

**The Thrill of Victory, the Agony of Defeat:
The Nietzschean Vision of Contest**

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‘For believe me: the secret for harvesting from existence the greatest fruitfulness
and the greatest enjoyment is – *to live dangerously!* Build your cities on the
slopes of Vesuvius! Send your ships into uncharted seas! Live at war with your
peers and yourselves!’

- Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*

Just as Friedrich Nietzsche discovered the remarkable institution of the agon (“contest”) in the world of the pre-Socratic Greeks, so the branch of political theory calling itself “agonistic” has discovered the same remarkable institution in the world of Friedrich Nietzsche. Their appropriation, however, leaves out key aspects of what Nietzsche understood to be the purpose and product of the agonistic experience. A more faithful understanding of this experience is needed in order to better evaluate the theoretical implications of a “tamed” agon. This essay aims to assess the contemporary conception of the agon in relation to something conspicuously absent elsewhere: a sustained look at what the agonistic experience should be, as conceived by Nietzsche. I describe here the relationship between the agonistic combatant and the tragedian artist and their appearance as aesthetic phenomena. Further, I identify what I take to be four essential components of the Nietzschean agon: (a) the production of *rank order*, (b) the experience of victory, (c) the experience of defeat, and (d) the experience of *ecstasis*. After describing these four components, I briefly sketch out corresponding guidelines for what might be construed as a *political agon*. To conclude, I address today’s agonists in light of the preceding depiction of the Nietzschean agon.

The task at hand here is to flesh out a particular, if not insignificant, niche of Nietzsche’s philosophy. The agon as political concept played much less of a role in Nietzsche’s thinking than it has assumed in contemporary thought, and thus should be approached less in conversation with Nietzsche and more in conversation with today’s liberal-egalitarian paradigm. Ruth Abbey and Fredrick Appel correctly argue that although Nietzsche’s value as a liberal democrat is vastly

overrated, his value as an antidotal alien to liberal democracy has been almost willfully ignored.¹ Yet it cannot be that Nietzsche's primary value lay in his ability to play devil's advocate. Nietzsche speaks directly to our modern age and to our most widely-held beliefs in political rights and human equality. His objections to the modern psychology should not be ignored and discounted because they are disquieting.

Agonism

The branch of democratic theory labeled "agonistic" emerged largely as a corrective to the procedural consensualist liberal theories of thinkers like John Rawls and Jurgen Habermas.² Theorists of this stripe (a group including Sheldon Wolin, William Connolly, Chantal Mouffe, and Bonnie Honig) are skeptical of the possibility of a politics predicated on consensus. Drawing from non-liberal philosophers such as Wittgenstein, Nietzsche, Foucault, Derrida, and Arendt, agonists pay extra attention to what Mouffe calls the "ineradicable character" of "power and antagonism."³ Any consensus arrived at through public deliberation must be reached by either overpowering through compromise or by willfully ignoring opposing and dissenting views, meaning that "social objectivity is constituted through acts of power."⁴ Mouffe further argues that "any social objectivity is ultimately political and has to show the traces of acts of exclusion that govern its constitution—what, following Derrida, can be referred to as its

¹ Ruth Abbey and Fredrick Appel, "Friedrich Nietzsche and the Will to Politics," (*The Review of Politics*, 60:1, pp 83-114 [1998]) p. 88.

² "Agonistic democracy" is far from settled terminology. The term is most likely William Connolly's (since he claims to coin it the preface to *Identity/Difference*, p. x); it is also referred to as "agonistic pluralism" (Mouffe), "virtu politics" (Honig), or even the variations "affirmative pluralism" of Jane Mansbridge and "strong democracy" of Benjamin Barber.

³ Chantal Mouffe, "Democracy, Power, and the Political," in *Democracy and Difference: Contesting the Boundaries of the Political*; ed. Seyla Benhabib. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. 1996) p. 247.

⁴ Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*. (New York: Verso. 2000) p. 99.

‘constitutive outside.’”⁵ As both Mouffe and Connolly note, the agonistic alternative to democratic consensualism is primarily *ontological*: if Habermas can be said to be making an ontological claim about the possibility of objectively discernible answers to political questions, then agonistic theorists must be as well.⁶ Habermas and the deliberative school say: yes, there exists the possibility of rational consensus. The agonists claim the opposite.

Agonistic democrats emphasize the role of the construction of identity/difference both external and *internal* to the democratic citizen and suggest that—since identity should be understood as fluid, other-positing, and constantly reshaping itself—politics must be understood as inescapably and inherently pluralistic. As a result, consensus—however it might be procured—is necessarily incomplete, exclusionary, and potentially coercive. As consensus is reached, politics will always produce what Bonnie Honig calls “remainders,” which proceduralists can account for “only as independent, prepolitical, or apolitical artifacts.”⁷ Consensus pushes dissenting identities and means of expression to the margins of the political sphere without providing avenues of reentry consistent with the demands of authenticity.

To counter the tendency of democratic theorists, and political theorists generally, to minimize, marginalize, or attempt to cancel the possibility of ineradicable difference and conflict, the agonists find new possibilities in the politics of the *agon* (*αγών* – literally, “competition” or “struggle” – also, the root of “agony”). Agonistic politics is premised on conflict, dissonance, resistance, unceasing competition – all of which constitute what agonistic theorists believe to be the natural state of politics. Wolin defines “politics” (as opposed to the “political”) in precisely this way: “legitimized and public contestation, primarily by organized and unequal social powers, over access to the resources available to the public authorities of the

⁵ Mouffe, “Democracy,” p. 247.

⁶ Mouffe, *Paradox*; p. 98.

⁷ Bonnie Honig, *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics*. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, 1993) pp. 5-6.

collectivity...politics is continuous, ceaseless, and endless.”⁸ These thinkers recall Hannah Arendt’s worries over the interplay between truth and politics. For Arendt, the introduction of universal or objective truth (such as a procedurally-legitimated consensus) must bring about the temporary suspension of the political sphere and likewise the suspension of freedom itself. Action and speech can only exist when their outcome remains in question. The kind of truth sought after by philosophers since Plato only serves to *cut off* the possibility of action by cutting off the uncertainty attached to it. Truth, in Arendt’s terms, is patently coercive and “despotic”: it necessarily eliminates the choices and possibilities that comprise politics.⁹ Previously the connection between struggle and absolutes emerged in Nietzsche’s early essay “Homer’s Contest,” in which he describes the original meaning of “ostracism.” Greek society, he points out, removed the greatest genius from the city because the undefeatable genius represented the most dangerous threat to the continuation of the agon.¹⁰ The genius functions in the pre-Socratic Greek world as absolute truth functions in Arendt’s thinking about politics: both deny the possibility of dissent and the continuing space for creation.

Agonists aim, therefore, to complicate the underlying binaries that work to preclude marginalized perspectives from reentering the political sphere: us/them, identity/difference, home/foreign all must be problematized and destabilized if their contingent and artificially coercive nature is to be revealed. To challenge these problematic consensuses, agonists emphasize the need for new political spaces and for conflict and struggle in the political sphere. For Mouffe, “a well-functioning democracy calls for a vibrant clash of democratic political positions,” clashes which should normalize political strife and familiarize citizens with a more

⁸ Sheldon Wolin, “Fugitive Democracy,” in ed. Benhabib, *Democracy and Difference*; p. 31.

⁹ “Seen from the viewpoint of politics, truth has a despotic character.” Hannah Arendt, “Truth and Politics” in *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought*. (New York: The Viking Press, 1961) p. 241.

¹⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, “Homer’s Contest,” in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. Walter Kauffman. (New York The Viking Press, 1954).

democratic and less dangerous construction of Carl Schmitt's friend/enemy binary.¹¹ Friends and enemies, like other us/them constructions, must be made fluid and temporary, since "the aim of democratic politics is to construct the 'them' in such a way that it is no longer perceived as an enemy to be destroyed, but as an 'adversary,' that is, somebody whose ideas we combat but whose right to defend those ideas we do not put into question...this is the real meaning of liberal-democratic tolerance."¹²

Another way of describing the agonist project is through its particular vision of the "paradox of politics."¹³ Writes Connolly of this paradox:

The human animal is essentially incomplete without social form; and a common language, institutional setting, set of traditions, and political forum for enunciating public purposes are indispensable to the acquisition of an identity and the commonalities essential to life. But every form of social completion and enablement also contains subjugations and cruelties within it. Politics, then, is the medium through which these ambiguities can be engaged and confronted, shifted and stretched. It is simultaneously a medium through which common purposes are crystallized and the consummate means by which their transcription into musical harmonies is exposed, contested, disturbed, and unsettled. A society that enables politics as this ambiguous medium is a good society because it enables the paradox of difference to find expression in public life.¹⁴

The agonists' key concern, then, is that the polity be aware of the incomplete nature of any "social completion" through an increased sensitivity to the construction of identity/difference and the often invisible violence caused by (admittedly necessary) political consensus of any kind. The introduction of the agon, then, implies that all social constructions are fair game: we must cultivate contestation (politics) everywhere in order to ensure the fluidity required by the fact of pluralism. Though Honig, Mouffe, and Connolly take different routes to agonistic democracy (Honig through Arendt, Mouffe through Wittgenstein, Connolly through Foucault and Nietzsche), they all three give similar recommendations on what an agonistic democracy should look like: namely, more space. For Honig and Mouffe, this means multiplying the spaces in

¹¹ Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, p. 104. Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1996)

¹² *Democratic Paradox*, p. 101-102.

¹³ This is Connolly's formulation. Mouffe produces a conceptually similar notion in her *The Democratic Paradox*. Honig produces yet another formulation in the conclusion to her *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics*.

¹⁴ Connolly, *Identity/Difference*. (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1991) p. 94.

which politics is carried out, meaning both a proliferation of physical spaces and mediums for political negotiation and a reconceptualization of the public/private distinction with an eye toward a more fluid understanding of what counts and does not count as political. For Connolly, this means providing the individual the space necessary for free negotiation of identity, a coercion-free zone in which one might arrive more autonomously at one's own notions of identity/difference.

Why involve Nietzsche at this point? First, because the agonists involve Nietzsche prominently at this point. For Connolly, Nietzsche's *pathos of distance* provides the basis for a fuller understanding of the fluidity of identity/difference construction, and for Honig Nietzsche urges the reclaiming of a responsible subjectivity and the institutionalization of agonistic ostracism. "Homer's Contest" figures heavily in both. Second, understanding Nietzsche—the father of post-modernism—is instrumental in understanding the philosophical tradition of a politics of difference or *différance*, the fountainhead of the agonistic wave.

Lastly, and most importantly, a proper conception of Nietzsche's agon is essential in understanding just how far agonism has strayed from its vibrant and terrible Greek origins. Contemporary democratic theory misuses and misunderstands the power and purpose of the agon, supposing it an institution through which difference is *rectified* through its expression. In their formulation, the agon is the institution through which the ontological claim for pluralism becomes a normative claim for tolerance. The answer to the question, "Why tolerance?" is simply: "Because we are agonists." A look at Nietzsche corrects this view in two ways: first, it suggests that from the *fact* of difference the claim for respect does not follow; and second, it reveals that the agon is not an institution of respect. The agon, in Nietzsche's view, is the arena in which difference is *felt, experienced, lived*. One comes to the agon, not out of respect, but out

of a desire for *disrespect*: a desire to *test* oneself against another, to *order oneself vertically, hierarchically*. This is the purview of the following essay. If Connolly believes that Foucault tames the problem of Nietzsche's heroic individualism, then my aim here is to expose the absurdity of an agon without heroes and the agon without Nietzsche.¹⁵

Homer's Aesthetic Contest

In his early essay "Homer's Contest," Nietzsche gives his most sustained discussion of the Greek agon. The Homeric desire for contest arises, in Nietzsche's vision, out of the prospect of the "uninterrupted spectacle of a world of struggle and cruelty."¹⁶ He praises the Greeks for their embrace of the inhumane aspects of humanity, an embrace that acknowledges that "'natural' qualities and those called truly 'human' are inseparably grown together."¹⁷ To be human, to act in this world as a human being, requires benevolence *and* cruelty, love *and* hate, the will to create *and* to destroy. The Greeks here serve as a corrective to "the flabby concept of modern 'humanity'" because they sanction the "earnest necessity to let their hatred flow forth fully."¹⁸ The Greeks are terrifyingly human.

Yet these Greeks shuddered at their own possibilities. Cruelty needed boundaries; efforts were needed to control the proliferation of strife and death. If life was ruled only by "the children of the Night: strife, lust, deceit, old age, and death," then the realization of man's greatest danger might come about: "disgust with existence...the conception of this existence as a punishment and a penance...the belief in the identity of existence and guilt."¹⁹ The Greeks'

¹⁵ Connolly, *Identity/Difference*, p. 10. "...Foucault as a response to the heroic conception of self-responsibility and the disdain for democracy in Nietzsche."

¹⁶ Nietzsche, "Homer's Contest," p. 34.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 32.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, p. 33.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, p. 34.

reply to this quandary—worthy of Silenus—was to divide discord into good and evil forms.²⁰

The evil Eris was that form which pitted combatants against each other in battles of annihilation – this in contrast to the good Eris, “the one that, as jealousy, hatred, and envy, spurs men to activity; not to the activity of fights of annihilation but to the activity of fights which are *contests*.”²¹ Achilles and Hector exchanged for Aeschylus and Euripides; Pericles for Socrates. From the beginning, then, Nietzsche interprets the agon as a channel for our destructive capacities.

Nietzsche’s agon exhibits a profoundly aesthetic dimension. His combatants are artists all of them: the poets Xenophanes, Homer, and Plato, the musicians Pindar and Simonides, and the politicians Themistocles and Aristides.²² Artistic contests enter as viable alternatives to armed combat, and artists replace the warriors of old. Now the artist employs his craft *against* his fellow artists and “the Greek knows the artist *only as engaged in a personal fight*.”²³ The irresistible force of war is redirected into the artists’ object as it was previously routed from the warrior to his enemy. In this way virtues are strengthened and greatness attained, because from war “man emerges...stronger for good and evil.”²⁴

The aesthetic dimension of Nietzsche’s agon warrants further examination. The Greek contest, as described in “Homer’s Contest,” shares potentially instructive characteristics with Greek tragedy as described by Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy*. In Nietzsche’s understanding

²⁰ Nietzsche relates the wisdom Silenus revealed to Midas in *BoT*, p. 42: “Oh, wretched ephemeral race, children of chance and misery, why do you compel me to tell you what it would be more expedient for you not to hear? What is best of all is utterly beyond your reach: not to be born, not to *be*, to be *nothing*. But the second best for you is—to die soon.” At the close of *On Revolution* (p. 281), Arendt contrasts the Silenus-inspired tragic worldview with the potential of aesthetic citizenship in the *polis*. See, more precisely, Sophocles’ *Oedipus at Colonus*, line 1224, spoken by the chorus: “Not to be born surpasses thought and speech. The second best is to have seen the light and then to go back quietly whence we came.” (transl. Robert Fitzgerald)

²¹ *Ibid*, p. 35.

²² *Ibid*, pp. 36-38.

²³ *Ibid*, p. 37. For Nietzsche, even Plato must finally say: “Only the contest made me a poet, a sophist, an orator.” (p. 38)

²⁴ Nietzsche, *Human, All-too-Human: A Book for Free Spirits*, transl. R. J. Hollingdale. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986) p. 163 (Section 444).

of tragedy, an opposition is drawn between the Apollonian and Dionysian elements that coexist in the tragedian artist. The Apollonian is the element of boundaries, illusions, and the “*principium individuationis*” – it is the element of “dreams” through which the artist recreates the world in her own image.²⁵ The Apollonian artist is the sculptor who molds the raw materials of existence into a “*middle world*” between consciousness and the horror of the meaningless life as the Greek Apollonians did in creating the Olympian god-world.²⁶ To dream is to create a buffer against existence itself by forming lines and boundaries between the dreamer and the shapeless chaos of the universe. Opposite this is the Dionysian element, the bringer of fervor and ‘intoxication.’ Named for the Greek god Dionysus – god of wine and theatre – the artist therein channels the primal, the primordial, the unified character of nature, for:

Under the charm of the Dionysian not only is the union between man and man reaffirmed, but nature which has become alienated, hostile, or subjugated, celebrates once more her reconciliation with her lost son, man...the slave is a free man; now all the rigid, hostile barriers that necessity, caprice, or “impudent convention” have fixed between man and man are broken. Now, with the gospel of universal harmony, each one feels himself not only united, reconciled, and fused with his neighbor, but as one with him, as if the veil of *maya* had been torn aside and were now merely fluttering in tatters before the mysterious primordial unity.²⁷

The Apollonian and the Dionysian exist, then, as the two necessary aesthetic elements: as one individuates, the other reunites; as one creates boundaries, the other transcends them; as one orders, the other plays. Through a sublime unity of the two, the artist transcends existence if but for a moment in an act of channeling what can only be described as primal humanity. Nietzsche writes:

Insofar as the subject is the artist, however, he has already been released from his individual will, and has become, as it were, the medium through which the one truly existent subject celebrates his release in appearance. For to our humiliation *and* exaltation, one thing above all must be clear to us. The entire comedy of art is neither performed for our betterment or education nor are we the true authors of the art world. On the contrary, we may assume that we are merely images and artistic projections for the true author, and that we have our highest dignity in our significance as works of art – for it is only as an *aesthetic phenomenon* that existence and the world are eternally *justified*...Only insofar as the genius in the act of artistic creation coalesces with this primordial artist of

²⁵ Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*. (New York: Random House, 1967) pp. 33-41.

²⁶ *BoT*, p. 42. Nietzsche interprets the creation of the Olympian gods on the next page: “The same impulse which calls art into being, as the complement and consummation of existence, seducing one to a continuation of life, was also the cause of the Olympian world which the Hellenic “will” made use of as a transfiguring mirror. Thus do the gods justify the life of man: they themselves live it – the only satisfactory theodicy!”

²⁷ *Ibid*, p. 37.

the world, does he know anything of the eternal essence of art; for in this state he is, in a marvelous manner, like the weird image of the fairy tale which can turn its eyes at will and behold itself; he is at once subject and object, at once poet, actor, and spectator.²⁸

The artist, at the moment of creation, transcends temporality and can behold herself as spectator (literally an “out-of-body” experience). To view oneself as artistic phenomenon – this is the purpose of the aesthetic and the only justification of existence.

It is conceptually helpful to conceive of the agon as aesthetic experience. Imagine a wrestling match: it requires contestants, boundaries, and fervor. Before the match can begin, boundaries must be drawn and the previously chaotic landscape of the arena must be ordered and made concrete, an act of Apollonian dreaming. The contestants pronounce this temporary suspension of reality – this molding and drawing of an unordered space into an ordered arena of contest – through a set of rules and boundaries. Once the illusion has been created, the contestants proceed to wrestle. They come together in an act of primal physicality, struggling against each other with every ounce of their will. Both contestants wrestle from the same instincts: the instinct to dominate and to exert power over an opponent, the instinct to *philotimia* (love of honor) and *philonikia* (love of victory). Soon the boundaries drop away – the technicalities that bound the fervor are forgotten in a frenzy of contest as the combatants, the wrestling circle, and the arena and spectators are all caught in a moment of exhilaration. The match is over – winners and losers are declared, the contestants re-separate themselves and exit the arena. Existence returns where an aesthetic thrill had appeared only moments before. If one can conceive of the agon in this way, it becomes clear that it shares with the aesthetic experience the character of *bounded fervor*. If the combatant is the artist and the aesthete is the warrior, then

²⁸ Ibid, p. 52.

one might make further instructive correlations between Nietzsche's conceptions of the aesthetic and agonistic. One might come to understand how the Greeks "poetized in order to conquer."²⁹

It has been shown that the warrior of the agon and the artist as aesthetic phenomenon are conceptually intertwined by a kind of subliminal ascension into bounded action and fervor. Nietzsche's artist is a fighter who engages in the contest out of aesthetic necessity—the desire for opponents, for tests. What is left is to consider the character of the contest—what is at stake therein, and why relate to others agonistically and not, say, cooperatively? While a concept as general as the notion of contest might well escape definition in an essay of this size, for the sake of comparison with the agonists' conception of contest, it is nonetheless helpful to outline four crucial benefits derived from the agon as Nietzsche conceived it. The reasons for participating in the agon are: 1) to establish rank order; 2) to attain an existential feeling of power; 3) to experience pain and suffering in an illusory form; and 4) to experience moments of *ecstasis*.

Rank Order

First, the agon provides its contestants with an opportunity for what Nietzsche often refers to as "*order of rank*."³⁰ Nietzsche felt "compelled" to "reestablish *order of rank*" in response to the advent of universal suffrage.³¹ Order of rank, which is determined by "quanta of power" and should be understood thus as "order of power," is necessary for the emergence of an elevated kind of politics.³² The liberal-democratic impulse for equality of all varieties is, in Nietzsche's view, another symptom of the dead God's shadow. Political egalitarianism and social justice are in this view merely secularized versions of the Christian belief in the immutable

²⁹ *HAH*, p. 90 (170).

³⁰ See especially *Will to Power*, Book Four: "Discipline and Breeding."

³¹ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, transl. Walter Kauffman and R.J. Hollingdale. (New York: Random House Inc., 1967) section 854.

³² *Will to Power*, sec. 855-859.

equality of souls, the belief that would reach its perfect expression in Luther, whose “peasant rebellion” dictated the doctrine of “Everyone his own priest!” out of “the abysmal hatred of ‘the higher human being.’”³³

In this notion of rank of order, anyone familiar with Nietzsche’s thought should recognize the move to establish the basis of a “*pathos of distance*.” This pathos, as Nietzsche writes in *Beyond Good and Evil*, emerges “out of the incarnated difference of classes, out of the constant out-looking and down-looking of the ruling caste on subordinates and instruments, and out of their equally constant practice of obeying and commanding, of keeping down and keeping at a distance” and is instrumental in bringing about the type of person who experiences distance even in soul.³⁴ It is through *experiencing* distance from others that values can be authentically created. Recall that each volume of Nietzsche’s masterpiece, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, begins and ends with the experience of solitude, and it is on his mountain—away from the masses—that Zarathustra fills his creative cup to overflowing.³⁵ When solitude must be exchanged for company with others, the pathos of distance is felt again through the phenomenon of rank order. It is through *living* the relationships of master and subject, ruler and ruled, that one comes to know the feelings of power and pain, and this in turn is instrumental in self-development. In *actively* placing ourselves amongst others, one engages in an evaluative act in which ascendancy and “exploitation” are possible, and this placement mirrors the ascending and evaluating act of self-overcoming. To place oneself in society is to measure oneself against others, to feel superiority and distance from them, and to use them in one’s own designs. Nietzsche here reminds one that “life itself is *essentially* appropriation, injury, conquest of the strange and weak,

³³ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*. (New York: Random House Inc., 1974) p. 312, sec. 358.

³⁴ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*. (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications Inc., 1997) p. 124, sec. 257.

³⁵ See especially “On the Gift-Giving Virtue” in Vol. I, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Zarathustra here addresses his close friends at the consummation of their friendship: “Now I go alone, my disciples. You too go now, alone. Thus I want it.” From *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, transl. Walter Kauffman in *The Portable Nietzsche*; p. 190.

suppression, severity, obtrusion of peculiar forms, incorporation, and...exploitation.”³⁶

Establishing rank order in society mimics the move to self-overcome undertaken in the soul and thereby represents a form of the will to power. The abolition of rank order, what Nietzsche considers the pre-eminent goal of Christianity, is thus “also the abolition of society.”³⁷

The agon *produces rank order*. By entering a contest with another, one must aim to measure oneself against the opponent. The contest will almost always produce a winner and a loser, and it is to be desired for precisely this reason. To stand on a podium is to experience distance and to place oneself *above* and *below* other humans; it is to experience life as situated. It is to experience life where one establishes and experiences in a primordial way one’s identity within a community of others all living by the same rules. It is to collectively partake of a little world of meaning, the one so subtly symbolized by the arena of contest. By becoming either a winner or a loser in relation to another person, one may exist at that moment, like the tragedian satyr, as an aesthetic phenomenon to be regarded by others and to be evaluated based on one’s appearance in the world relative to others. The outcome of the contest is the evaluation: “I, the artist/contestant, am better/worse than thou. My/your *value* has become manifest. I/you must be used/disposed.”

Winning

Second, the agon provides the opportunity for the *experience* of power—it provides the opportunity for glory and victory. Recall that the Greeks turned to the agon to allow for a more creative venting of the lust to annihilate and dominate: thus the agon was, according to Nietzsche’s interpretation, designed from the first to provide the arena for individuals to enjoy

³⁶ *BGE*, p. 125, sec. 259.

³⁷ *WP*, p. 123, sec. 207.

cruelty and domination of another. What Nietzsche could formulate in 1872 only as the “joy of victory,” “hatred [flowing] fully,” or “the tiger...[of] voluptuous cruelty” would emerge as his concept of the *will to power*.³⁸ This “form-giving and ravishing...force” that the Greeks vented outwards and which men, when enclosed in society, must turn inwards, comprises for Nietzsche all that is in the world.³⁹ Formulated for the first time in the section entitled “On Self-Overcoming” in Volume II of *Zarathustra*, the will to power is described as the all-encompassing drive of human existence: “That is your whole will, you who are wisest: a will to power – when you speak of good and evil too, and of valuations. You still want to create the world before which you can kneel: that is your ultimate hope and intoxication.”⁴⁰ This desire to shape the world in a way that renders it more pleasing is, in fact, not only for “the wisest,” since, as Zarathustra tells: “Where I found the living, there I found will to power; and even in the will of those who serve I found the will to be master.”⁴¹ Human beings are, like the universe itself, quanta of energy that seek constantly to expand and to consume outside energy. In the final section of *The Will to Power*, Nietzsche describes the totality of his aesthetic metaphysics:

‘And do you know what “the world” is to me? Shall I show it to you in my mirror? This world: a monster of energy, without beginning, without end; a firm, iron magnitude of force that does not grow bigger or smaller, that does not expend itself but only transforms itself...as force throughout, as a play of forces and waves of forces, at the same time one and many, increasing here and at the same time decreasing there; a sea of forces flowing and rushing together, eternally changing, eternally flooding back...out of the simplest forms striving toward the most complex, out of the stillest, most rigid, coldest forms toward the hottest, most turbulent, most self-contradictory...my *Dionysian* world of the eternally self-creating, the eternally self-destroying...do you want a *name* for this world? A *solution* for all its riddles? A *light* for you, too, you best-concealed, strongest, most intrepid, most midnightly men? – *This world is the will to power – and nothing besides!* And you yourselves are also this will to power – and nothing besides!’⁴²

³⁸ “Homer’s Contest,” pp. 33-34.

³⁹ Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*, transl. Walter Kauffman. (New York: Random House Inc., 1969) p. 84, sec. II 16: “I regard the bad conscience as the serious illness that man was bound to contract under the stress of the most fundamental change he ever experienced—that change which occurred when he found himself finally enclosed within the walls of society and of peace.” Also p. 87, sec. II 18: “For fundamentally it is the same active force that is at work on a grander scale in those artists of violence and organizers who build states, and that here, internally, on a smaller and pettier scale, directed backward...creates for itself a bad conscience and builds negative ideals—namely, the *instinct for freedom* (in my language: the will to power)...”

⁴⁰ *Zarathustra*, p. 225, sec. “On Self-Overcoming,” Vol. II.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, p. 226.

⁴² *WP*, pp. 549-550; sec. 1067.

To engage in competition, then, is to become fully the will to power. To contest is to exert one's force against an opposing force, to test one's will and energy against another's. This urge to power is also the "instinct for freedom,"⁴³ since its principle aim is the destruction of all barriers to its unrelenting exertion. The agon, to put it in Nietzsche's forceful terms, provides and encourages its combatants to fulfill their biological purpose: to *become* power and become free.

For Nietzsche, this biological destiny is itself justified by the feelings of joy that accompany it. It should be noted that Nietzsche does not define power as *success*, and in fact success will often negate any real benefit derived from the contest.⁴⁴ Victory is "good" only because it "heightens the feeling of power, the will to power, power itself in man" – it brings existential "happiness" because it is "the feeling that power *increases* – that a resistance is overcome."⁴⁵ The agon imbues joy and freedom into its participants *as they act* – or, more appropriately, as they compete. Freedom is experienced as "the manly instincts that delight in war and victory [gain] mastery over the instincts," for these other instincts – such as happiness and comfort – here function as fetters to the expression of strength and power: "the free man is a *warrior*."⁴⁶ Joy is derived from cruelty—from the act of making another suffer. To defeat another—to force another into submission—is an act that heightens the feeling of power and brings about an "all-too-human" pleasure: "the

⁴³ *GM*, p. 87, sec. II 18.

⁴⁴ For example, Nietzsche's discussion of liberalism in *TI*, p. 103, sec. 38 of "Expeditions of an Untimely Man": "The value of a thing sometimes lies not in what one attains with it, but in what one pays for it – what it *costs* us. I give an example. Liberal institutions immediately cease to be liberal as soon as they are attained: subsequently there is nothing more thoroughly harmful to freedom than liberal institutions. One knows, indeed, *what* they bring about: they undermine the will to power, they are the leveling of mountain and valley exalted to a moral principle...As long as they are still being fought for, these same institutions produce quite different effects; they then in fact promote freedom mightily. Viewed more closely, it is war which produces these effects, war *for* liberal institutions which as war permits the *illiberal* instincts to endure." Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, transl. R.J. Hollingdale. (New York: Penguin Books, 1968)

⁴⁵ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, transl. R.J. Hollingdale. (New York: Penguin Books, 1968) p. 127, sec. 2.

⁴⁶ *TI*, p. 104; sec. 38 of "Expeditions of an Untimely Man."

pleasure of being allowed to vent...power freely upon one who is powerless.”⁴⁷ This “being allowed to despise and mistreat someone as ‘beneath [one]’” produces a release of gaiety, since “to see others suffer does one good, to make others suffer even more...in punishment there is so much that is *festive!*”⁴⁸ Note here that the joy of victory and cruelty emerges only because *every winner will eventually lose*. Defeat accompanies victory as suffering accompanies joy in life, and it is the contrast between the extremes of experience that heightens and makes possible the appreciation of both. Thus, in the contest, one risks the chance of suffering for the opportunity to inflict it upon another, an aesthetic act that justifies the suffering of existence. In this way, the agon is attractive as a medium for victory, but, just as importantly, as a medium for losing.

Losing

The third benefit derived from competing is the experience of an illusory and aesthetic form of pain—or, more plainly, the agon provides the opportunity to *lose*. Nietzsche understood suffering and destruction as constitutive of life and thus experiences to be *valued*, in contrast to those values he believed to be symptomatic of the modern age, the desire for material and spiritual comfort and an aversion to pain of any kind. “Today,” he writes in describing the ancient festivals of punishment in *The Genealogy of Morals*, “when suffering is always brought forward as the principal argument *against* existence, as the worst question mark, one does well to recall the ages in which the opposite opinion prevailed because men were unwell to refrain from *making* suffer and saw in it an enchantment of the first order, a genuine seduction *to* life.”⁴⁹ Suffering is, above all, common; it is only made unbearable when it exists *unjustified*. Thus

⁴⁷ *GM*, p. 65, sec. II 5.

⁴⁸ *GM*, p. 65, 67; sec. II 5, II 6.

⁴⁹ *GM*, p. 67; sec. II 7.

“what really arouses indignation against suffering is not suffering as such but the senselessness of suffering,” and humanity is forced to invent justifications for the pain felt by all (e.g. God, sin).⁵⁰ The agon was invented, on the one hand, to reduce suffering by channeling the will to power into the arena; but on the other hand, the agon enables the *aestheticization* of suffering. In competing, the combatant makes a spectacle of striving, and it is a spectacle whether he wins or loses. One loses in the agon on one’s own terms and in a way that befits the artist. One dies the *tragic* death in the arena, losing and suffering in front of others and in front of one’s opponent. In defeat, the combatant feels the suffering of submission and becomes a slave to the victor – but *only in the arena!* The agon makes possible the *illusory defeat*.

The defeat is illusory because no one has to die. Aesthetic defeat orients the contestant towards death in the sense that the vanquished experiences a real defeat unique to her.⁵¹ It should be clear by this point that to construct a contest that results in the death of a contestant is to miss the point of the agon almost entirely. Recall that the Greek answer to the Silenusian challenge—why life?—was, essentially, *more* life. The agon, like the aesthetic, is a celebration of life understood comprehensively. To actively seek out both joy and suffering is to immerse oneself willingly and completely in the very fabric of existence.⁵² Death, like the ostracized genius, ends the agon and the benefits derived therein. Nietzsche’s treatment of the institution of dueling is instructive, for in it he seeks “a code of honour which admits blood in place of death,

⁵⁰ *GM*, p. 68, sec. II 7.

⁵¹ See here Heidegger’s exploration of death in *Being and Time*: “With death, Dasein stands before itself in its ownmost potentiality-for-Being. This is a possibility in which the issue is nothing less than Dasein’s Being-in-the-world. Its death is the possibility of no-longer-being-able-to-be-there. If Dasein stands before itself as this possibility, it has been *fully* assigned to its ownmost potentiality-for-Being. When it stands before itself in this way, all its relations to any other Dasein have been undone. This ownmost non-relational possibility is at the same time the uttermost one. As potentiality-for-Being, Dasein cannot outstrip the possibility of death. Death is the possibility of the absolute impossibility of Dasein. Thus death reveals itself as that *possibility which is one’s ownmost, which is non-relational, and which is not to be outstripped*.” Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, transl. John Macquarrie & Edward Robinson. (New York, NY: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1962) p. 294 (250-251 standard).

⁵² This notion leads easily to Nietzsche’s doctrine of “eternal recurrence.” See below.

so that the heart is lightened after a duel fought according to rules, [and this would be] a great blessing, since otherwise, a great many human lives would be placed in danger.”⁵³ Like doctors practicing the art of bloodletting, contestants inflict wounds and spill blood—whether it be real or metaphorical. Just as killing one’s patient due to bloodletting constitutes an entirely unsuccessful practice, so the contestant does not wound to kill. What is desired is the *regenerative* effect of wounding. Thus Nietzsche praises war, like tragedy, for “its curative power lies even in the wounds one receives...*increscunt animi, virescit volnere virtus* (The spirit grows, strength is restored by wounding).”⁵⁴

Since the agon provides suffering and the feeling of loss without actually killing the vanquished, it functions as an *actively nihilistic* institution.⁵⁵ Nietzsche reminds us at every turn that creation and self-overcoming require proportionate amounts of destruction and leaving-behind: thus “if a temple is to be erected *a temple must be destroyed*: that is the law...”⁵⁶ Nietzsche calls upon the strong to be hard – like diamonds – and to philosophize with hammers, because creation must tear down and smash all that stands in its way—namely, all that is.⁵⁷ To conceive of the universe as energy is to believe profoundly in the importance of recycling, since this energy is, after all, finite. “The law of the conservation of energy demands *eternal*

⁵³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, transl. R.J. Hollingdale. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1986) p. 144, aph. 365: *Dueling*.

⁵⁴ *TI*, ‘Foreward,’ p. 31.

⁵⁵ Active nihilism exists opposed to *passive nihilism*, and the difference between them can be understood in reflecting on the meaning of two of Nietzsche’s most notable phrases: “God is dead,” and “a Revaluation of all Values.” God did not die suddenly; the death of God (Nietzsche understands “God” to be the notion of an objective realm of values) is to be understood as the historical movement of the West, a movement Nietzsche describes in the section entitled “How the Real World Became a Myth” in *Twilight*. The death of God signals the arrival of the age of *revaluation*. The highest values of the world are being torn down in the nihilistic movement. What constitutes an *active* nihilism is, for Nietzsche, the *reassigning* of values, the will to revalue according to the needs of the will to power. To be *actively nihilistic* is to constantly change, to seek out new values that satisfy new forms of life. See especially on this point: Heidegger, “The Word of Nietzsche: ‘God Is Dead,’” in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, transl. William Lovitt. (New York, NY: Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc., 1977) pp. 53-113.

⁵⁶ *GM*, p. 95; sec. II 24.

⁵⁷ See Foreword in *TI* and the final section in the same work: “The Hammer Speaks” (p. 122). “For all creators are hard.”

recurrence,” and here Nietzsche means that energy does not expand or contract but rather takes on new forms by remaking itself continually.⁵⁸ The universe *eternally recurs* because energy cannot be destroyed or made: all that is, was, and will be: all that becomes does so always already. To make anew means *necessarily* to unmake simultaneously. All this is to explain that the pain and suffering endured in the agon function for Nietzsche as opportunities for reassessing and remaking, for “war has always been the grand sagacity of every spirit which has grown too inward and too profound; its curative power lies even in the wounds one receives.”⁵⁹ Pain inflicted by loss is endurable—indeed, desirable—because there exists the possibility of wising up, improving, and winning next time around. Mistakes should be learnt from, a lesson made all the more difficult by the modern age’s distaste for all things uncomfortable. To accept the necessity and pregnant possibilities of pain is to accept all at once one’s own existence as a suffering being. Thus, “to *endure* the idea of the [eternal] recurrence one needs...new means against the fact of *pain* (pain conceived as a tool, as the father of pleasure; there is no cumulative consciousness of displeasure)...”⁶⁰ The degree to which one accepts pain, even *invites* pain, will measure one’s greatness and recall “the heroic type, the great *pain bringers* of humanity.”⁶¹ One may think here of Sisyphus the tragic hero who can never defeat his enemy – *who will always finally lose*. Sisyphus reveals to us the truth of the eternal recurrence, and Nietzsche asks: “How much truth does a spirit *endure*, how much truth does it *dare*?”⁶²

⁵⁸ *WP*, p. 547; sec. 1063.

⁵⁹ *TI*, Foreword; p. 31.

⁶⁰ *WP*, pp. 545-546; sec. 1060.

⁶¹ *Gay Science*, p. 253; sec. 318.

⁶² Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo: How One Becomes What One Is*. (New York: Random House Inc., 1969) p. 218; sec. 3 of the Preface.

Ecstasis

Thus far three facets of what might constitute a Nietzschean conception of the agon have been presented: ranking, winning, and losing. Lastly, I would like to take up the fourth dimension of the agon: its capacity for producing moments of existential *ecstasis*. Recall that in *The Birth of Tragedy*, existence is justified through the experience of oneself as *aesthetic phenomenon*: the moment at which one exists as “subject and object...at once poet, actor, and spectator.” This is the moment of synthesis between the Apollonian world of illusion and the Dionysian revelry. It is the moment in which one literally loses one’s identity, becomes fully something or someone else (in this case, the tragedian satyr), and attains an almost transcendent state of consciousness. This moment is life’s climax.

Competing, like tragedy, takes place right *now*. It is pure action, a moment in which the brain ceases to function as it does normally and the instincts take over. When one fights, one *becomes* strength, like a bolt of lightning or a bird of prey.⁶³ The feeling of strength grows throughout the battle, climaxing at the moment of victory or defeat, when the evaluation is made and rank is established where none existed before. The battle must be *felt* and experienced and cannot be subject to calculations of utility, which only apply in the aftermath and do not result in the experience of strength. The experience of strength desires “*not* contentment, but more power; *not* peace at all, but war...”⁶⁴ In the midst of the contest, one does not desire its cessation; one does not think of why the battle is fought in the first place; one does not think of the riches of victory or the embarrassment of defeat. One *acts* in the now, in this moment, and

⁶³ *GM*, pp. 44-46; sec. I 13.

⁶⁴ *The Anti-Christ*, p. 128; sec. 2.

experiences the highest feeling of power: "...on the highest rung of power one placed the most intoxicated, the *ecstatic*."⁶⁵

Intoxication is the "*over-fullness of life*" that requires release.⁶⁶ Euripides' depiction of the Dionysian intoxication found in *Bacchus* suggests as much: Agave and the other revelers are filled with the presence and feeling of the Dionysian, and they are compelled to release—first upon the grazing animals in the field and then upon Agave's own son, Pentheus. Nietzsche describes intoxication as the precondition for aesthetic creation, and this applies to action as well. In the moment of Dionysian intoxication, experience itself is altered. Nietzsche describes this as an "extreme calm in certain sensations...(more strictly: the retardation of the feelings of time and space)." Further and at length:

The condition of pleasure called intoxication is precisely an exalted feeling of power – The sensations of space and time are altered: tremendous distances are surveyed and, as it were, for the first time apprehended; the extension of vision over greater masses and expanses; the refinement of the organs for the apprehension of much that is extremely small and fleeting; *divination*; the power of understanding with only the least assistance, at the slightest suggestion: "intelligent" *sensuality*–; strength as a feeling of dominion in the muscles, as suppleness and pleasure in movement, as dance, as levity and *presto*; strength as pleasure in the proof of strength, as bravado, adventure, fearlessness, indifference to life or death – All of these climactic moments of life mutually stimulate one another; the world of images and ideas of the one suffices as a suggestion for the others: - in this way, states finally merge into one another though they might perhaps have good reason to remain apart. For example: the feeling of religious intoxication and sexual excitation (-two profound feelings, co-ordinated to an almost amazing degree...)

Nietzsche describes here the moment of suspended reality, of *ecstasis*: note that both the phenomena of religious conversion and sexual climax are subsumed in the moment of aesthetic phenomenon and intoxication.

One should note, too, the treatment of time. Action occurs in the now, in the timeless moment that comprises every experience. "The destiny of man is designed for *happy moments*—every life has them—but not for happy ages," suggesting that life is most fully *felt* at certain

⁶⁵ *WP*, p. 31; sec. 48. Emphasis added.

⁶⁶ This, from *Gay Science*, p. 328; sec. 370. See also *WP*, sec. 48. Nietzsche does distinguish between two types of intoxication and their causes. The first – the greater – is the result of over-fullness and the need for discharge; the second – the lesser – is caused artificially and is a means of escape from suffering.

times, at certain *nows*.⁶⁷ In his first full formulation of the eternal recurrence, Nietzsche describes a “demon” posing to the reader the question of recurrence: would you will *this* again and again? Nietzsche’s reaction: “Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who spoke thus? Or have you once experienced *a tremendous moment* when you would have answered him: ‘You are a god and never have I heard anything more divine.’”⁶⁸ Later in *Zarathustra*, it is during a mountain climb that Zarathustra reaches the gate called “Moment” and confronts the possibility of recurring eternally.⁶⁹ It is through accepting the eternal recurrence and accepting *all* of life, including its mass of pain, for the sake of these particular moments of feeling and heightened strength that humanity can “slay even death” and proclaim: “Was *that* life? Well then! Once more!”⁷⁰

The agon, then, provides moments.⁷¹ Combatants enter the agon, like the artist who again picks up his brush, to experience *nows* of heightened strength and life – to exist intoxicated as aesthetic phenomena. Put another way, the contest provides moments worth dying for.

Political Agonism

This description of the agon paints a fuzzy picture when it comes to politics. The concept itself is without specific content because there are no particular institutions or even political dispositions held within it. Nietzsche himself is quite difficult to pin down on the question of politics, and such a feat will not be attempted here.⁷² I will not even attempt to systematize

⁶⁷ *HAH*, p. 170; sec. 471.

⁶⁸ *Gay Science*, pp. 273-274; sec. 341. Emphasis added.

⁶⁹ *Zarathustra*, p. 270; sec. “On the Vision and the Riddle,” part 2.

⁷⁰ *Ibid*, p. 269; sec. “On the Vision and the Riddle,” part 1.

⁷¹ For a much more sophisticated analysis of the existential *moment*, see Richard Avramenko, “On the Road to Perplexity: The Temporal-Ontological Presence of Nowness in Martin Heidegger’s *Being and Time*,” esp. pp. 31-33.

⁷² For a few notable attempts, see Bruce Detweiler, *Nietzsche and the Politics of Aristocratic Radicalism* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1990); Mark Warren, *Nietzsche and Political Thought* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988); Leslie Paul Thiele, *Friedrich Nietzsche and the Politics of the Soul: A Study of Heroic Individualism* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1990); Thomas Heilke, *Nietzsche’s Tragic Regime* (Dekalb:

agonistic politics here. Instead, I will briefly sketch out what might be described as *political agonism*, as opposed to *agonistic politics*.

To say the agon is political because it involves more than one person is to define away any meaning the term may hold. The agon must be conceived as considerably broader a category than the political, if only because of its relationship to the aesthetic, Nietzsche's "truly metaphysical activity of this life."⁷³ Politics should be thought of as one of many forms the will to power may take, while the agon should describe a more common outlet for the will to power. Instead of attempting to shove the agon into our preconceived understanding of politics, it may be fruitful to reflect on a uniquely political agon. That is, instead of thinking about *agonistic politics*, what would *political agonism* look like?

As it relates to *rank order*, a political agonism would recommend gradations of political status. To grade politically would require circumscribed spheres of political power within which members of one class are beholden to another. Nietzsche understood "bondage as the precondition of every higher culture,"⁷⁴ but the idea of rank order as presented here requires relationships of bondage only insofar as the notion of political inferiority exists uniquely relative to the notion of political superiority. Political rank order would mean that the superior/inferior relationship, as it exists in some mode defined as "political," would be based on the evaluations produced through agonistic competition. Remember that "Dionysus is a judge," that a political Dionysus would judge men according to their value, and that political value would be determined on the basis of agonistic and thus aesthetic achievement.⁷⁵ To attempt to put this in more practical terms: any political actor or movement must prove itself of higher value by pitting

Northern Illinois University Press, 1998); Dana Villa, "Beyond Good and Evil: Arendt, Nietzsche, and the Aestheticization of Political Action," *Political Theory* Vol. 20 No. 2, May 1992 (pp. 274-308).

⁷³ *Birth of Tragedy*, p. 32, Preface to Richard Wagner.

⁷⁴ *WP*, p. 255, sec. 464.

⁷⁵ *WP*, p. 541; sec. 1051.

itself against every other actor or movement, and this value must in turn be awarded with higher political rank.

As it pertains to *winners and losers*, a political agonism should dole out political rewards and political *punishments* to those engaged in contest. For Nietzsche, the feeling of power is enhanced in proportion to the amount at stake in its exercise. Vanquishing one's opponent across the chessboard is, for Nietzsche, qualitatively different than Achilles' vanquishing of his greatest enemy, Hector. As the risk involved decreases, so to do the benefits derived from fighting decrease:

'When the Romans of the imperial era had grown a little tired of war they tried to gain new energy through animal-baiting, gladiatorial combats and the persecution of Christians. Present-day Englishmen, who seem also on the whole to have renounced war, seize on a different means of again engendering their fading energies: those perilous journeys of discovery, navigations, mountain-climbings...so as to bring home with them superfluous energy acquired through adventures and perils of all kinds. One will be able to discover many other such surrogates for war, but they will perhaps increasingly reveal that so highly cultivated and for that reason necessarily feeble humanity as that of the present-day European requires not merely war but the greatest and most terrible wars – thus a temporary relapse into barbarism – if the means of culture are not to deprive them of their culture and of their existence itself.'⁷⁶

The agon does not produce little victories and does not spontaneously emerge when a scuffle occurs over whose turn it is to take out the dog. The higher the risk, the higher the existential reward – and the greatest risk and greatest prize of all is blood.⁷⁷

It could be said that, if there is *political blood*, it is comprised of rights.⁷⁸ The political agon may then award and take away *alienable rights*, perhaps better understood as *alienable powers*. In the realm of politics, the risk next to biological death shall be political death or the loss of even the dearest political rights. Conversely, victory should be rewarded with exceptional rights and political status: the right to command, for example. This, of course, seems quite harsh and inhumane today, and yet Nietzsche would caution against pitying those stripped of their political rights. One should recall that, for Nietzsche, political freedom is not tied to political

⁷⁶ HAH, p. 176; sec. 477.

⁷⁷ See GM, sec. II 19. For Nietzsche, elsewhere, the value of the overman will be determined by how many others must be sacrificed for his/her arrival.

⁷⁸ See Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*; esp. discussion of "the right to have rights."

rights, since freedom is the feeling of overcoming. Further, such a potentially severe punishment can be a seduction to life and an “origin of genius”: “The way in which a prisoner uses his wits in the search for a means of escape, the most cold-blooded and tedious employment of every little advantage, can teach us what instrument nature sometimes makes use of to bring into existence genius...it takes it and shuts it in a prison and excites in it the greatest possible desire to free itself.”⁷⁹ The notion of alienable rights or powers is only one suggestion in regards to the experience of political winning and losing.

Lastly, as it pertains to *ecstasis*, political agonism should uniquely offer the means of experiencing politics *right now*. In Franz Kafka’s parable “Before the Law,” the existential reaction to the rise of bureaucracy and the politics of procedure is revealingly articulated. He writes:

Before the law stands a doorkeeper. To this doorkeeper there comes a man from the country and pray for admittance to the Law. But the doorkeeper says that he cannot grant admittance *at the moment*. The man thinks it over and then asks if he will be allowed in later. “It is possible,” says the doorkeeper, “but not *at the moment*.” The country man’s life passes waiting for the doorkeeper to allow entry, and in his dying moments, the doorkeeper reveals his secret:

“No one else could ever be admitted here, since this gate was made only for you. I am now going to shut it.”⁸⁰ One can interpret Kafka to be saying here that “the Law” – politics – must be experienced first-hand and individually. This is consistent with Nietzsche’s idea of *action*, an idea famously borrowed by Hannah Arendt in her unique conception of freedom as action.⁸¹ In acting politically one *becomes* a political power. One gains entry into “the Law” and experiences all that the arena of political relations has to offer. Acting allows the combatant to bypass existing political institutions and other fetters to one’s political enabling by confining politics to the

⁷⁹ *HAH*, pp. 110-111, sec. 231.

⁸⁰ Franz Kafka, “Before the Law,” in *Kafka: The Complete Stories*, ed. Nahum N. Glatzer. (New York: Schocken Books, 1976), pp. 3-4. Emphasis mine.

⁸¹ See Hannah Arendt, “What Is Freedom?” in *Between Past and Future*. (New York: Viking Press, 1961) pp. 143-172. See also, Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*. See for Arendt’s borrowing of *action* from Nietzsche: Dana Villa, “Beyond Good and Evil: Arendt, Nietzsche, and the Aestheticization of Political Action.”

moment of ecstasis. The experience of the political protest and the polemic speech cannot be evaluated by their success or effectiveness, but rather by their aesthetic ingenuity.

What, then, of the contemporary agonist push for multiplying political spaces? The difference between the contemporary agonists and the Nietzschean agonist is fundamental. The key problem arises when the agonists move from ontological to normative claims about the status of the agon. They agree with Nietzsche (as all post-modernists do) that, ontologically speaking, absolute truth (embodied in rational consensus) is a myth. The universe of energy is like the veil of Penelope, creating itself only to unravel itself purposively. The agonists, however, turn this into a distinctly egalitarian *normative* claim: the absence of absolute truth hereby *morally precludes* any fundamental claims to truth. Thus Honig, for example, places the emphasis of “Homer’s Contest” in entirely the wrong place, writing that

Nietzsche shows the same love of the world and devotion to the contest as Arendt, the same fear that the agon’s winners could shut down the agon and fracture the forces that, united, have the power to maintain and preserve it. Here he espouses not a radical subjectivism but a commitment to the responsible maintenance of a public, shared space of appearances for the sake of the contest it enables and secures. This agonism is not restricted. Nietzsche endorses the ancient Greek practice of ostracism to protect the agon from domination by a single “individual who towers above the rest.”⁸²

Yet this is neither textually nor conceptually accurate. Nowhere in “Homer’s Contest” does Nietzsche condemn or endorse the practice of ostracism. Elsewhere, however, the Zarathustran image of the man of lightning who lives on mountains conjures very much the image of an individual who towers above the rest. Nietzsche understands completely that superior individuals will often be ostracized or destroyed, *a fact he laments*. Indeed, the move from the claim that “God is dead” to the claim that any absolutist claim is itself unacceptable suggests that today’s agonists come to the contest out of an *egalitarian* impulse and from the notion that all are equally incapable of producing living truth.

⁸² Honig, “The Politics of Agonism: A Critical Response to ‘Beyond Good and Evil: Arendt, Nietzsche, and the Aestheticization of Political Action’ by Dana R. Villa,” *Political Theory* Vol. 21 No. 3, August 1993 (pp. 528-533) pp. 529-530. Emphasis mine.

In this Nietzsche would find passive nihilism⁸³ and the will to nothing. The agon contains no element of *respect* for difference—it contains *only difference*. It demands its warriors will to *their* truth, to *their* power; it demands its warriors *test their truth against another's* with the aim of deciding whose truth is *superior* and whose truth must be *destroyed*. Games predicated on respect establish no rank order, produce no real winners and losers, and are incapable of producing the frenzy of victory, the agony of defeat, and the ecstasis of perfect struggle. The opening of political space, whether it be public or private, is an act of *pity* toward those whose efforts have not achieved victory.

If political society's "remainders" are those defeated in the agon of public opinion, then a more agonistic policy for "remainders" is *not* the opening of more political space. To treat "remainders" agonistically is to suspend pity and expect what one expects from the losers of any other contest: reassessment, reformulation, rededication—in short, *change*. To enter the agon by submitting a claim to political power is to risk the rejection of this claim by whatever procedures of (aesthetic) judgment govern the contest.

Conclusion

The weakness of this piece is its aim. So today's agonists and the Nietzschean agonist employ different conceptions of the agon in their theories. So what? So today's agonists have misunderstood Nietzsche. So what? I have provided here what I believe to be a working conception of the Nietzschean agon and a brief sketch of what a political agonism might look like. Further, I have provided a brief but, I think, reasonably troubling critique of contemporary agonism from the perspective of the Nietzschean version established above. So what?

⁸³ See *active nihilism* above, footnote 51.

I undertook this project out of concern. The contemporary agonist literature has, I believe, a great deal of promise. It injects some much-needed intellectual vigor into the dominant and complacent theories of liberalism that have dominated political theory for much of the past fifty years. Further, it provides hope for those who hold, like Nietzsche, that life is more than material and psychological comfort and that struggle is good for more than the middle class lifestyle and some notion of personal respect. Agonism may hold the key to appreciating the sweet *and* the sour, winning *and* losing, comfort *and* pain. Nietzsche's agon is essentially a praise of genuine, *deep* difference: establishing rank of difference, actively *producing* difference, smashing the monotonous, entirely level and equal course of life with moments of ecstasis. I believe the agonistic literature hints at a more vigorous, more beneficent political theory: a liberalism with losers.