribing for all who come before the entrance gate to Greek ethics' (KSA 1.786), later observing, 'what a chasm of ethical judgement lies between us and him [the ancient Greek]!' (KSA 1.787). There are lessons to be drawn from the form of human existence that produced (and reproduced) these values and the constellation of values in which it is found. The positive valuation of a particular manifestation of *Eris* has effects that are pervasive, serving not only aristocratic elites such as Achilles, should he have existed.²⁴ This positive orientation towards excelling, Nietzsche claims, imbues many, if not all, social and political relations, according to Hesiod: neighbours, craftsmen, athletes, artists, educators and statesmen; later, Nietzsche will add city-states themselves to this list (KSA 1.792). What Nietzsche thinks he finds in the testimony of ancient Greek poets, philosophers and historians (as will ring true for his Basel colleague Jacob Burckhardt) is an ethos that affirms the view that human beings acquire a powerful motivational force in envy, one that is perpetually policed and maintained not only in the political realm through the practice of ostracism but also through social and cultural mechanisms as suggested in stories warning against dangerous excess.

It is worthwhile to examine the nature of this boundary or border between envy that merits gratitude and hybris. These are clearly in tension, and Nietzsche's exegesis of the *odium figulinum* shows that there is a fine but definite distinction being drawn between the two forms of *Eris*. That they are figured as *twin* goddesses rather than as separate and distinct personages suggests what might be regarded as the closest

possible relationship between the two; they not only share the same parentage and genealogy, they are superficially, at least, nearly indistinguishable as well. Indeed, they are so closely related that they even share the same name. Yet, one is responsible for war and the gruesome scenes of unremitting violence, the 'uninterrupted view of a world of fighting and cruelty', 'a tigerish lust to annihilate' (KSA 1.783), while the other Eris 'drives even the unskilled man to work' and cultivates qualities that promote well-being. As an example of the latter, Nietzsche offers what happens when one looks upon another who is rich and is motivated not to steal from him or diminish his success but rather 'hurr[ies] himself to sow and to plant in the same way as the other and to order his house well' (KSA 1.786). The second Eris is thought to motivate *activity aimed at surpassing* (towards excellence) rather than provoking an affective state of resentment that seeks vengeful destruction of what might appear as superior.

In Hesiod's account, Nietzsche finds an expression of *gratitude* for this feeling; it is regarded as a gift to humankind. However, there is also recognition that even this drive has its limits. If one is too greatly 'enflamed by jealousy' (KSA 1.790), one risks ruin. This can happen in two ways: one might be provoked to action that exceeds the limits of what is otherwise valued as good for human beings, including what they regard as the proper relations between the human and the divine, as in the case of Miltiades. This particular concern seems to point to a place on a continuum where creative opposition bleeds across a razor-thin boundary to what is destructive; one twin might be thought to morph into the other at this point.

However, there is another social and cultural prohibition that governs the cultivation and expression of the competitive desire and that manifests as fear of attracting the envy of the gods: 'Because he is envious, he also feels, at every excess of glory, riches, splendor, and luck, the envious eyes of a god resting on him, and he fears this envy' (KSA 1.787). What one risks in these cases is utter destruction, the decimation of the products of one's own ambition. This suggests recognition of not only how thin the line might be between creative and destructive motivation but also how circulation of the desire to outdo might require regulation. Individuals can be destroyed by it, but so too can the social order if it should come to pass that someone enflames this desire too greatly in others.

From this, we can see quite clearly that exemplars of agonistic achievement are not any particular heroic individuals, fictional or otherwise: it is the ancient Greek ethos itself and not aloof aristocrats removed from society. In fact, one of the things most impressive to Nietzsche about the existence of this drive is that it became such a pervasive phenomenon, organizing most if not all aspects of public and even some dimensions of private life. Thus, what it takes to maintain this is also extraordinary. It is because it is pervasive and so highly valued that it is regarded as essential for the maintenance of the state; that is what Nietzsche intends the example of the practice of ostracism to show (KSA 1.788-9). What he most admires is the existence of a thoroughgoing proliferation of competitive opportunities as 'the perpetual source of life of the Hellenic state', one that requires 'the play of powers' (KSA 1.788).

Thus, various social and cultural institutions are utilized for the preservation and maintenance of the competitive enterprise. It is not at all the case that the only check on the power of a great competitor is one who is able to surmount him, and it

is not only the community of immediate participants (the primary contenders) who are maintaining the boundaries of the contest. Educational institutions and practices acknowledge the importance of the good Eris for the development and production of individuals with distinctive talents (KSA 1.789). And this was regarded as benefiting society as a whole and not only the persons so educated: 'the goal of agonistic education was the welfare of the whole, of civic society' (KSA 1.789), in service to the whole community. Moreover, Nietzsche thought this desire for service, to be the standard bearer for the good of the community, motivated individual development: 'Every Greek felt in himself, from childhood on, the burning wish to be an instrument of the well-being of his city in the contest of the cities: with this his selfishness was enflamed, with this it was bridled and restrained' (KSA 1.789-90).

This highlights another intriguing tension in Nietzsche's view: To obtain the productive benefit of competition, individuals must be intensely motivated, but not so motivated as to cross the line to act destructively, and not so greatly that they harm the institution that makes the competition possible in the first place. They must be supremely motivated to compete but must also maintain a desire to *compete well*, as indicated above in reference to the potentially tyrannical inclination of participants. No doubt, there is a priority ranking of these motivations and desires, and the overall competitive disposition is undoubtedly complex. But, what I wish to highlight at this point is that Nietzsche appears to clearly recognize that a broader field of relations is necessary to direct – or, if one prefers, *discipline* – the agonistic drive. This is so for both the good of the individual and the community in which he or she lives.

There are surely flaws of naivety and overgeneralization in Nietzsche's observations in this short work, which was originally intended for a personal audience. It is certainly not a work of scholarship. It does not collect and assess the detailed data that one finds in contemporary analyses including those examining the extent to which the broader culture had access to agonistic arenas that defined public life.²⁵ But, I think it is clear that *Homer's Contest* (and, I have argued, elsewhere as Nietzsche continues to draw upon and develop the agonistic themes he elaborated early on) does not simply reflect an idealized nostalgia. The dynamism of the culture he imagines as oriented and animated in this form of life is what he most admires, not simply the heroes or heroism.

Nietzsche also speculates that the agonistic inclinations of the ancient Greeks meant that they were 'freer' than his contemporaries. This is not because they (or some tiny subset of them) were free to be heroes, but rather 'because their goals were nearer and more tangible' (KSA 1.790). Thus, Nietzsche appears to associate a sense of capability, of being enabled, with *freedom* here. They were free to pursue and reach goals that emerged specifically from the contests in which they were engaged, and this was so on a grand scale, even at the level of the neighbour. Nietzsche's idea is that measure makes goals clearer, more specific, and ultimately more achievable for those who might pursue them (and that more would have access to pursuing them) than what is available guided by the modern, romantic conception of genius.²⁶

It is also worth noticing the variety of 'powers' indicated in this text, and they might be explored even further in consideration of how they define and expand a broader field of relations. Already mentioned is the looming power of the gods, which provides a brake to the contest. This power is presented as a check to *hybris* late in the essay,

but where it initially appears, it might be regarded as a warning to the broader social organization itself that supports the contest – beware of just how much you esteem this contest, because the goods that accrue to the victor could attract unwanted attention from the gods.

Additionally, there is the third power of 'the state', which famously provides a check to political agonism through the practice of ostracism. This is evidence not only of a broader field of relations that supports (and controls) agonistic exchange. It also shows a thoroughgoing investment in maintaining the agon as an institution, as a sustaining mechanism for the state, specifically, and the culture more generally.

'Why should no one be the best?', Nietzsche asks, 'Because with that the contest would dry up and the perpetual source of life of the Hellenic state would be endangered' (KSA 1.788). Nietzsche is careful enough to identify just why this practice arose and the function it served: 'The original function of this strange institution [of ostracism] is not, however, as a safety valve but rather as a means of stimulation: one removes individuals who tower over the others only to reawaken the play of powers' (KSA 1.789). This *play of powers* is significant. Were it the case that the agon was principally comprised of only two powers, those of the immediately competing entities, then there should be little concern for sustaining such interactions. Rather, a current of power is what is desirable and serves as a chief concern as Nietzsche characterizes it. This suggests a much broader field of activity than what is generally recognized.

Nietzsche makes this even clearer when he writes about the ancient Greek educational system, which he regarded as inculcating agonism, as shaping prospective participants in the agonistic stream. It is interesting to notice that in doing this, Nietzsche does not imagine the educational system as joining individuals to this agonistic cause; rather, in igniting, directing and sharpening the agonistic instincts, the ancient Greeks are imagined as providing the basis for the emergence of individual qualities. *Individuals are produced through agonistic exchange*. 'Every Athenian, for example, was supposed to develop himself in contests [...]' (KSA 1.789). Of course, the purpose of this development was not so that individuals may be self-fulfilled; rather, it was so that such individuals could contribute to the welfare of the state: 'the goal of agonistic education was the welfare of the whole, of civic society' (KSA 1.789). 'Every Athenian, for example, was supposed to develop himself in contests in order to be of the highest service to Athens and to bring it the least harm' (KSA 1.789). It is clear from Nietzsche's discussion that an orientation towards contest shapes an entire way of life; it impacts virtually every corner of ancient Greek culture. Two opposing powers might be isolated in view in order to understand the substance of particular agonistic exchanges, but even these conflicts arise out of a much broader field of relations, including the educational systems that produce those powers, the civic institutions that make them possible and limit them, the community of judges that provides the moments of decision and determine victory, the social institutions and practices that employ and relay those decisions in the form of the currency of the new standards of excellence, and the theistic limitations that shape the economy circulating this currency.

Familiar examples of agonistic engagement, including those drawn from Nietzsche's texts, involve individual competitors facing off. Nietzsche himself refers to contests in

these terms and shapes his own contests *against* others in order to frame different philosophical problems and objects of concern. Even Nietzsche, in his own account of his *practice of war*, his *Kriegs-Praxis*, acknowledges that his struggles have an apparent dyadic structure, such as *Nietzsche contra Wagner*. In these cases, he notes that he takes the name of a specific individual opponent in order to confront broader social phenomena (see EH Wise). But, if Nietzsche is aware of a broader field of relations as essential to any significant contest, as I have argued here, then references to the two primary opposing powers must be a shorthand, a title for the larger whole. In my own prior work, I have resorted to this tendency myself, perhaps even exaggerating it. Further development of these ideas might assess the extent to which awareness of a broader field of relations is evident in Nietzsche's other writings, and there may be interesting applications and extensions of this idea in considering how this context might bear on Nietzsche's views about power, action and responsibility. For example, one might look at what Nietzsche has to say about loving one's enemies (GM I 10); the destructive effects of the internalization of perverted contest in the ascetic ideal (GM *passim*, especially GM II 22); Nietzsche's alternative to the ascetic ideal in the model of self-overcoming (Z II) and Zarathustra's curious relations with his disciples; and in the context of Nietzsche's own contests with others (e.g. Homer, Socrates, Paul and Wagner; but, of course, there are numerous others). That there are whole fields or domains of activity involved in agonistic engagements is strongly suggested in Nietzsche's extended meditations on the different forms of evaluation and value evident in what he calls slavish and noble in the *Genealogy*. Indeed, a key distinction between the two is how they regard their opposition, how they think about their enemies and the role the enemy plays in their conceptions of themselves. It is the modes of evaluation and judgement that the opposition supports that is at issue for him and not simply that the good/evil axis makes it harder for noble gentlemen to tangle.²⁷ We would do well now to clarify some constituents of the field of activity associated with agonistic engagements in Nietzsche's text and to extract some of the general characteristics of the broader social space comprising agonistic engagements.

IV

What I have suggested throughout this chapter is that the agon is better conceived as a field of relations – or, perhaps better still, as a *domain of activity* – than as a dyadic relation. A domain of activity is a social space that is organized around a broad goal or purpose. It is typically differentiated according to what one contributes in pursuit of the goal and the levels at which one participates. In the language of more contemporary sociological inquiry, we might also see such goals as typically involving pursuit of some form of social capital. Domains of activity indicate types of actions that can be engaged and opportunities and responsibilities attending them.

We might think of domains of activity as like *fields* that serve as sites of symbolic struggle in which 'what is at stake is the very representation of the social world and, in particular, the hierarchy within each of the fields and among the different fields.'²⁸ Domains of activity organize around processes of differentiation. Within them, agents

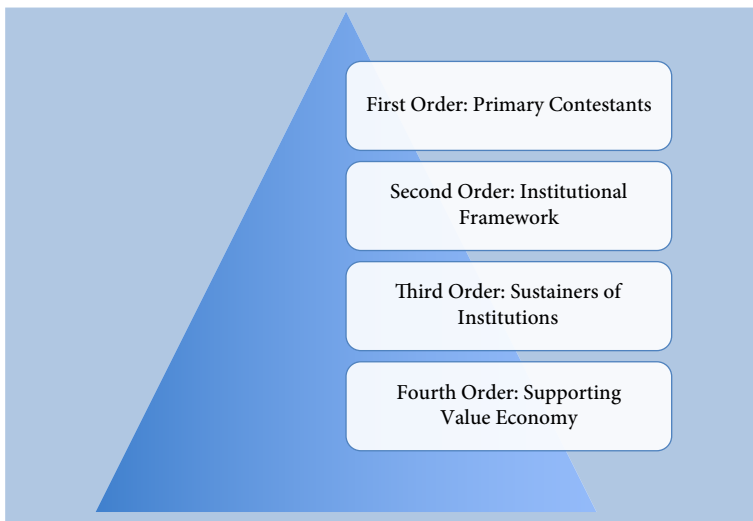
*become who they are relationally.*²⁹ We might also think of domains of activity as defined and articulated in terms of forces or power relations.³⁰ Another defining feature is the kind of capital, or social powers, that circulate within them. Studies of ancient Greece include examinations of the economies of *kudos*, which are certainly germane to the agonistic fields.³¹

A tendency to think about agonistic engagements in terms of simple dyads is surely not limited to the context of Nietzsche studies and we might notice a similar tendency in our own descriptions of contest in everyday life. But further reflection even there reveals broader fields of competitive relations. We could focus on the match-ups of modern rivals in the Olympic Games, for example, but in order to more fully appreciate both what is at stake and how such contests came about, we might also consider the legendary (and controversial) state-sponsored programmes that produce modern competitors. In understanding contemporary political contests and the dearth of women leaders in some countries, we might also recognize that systems of producing candidates are necessary in order for women to be electable. In our appreciation of the development of the sciences (which is often characterized as agonistic) and in trying to address the absence of minorities in science, we might consider the role of pipeline programmes. In short, even in familiar examples of contests and competitive environments, formal and informal, a great number of other factors are in play beyond the activities and qualities of the immediate competitors, and it is the dynamic of this broader domain of activity and *its* development, ultimately, that acquires significance.

Thus, in articulating some of the general features of this domain, we might recognize a variety of orders with the primary contestants (or combatants or agonists) at the level of a first order. These are the front line participants whose meetings and interactions may come to stand in for (or represent) the whole. But there could be no match in the first place were it not for an institutional framework that defines and sanctions the major terms of the engagement. This includes not only the practical matter of designating the spaces of engagement (their nature and actual locations) but also identifying their various constituents, including defining terms of eligibility, general goals or objects, rules of engagement and decision mechanisms. We might see this as a second order. Additionally, the institutional features require maintenance and sustenance, and this constitutes a third order comprising the sustainers of the institutions, including those who contribute to the production of prospective first-order participants as well as those who may occupy the positions defined in the second order (e.g. judges).

Finally, I think we can see further, at least in Nietzsche's account, a fourth order that is responsible for maintaining the ethos or milieu that motivates and orients the activities of the other orders. This order accounts for what Nietzsche calls the *ethical colouring* that gives form to a variety of interactions beyond and outside of the institutionalized engagements of the first and second orders; it facilitates the activities required to produce contributing participants throughout. This fourth order is a value economy; it captures the production, circulation and reproduction of value that Nietzsche links with agon insofar as it serves as a mechanism for the instantiating and affirming of what will count as excellence. The value economy not only fuels the activities of the other three

orders but also responds to what transpires, the transactions, within them. It provides the wellspring of meanings that are in play in agonistic exchanges, and it accounts for the circulation and reproduction of the meanings of their outcomes. This is to say that it is through the activities of the fourth order that the values produced through agonistic exchange are redistributed and instantiated in the broader community. In allowing the norms for excellence to be shaped through agonistic exchanges, the community benefits from what the agon contributes to the production of value. Values produced in the agon are absorbed by the community insofar as it adopts and makes use of those norms outside of the agon; and the products of agonistic engagement, institutionally supported and socially cultivated, may provide new standards of measure that *add meaning* outside of the institutions through which they were produced. A graphic image might help to simplify and crystalize the verbal description.



Although I have deliberately limited my scope to *Homer's Contest* in this chapter, a few examples drawn from other texts might sharpen our perspective on dimensions of the broader field of activity I am describing and the extent to which *Nietzsche* was aware of them. As discussed above, Nietzsche makes frequent reference to individual contestants, but he is also aware of (and most interested in) what makes them possible and sustains them, what I have designated above as the second order. Section 226 of *The Wanderer and His Shadow* bears the title *Greek Prudence*, where Nietzsche writes:

Since the desire for victory and eminence is an inextinguishable trait of nature, older and more primitive than any respect for and joy in equality, the Greek state sanctioned gymnastic and artistic contests between equals, that is to say *marked off an arena where that drive could be discharged* without imperiling the political order. With the eventual decline of the gymnastic and artistic contest the Greek state disintegrated into inner turmoil. (WS 226; emphasis added)

This might seem to be largely dyadic and separate from others insofar as it occurs in a space that is 'marked off'. But it is sanctioned and regulated not merely as a diversion for those already 'equals' but rather for those developing the judgement to distinguish competitors as such. Here Nietzsche actually seems somewhat less mindful of the essential importance of the broader field that cultivates audience, judges and prospective competitors than he was in *Homer's Contest*, as discussed above, since there he explicitly links the dwindling of precisely these broader social capacities supporting agonistic institutions with the decline of the state that supported them.

We find evidence of what I have called a third order of agonistic relations in Nietzsche's repeated discussions of wariness of attracting the envy of the gods, mentioned also in *Homer's Contest*. For example, where he discusses the envy of the gods in WS 30, Nietzsche mentions individuals (such as Ajax) who suffer destruction for their singular challenge to the gods. Anyone who is in the position of being subject to the envy of the gods is so 'when he [...] is accounted lower'. The context of this accounting is significant – the broader community supports its development, and it occurs through agonistic engagement. The currency of this accounting is the social capital mentioned above. These things are important in order to understand how it is that the disastrous fate of suffering the envy of the gods is a *price to be paid for an illegal transaction in this economy*: 'Within the social order of rank this envy imposes the demand that no one shall enjoy rewards that *exceed* his station [that is, what has been duly earned in agonistic engagement], and that his happiness too shall accord with his station, and especially that his self-conceit shall not grow beyond these bounds.' As discussed above, the envy of the gods contributes to the 'powers', checks and brakes that do, after all, *discipline* competitors in the agonistic scheme Nietzsche envisions.

Something of what I have described in terms of the fourth order is evident in Nietzsche's discussion of revenge in WS 33. There, he provides examples of individuals who have reason (or not) to avenge themselves against their opponents. One seeks revenge against an offending opposing other either out of self-preservation or out of a desire to hurt the opponent and gain restitution. This would generally sound like a relationship primarily among two people were it not for the second kind of revenge, which includes the restitution of honour, a much broader, socially contingent phenomenon. And in WS 29, Nietzsche describes 'the envious man' who is 'conscious of every respect in which the man he envies exceeds the common measure' where the broader context speaks to the wider benefit of the community and the application of its standards as his primary source of interest.

A thoroughgoing agonistic spirit that could anchor a value economy along the lines suggested above in the identification of a fourth order can be found in a remarkable passage from WS 222:

Only when, in the secular world of competition outside the religious cult, joy in the victory in the contest had risen so high that the waves here produced flooded over into the lake of the religious sensations; only when the statue of the victor was set up in the courts of the temples and the eye and the soul of the pious frequenter of the temple had, willingly or unwillingly, to accustom itself to this inescapable sight of *human* strength and beauty, so that, standing thus close to one another, spatially and in the soul, reverence for man and reverence for god came to blend

together; only then was the fear of an actual humanization of the divine image also overcome and the great arena for plastic art in the grand style opened up: yet still with the restriction that wherever *worship* was to be conducted the ancient forms and ugliness were preserved and scrupulously imitated. But the *sanctifying and bestowing* Hellene might now pursue to his heart's content his desire to let god become man. (WS 222)

The cultural saturation of agonistic values in the case Nietzsche describes ultimately disciplines (shapes and directs or orients) the activities of *sanctifying and bestowing*, that is to say, the evaluative practices more broadly of the culture that produced and sustained such relations. It is *this* rather than any particular heroic exploit that Nietzsche seems to admire about ancient Greek agonism. He is less focused on the heroic urbanity of his exemplary ancient Greek agonists than he is upon the dynamism of the institutions that make them possible: the kinds of relations constituted and others they produce. Agonistic interactions provide the occasion for forging relations from which standards for measure are drawn and, in some cases, dramatically revised. In attending to this, Nietzsche emphasizes the relation between the community and the individual that pervasive and institutionalized competition advanced.

Elsewhere, I try to expand this idea in an analysis of Pindar's *Olympian* 10. The latter is, of course, a praise poem for a victor at Olympia, but it also provides an important account of the founding of the Olympic Games. A vast community and complex set of relations are gathered in Pindar's text, including legendary figures, gods, spiritual intermediaries and the victor's immediate familial and civic relations. The meaning and significance of the victor's accomplishment is inextricably bound to those who supported and trained him, those who afforded him the opportunity to compete for his *polis*, those who founded the games, and the poet himself, who preserves the victory for others to remember, and who enhances and transmits the meaning of his victory. Such a vast field is conjured and coalesces around this (young) individual victor and the various forms of positive association (in contrast to the hostility and opposition that contest sometimes suggests), including esteeming or valuing, desiring and experiencing gratitude and indebtedness.³²

It seems from the text that a productive contest, for Nietzsche, is not one that just has a good outcome (or even that the one who wins is the truly superior person). In *Homer's Contest*, it is clear that Nietzsche's interest is in the way in which *contest serves culture* – the role it plays in the development of the culture is a paramount concern. There have been some damning discussions of the inadequacy of the social order that would be necessary to get a real contest going for Nietzsche, but generally these readings underscore the absence of this awareness in his own conception of contest. I think the evidence presented here undermines such claims, although the Nietzsche literature, including that to which I have contributed, tends to lose sight of this larger domain and its complexity.

Given the limited scope of my presentation with my focus on Nietzsche's *Homer's Contest*, it remains an open question as to what extent *Nietzsche* sustains a concern for the broader field of relations and domain of activity that are required to constitute and support agonistic engagements as I have sketched them here. What I think is clear is that Nietzsche's own contests need a social context, the basis for the *good* (i.e. the

mechanism of revaluation) he seeks, but it may not be the case that he is always so aware of this. A focus on the domain of activity that agonistic relations bear and sustain might suggest different ways human beings might live together; it could be relevant to a theory of action (and potentially to exploration of the form of *super-morality* Nietzsche anticipates); it might encourage us to further refine our understanding of power and its variety of forms and expressions.

Recognition of the complexity of a broader domain of activity is important because it provides some indication of a non-instrumental social – even communal – awareness that could seem to be lacking in Nietzsche's work.³³ At the very least, further research along these lines could provide resources for some interesting applications. One of the things that I think is gained by looking at the broader social context is the opportunity to glimpse and scrutinize other kinds of relationships within that sphere. Agonistic engagements require certain conditions and have tangible impacts on the social domain, and their products and larger domains of activity may play important roles in the foundation of a basis for community.

If we attend only to the dyadic relation, we might tend to think of the participants in the agon as vying for and receiving derivative benefits from the exchange (i.e. honour, status, entitlement to setting standards, etc.) rather than as parts of a larger set of relations and domain of activity that produces the social capital that is the very substance of contention. I have argued that there is evidence that Nietzsche has an awareness of this broader scope, even though it remains unclear as to precisely how an actual future community could or would organize in this way. What it means for the community to hold or consecrate the values produced through agonistic exchange is that *they express them*. They do this in their day-to-day and routine activities, not in some remote space separated from the larger whole.

Some critics appear to think Nietzsche regards communities as constituted by individuals, primarily, rather than the other way around,³⁴ but it would appear that, at least in the context of the agonistic model, Nietzsche prioritizes the community insofar as it consecrates and authorizes, legitimizes, memorializes and embodies the values produced in agonistic exchange. What it means to be a victor is not simply to *bear* the prize of winning; rather, in victory, one's achievement is *borne* by others who affirm and apply the standards such performances establish. What is clear is that exceptional individuals cannot independently establish their own values and terms of excellence by dint of will, nor does this derive through agreement with or concession by one's defeated peer. Such expressions of what will be upheld as new standards of excellence both *need* and *receive* their meaning from the broader community in which they abide.

Fixating exclusively on the two opposing powers in agonistic exchanges occludes our vision of the broader field of relations that maintains the agonistic possibilities, and this is where the more robust commitment to agonism lies. If we examine and elaborate the ways in which the community provides the conditions – both material and cultural (or what Nietzsche describes as *spiritual*) – for the possibility of the agon and therefore for the meaning of any particular activity that may occur there, then the participation of the community is not only a necessary precondition but also omnipresent insofar as it is perpetually engaged. Thus, its withdrawal would represent a shrinking of the products of agonistic exchange.

Notes

- 1 I wish to thank the editors and audiences at the 2014 meeting of the Friedrich Nietzsche Society and at the University of Helsinki for helpful comments and discussions of earlier versions of this paper. I survey this literature and elaborate these features in Acampora (2013).
- 2 Discussions of applications of Nietzsche's agonism in political theory are numerous. A helpful guide to some of the literature may be found in Wenman (2013). For the most extensive account in English of applications of Nietzsche's agonism in democratic political theory, see Hatab (1995). Details of Nietzsche's critique of democracy were surveyed in Siemens (2009).
- 3 In this chapter, I generally use *Homer's Contest* (HC) to extrapolate Nietzsche's broader views about agonism because I am interested in the general structure of the relations he envisions, and HC is his most focused account of that overall structure. Elsewhere, I argue that Nietzsche persistently and repeatedly utilizes and refines these ideas throughout his published works, spanning virtually his entire corpus. A more extended discussion of the concerns raised in this chapter might explore whether Nietzsche substantially revises his conception of *the overall structure* in later works. But in order to do that, one first needs to have a clear sense of this structure, and this chapter attempts to secure that basis in the literature.
- 4 I have written extensively about this elsewhere, most recently in my Acampora (2013: esp. 50–76).
- 5 *Homer's Contest* is not an essay; rather, Nietzsche finished it and lumped it with other pieces under the heading of 'Five Prefaces to Five Unwritten Books.'
- 6 Emphasis added. This quotation and those at the end of the preceding paragraph are quotations of Nietzsche's loose translations of Hesiod. In these cases, Nietzsche is presenting his *textual* evidence for the views he attributes to the ancient Greeks.
- 7 Acampora (2013: esp. 22–7).
- 8 See for example Connolly (1991); Owen (1995); Connolly (1995); Schrift (2000); and Hatab (1995).
- 9 Not all forms of political agonism neatly align with democratic theory. For the most extensive discussion of contemporary views beyond Nietzsche, see Wenman (2013).
- 10 Dombowsky (2000: 281), citing Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* 208.
- 11 Siemens, (2002: 105).
- 12 I discuss this in greater detail in Acampora (2003).
- 13 Appel (1999: 160).
- 14 Appel (1999: 160).
- 15 Conway (1997: 156).
- 16 See Conway (1997: 3, 4). For Conway, Nietzsche's agonism is symptomatic of his *décadence*, which Nietzsche at times recognizes even as he combats it.
- 17 Conway (1997: 157).
- 18 Conway (1997: 255).
- 19 Conway (1997: 257).
- 20 Conway (1997: 254). Conway calls this overarching method *parastrategesis* (*passim*, but see especially 153–5). This interpretation of Nietzsche's agonism is closely related to Conway's notion of Nietzsche as engaged in a war against modern *décadence*, which he recognizes he cannot escape and its ultimate defeat cannot occur within his lifetime or by the work of his hands (or pen) alone. Thus, Nietzsche is supposed to

- have concentrated his efforts on creating 'communities of resistance' (resistant to the décadence of modernity as well as, superficially, resistant to discipleship) which will both survive and 'thrive' through agonistic attraction' (Conway 1997: 156).
- 21 I address some of these concerns in my analysis of what Nietzsche calls his *Kriegs-praxis*, or his practice of war. See Acampora (2013: 186–92).
- 22 Acampora (2013: 18–22 and *passim*).
- 23 Again, although I focus on *Homer's Contest* in this chapter, I think these ideas hold up in Nietzsche's other accounts of contests, competitive institutions and contending power complexes. I make the case for continuity in Nietzsche's thinking along these lines in my *Contesting Nietzsche*.
- 24 This is not to say, of course, that agonistic institutions in antiquity were not exploited by the social elites in order to distinguish themselves *as elites* as well as to distinguish themselves *from others* similarly positioned. The point is simply to suggest that this was not the exclusive function of agonistic institutions and the informal practices that mirrored them.
- 25 For examples, see Rich (1993); Saxonhouse (1989); and Vernant, Vidal-Naquet, Lloyd (1990).
- 26 On the idea of measure, see van Tongeren (2002).
- 27 I elaborated some of these examples in my (2014) presentation for the Friedrich Nietzsche Society. I am grateful to the audience at that presentation for the stimulating discussion.
- 28 Bourdieu (1985: 723).
- 29 Bourdieu thinks of these in spatial terms (hence his notion of *habitus*, from which one's perspectives on the field – *prises de deposition* – are held) such that 'one cannot really [...] occupy two opposite regions of the space' (Bourdieu 1985: 724).
- 30 Bourdieu describes what he calls *fields* in similar terms. They are articulated: 'as a set of object power relations that impose themselves on all who enter the field and that are irreducible to the intentions of the individual agents or even to the direct *interactions* among the agents' (Bourdieu 1985: 724). Indeed, for Bourdieu, it is not only explicitly competitive fields that are organized in this way; rather, *all fields of activity* are characterized by currents of broadly agonistic engagement that are crucial for ascertaining distinctions and differences – a view that is shared, albeit in a somewhat different domain, by Walter Ong – 'Every field is the site of a more or less overt struggle over the definition of the legitimate principles of division of the field. The question of legitimacy arises from the very possibility of this questioning, of a break with the *doxa* that takes the ordinary order for granted' (Bourdieu 1985: 734).
- 31 See for example Kurke (1993). For Bourdieu the social order itself is comprised of an array of fields: 'In reality, the social space is a multidimensional space, an open set of fields that are relatively autonomous, i.e., more or less strongly and directly subordinated, in their functioning and their transformations, to the field of economic production. Within each of these sub-spaces, the occupants of the dominated positions are constantly engaged in struggles of different forms (without necessarily constituting themselves into antagonistic groups)' (Bourdieu 1985: 736). See also the appendix to Bourdieu (1998). See also Ong (1980), and discussion in Connolly (1991). I am grateful to Tom DeGloma and Leonard Feldman for discussion of these ideas.
- 32 In Acampora (2013: Ch. 1).
- 33 Herman Siemens makes reference to an implicit 'social ontology of agonistic interaction: each particular quality, force, or genius can only become what it is through antagonistic striving against others' (Siemens 2002: 103). Further, he

endorses the extension of this idea such that ‘as a principle of social ontology, it makes for a strong, resolutely pluralistic concept of community, grounded in reciprocity and interdependence of antagonism’ (Siemens 2002: 104), noting that institutionalized ‘conflicts such as the agon house unique generative social powers’ (101). More efforts to account for and distinguish these powers might be welcomed. While I have my doubts about Siemens’ view that this constitutes a form of perfectionism, I agree that such engagements may *found* or *create* communities and that this is necessary in order to generate conditions for the exercise of judgement, providing mechanisms for temporarily settling disputes and devising standards.

- 34 Although Kathleen Higgins recognizes that ‘the agon model seems closest to a practical ideal [for community in Nietzsche’s texts]’, she nevertheless holds that Nietzsche’s community remains idealized and limited to the exceptional few who are the direct competitors, perhaps owing to Nietzsche’s own (personal) ‘hermit tendencies’, such that ‘Nietzsche’s ideals of community offer clearer guidance for individual aspiration than for community organization as such.’ See Higgins (2014: 80). She worries that ‘the *agon* among communities of taste [as Siemens elaborates] can proceed without much interaction of an everyday sort, since the necessary social interaction can proceed at a distance’ (ibid., 82 n.4). Discussions of varieties of expressivism that derive from or are consistent with Nietzsche’s views are relevant here, including in the political context. See for example Owen (2009).

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