

Yunus Tuncel, *Agon in Nietzsche*. Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2013.

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Nietzsche's philosophy is essentially a challenge – and remains even more so today. It marks the limits of an epoch that we call *modernity*. While placing himself within the tradition of his age, he is its antagonist; he effects a three-fold reversal in religion, philosophy, and morality. He questions the foundations of occidental thought laid more than two millennia ago through the figures of Jesus, Socrates, and Zarathustra. These foundations, Nietzsche shows have withered away. He presents himself as a prophet, a sophist, and a genealogist, on the one hand, and, on the other, as a hero, a thinker of the future, and the creator of new values. In the complex presentation of his profound thought, Nietzsche revives the quarrel at the heart of modernity: the quarrel between ancients and moderns. He sides with the ancients. What better way, then, to study Nietzsche's thought than to focus on the spirit of agonism and the role it plays in ancient Greek culture? Tuncel's *Agon in Nietzsche* rises to the challenge and explores Nietzsche's thought brilliantly. Before I turn to a discussion of Tuncel's book, let me place his work within broader philosophical and historical perspectives. I will focus on Nietzsche's three-fold reversal of religion, philosophy, and morality.

First, religion. Nietzsche's philosophy, as Tuncel rightly notes, essentially unfolds as an agon with his age and its values, principally *Christian* values (252–54). Yet, the notion of agon is itself complex. On the one hand, Nietzsche describes himself as Christianity's most vociferous critic, the Anti-Christ who will denounce Christianity “upon all walls, wherever walls are to be found.” Christianity is “the one great curse, the one great intrinsic depravity, the one great instinct of revenge, for which no means are venomous enough, or secret, subterranean and small

enough.” On the other hand, Nietzsche does not see agon primarily in political terms. Agon bespeaks a creative act that carries both participants in the contest or struggle higher.¹ At the heart of the agonistic experience, as Nietzsche understood it, is the awareness that a culture of agon is necessary to struggle, train, and excel among more or less equals before a worthy public in a specific form and context so that the best “works” could be created to become exemplary models in culture. Agon is the cultural condition for new values where it is “Time [that] . . . will tell what valuations throw humanity higher” (252). In ancient Greece, agon did not take place in vacuum but had its own mythic, religious, and ritualistic context. It is at least partly out of an awareness of the dependence of agon on Greek ritual and cultic practice that Nietzsche takes up the struggle with Christianity.² Tuncel notes: “almost all his [Nietzsche’s] ideas on religion and the reference point from which he critiques Christianity and other religions are indexed on Greek polytheism. The mythic context of agon that created a hierarchical universe from gods to mortals for the contestants is dismissed or has fallen into oblivion today. However, without this mythic hierarchy there was no agon for the Greeks. Nietzsche was well aware of this” (12).

Second, philosophy. “Agon lies not only in the words and deeds of the *agonal* individual, but also in the social, political and cultural formations that he is a part of When these formations collapse, the *agonal* culture collapses as well, since agon does not live only in the

¹ Tuncel quotes Nietzsche’s rules of his “agon-praxis,” written at the end of his life as an agonistic writer (97). These rules appear in *Ecce Homo* and consist of four principles (cited in full in *Agon in Nietzsche*, 98–103) that Tuncel summarizes as follows: “(1) To attack victorious causes . . . 2) To attack alone with no allies since agon is an individual strife . . . 3) Not to attack persons . . . 4) To attack out of good will, even out of gratitude. . . (184–185). In his account of the fourth rule, Nietzsche also specifically clarifies his relationship to Christianity, that is, the reasons why he attacks it: “When I wage war [*Krieg*] against Christianity I am entitled to this because I have never experienced misfortunes and frustrations from that quarter – the most serious Christians have always been well disposed toward me. I myself, an opponent of Christianity *de rigueur*, am far from blaming individuals for the calamity of millennia.”

² It is very important to note that, in Nietzsche’s thinking, Christianity represents a certain attitude, a certain potential within humans that can manifest historically (and has done so from time to time). Thus, when he speaks of “Christianity,” he does not primarily mean the religion called Christianity. The term takes on metaphysical, moral, and cultural dimensions for him. If we read Nietzsche’s criticisms merely as an intellectual polemic against personal faith, we would miss both the point of his philosophy and the role that his reading of Christianity plays in it.

lives of the *agonal* poets and thinkers or the isolated acts of the contestants. On the contrary, it lives and is fed by the dynamics of culture” (197). A look at Nietzsche’s writings on philosophy and philology suffices to show that he was well aware of these aspects. His agon with the values of his age unfolds not only as a struggle with Christianity but also contains a positive element of formulating a new ideal of philosophical pedagogy – a project that, once again, unfolds as a reversal of existing ideals. Tuncel discusses Nietzsche’s lectures from the 1870s in Basel, in which he contrasts “two types of education . . . useful education (all professional education) and education for the production of genius, what Nietzsche calls ‘true education’” (205). This task specifically requires us “to exchange the fundamental idea behind our present system of education, which has its roots in the Middle Ages and the ideal of which is actually the production of the medieval scholar, for a new fundamental idea.” Tuncel correctly notes of this passage (found in the third *Untimely Meditation*) that “Nietzsche does not trace modern education back to the Greeks” (207), but, we might also argue a stronger thesis: Nietzsche connects modern education to Christianity, whose genealogy, he shows, is specifically theological.³ Indeed, he will ultimately link both together, as is shown in his hyperbolic contrast of the Greeks with the philologists in the essay *We Philologists*:

The Greeks render homage to beauty, develop the body, speak clearly, are religious transfigurers of everyday occurrences, are listeners and observers, have an aptitude for the symbolical, are in full possession of their freedom as men, can look innocently out into the world, are the pessimists of thought.	The Philologists are babblers and triflers, ugly-looking creatures, stammerers, filthy pedants, quibblers and scarecrows, unfitted for the symbolical, ardent slaves of the State, Christians in disguise, philistines.
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³ Thus, in *The Antichrist* he writes, “The Protestant pastor is the grandfather of German philosophy. Protestantism itself is its *peccatum originale*. Definition of Protestantism: hemiplegic paralysis of Christianity – *and* of reason. . . . One need only utter the words ‘Tübingen School’ to get an understanding of what German philosophy is at bottom – a very artful form of theology.”

This point should not be underestimated: Nietzsche's positing of Greek agonal values as an alternative to Christian morality occurs in the context of his relationship to the ancients via their reception in modernity, and this means that he cannot evade the agon with the interpreters of the ancients, that is, the philologists. Within Germany, philology has always maintained close links with Lutheranism and Protestant hermeneutics.⁴ This connection cannot be overstated. Men such as Johann Matthias Gesner (1691–1761), Johann August Ernesti (1707–81), and Jeremias David Reuss (1750–1837) all came from pastors' homes. Perhaps the most famous of them all, Friedrich August Wolf (1759–1824) was the son of the choirmaster of Lohra, while others such as the biblical critics Johann Salomo Semler (1725–91), Friedrich Christian Baur (1792–1860), and David Friedrich Strauß (1808–74) traditionally maintained an even stronger interest in theological questions. David Friedrich Strauß belonged to the Tübingen School; Friedrich Christian Baur was considered its founder, and thus not only was Christianity implicated in a certain kind of philology but philology also went hand in glove with and pursued a certain kind of Christianity.⁵

Third, morality. Nietzsche's comments on morality are diverse and scattered across many writings. Yet, a few main strands may still be gleaned. As with the other two aspects, religion and philosophy, here also his main target is Christian morality, which he equates with "slave morality" and opposes to "master morality." Greek morality was of the latter type. In the contemporary period, however, Nietzsche's main target is the revival of Christian morality

⁴ See Vishwa Adluri and Joydeep Bagchee, *The Nay Science: A History of German Indology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

⁵ Nietzsche was well aware of these concerns, mediated to him via the work of David Friedrich Strauß and others. In aphorism 95 of *Daybreak* ("Historical refutation as the definitive refutation"), he noted: "In former times, one sought to prove that there is no God — today one indicates how the belief that there is a God could *arise* and how this belief acquired its weight and importance: a counter-proof that there is no God thereby becomes superfluous. — When in former times one had refuted the 'proofs of the existence of God' put forward, there always remained the doubt whether better proofs might not be adduced than those just refuted: in those days atheists did not know how to make a clean sweep."

through Luther, whom he specifically holds responsible for reinstituting the values of a slave morality after its near overcoming in the neo-platonically inspired Renaissance. For Nietzsche, the Renaissance was the “*transvaluation of Christian values*,” “the attempt, undertaken with all means, with all instincts, with all genius, to bring about the triumph of the *opposite* values, the *noble* values.” According to Nietzsche, with the election of the Borgia popes, Christian morality was exhausted and almost at its end. He exults that Christianity “the old depravity, the *peccatum originale*, . . . no longer sat on the throne of the Pope! But life! The triumph of life! The great yea to all things high, beautiful and daring!” Luther’s attack upon Christianity, however, had the effect of restoring the Church once more. More: “they [the Germans] also have on their conscience the foulest kind of Christianity, the most incurable, the most irrefutable that exists, Protestantism . . . If we do not get done with Christianity, the *Germans* will be to blame for it.” This historical attribution explains why much of Nietzsche’s reversal of morality unfolds as a contest with Luther and German thought. It also explains the transformation that takes place in Nietzsche’s thought between 1876 and 1882. Heinz Blum notes: “As late as 1876 he [Nietzsche] looked upon Protestantism as a source of light and freedom and upon Roman Catholicism as the embodiment of darkness and intellectual bondage. However, all his complimentary utterances on Luther and the Reformation are scarcely based on an intimate knowledge of the man and the movement he inspired. They rather express little more than the idea of Luther held by most educated Protestants of that day. . . Luther the great hero of the Reformation, the first representative of modern culture, without whom the world in which we live would be quite unthinkable.”⁶ After 1876, however, Nietzsche’s appraisal of Luther is decidedly less complimentary; in fact, he makes him responsible both for the failure of the sciences to develop

⁶ Heinz Blum, “Nietzsche’s Idea of Luther in *Menschliches, Allzumenschliches*,” *Proceedings of the Modern Language Association* 65, no. 6 (1950): 1053.

and for the lack of respect for the truth and for a kind of cultural philistinism, associated with anti-Semitism, that he considers characteristic of the Germans (Luther himself was the author of two anti-Semitic tracts, *On the Jews and their Lies* and *Of the Unknowable Name and the Generations of Christ*, that were to have a profound influence up to twentieth-century German Nazism).⁷ Nietzsche's rejection of German nationalism as well as Protestantism, counter to a tradition in German philosophy both before and after him of emphasizing one's connections to Protestantism,⁸ must be traced to this interest in seeing, in the German Reformation, a regression to the Middle Ages.

Nietzsche's multifaceted struggle with modernity thus places enormous demands on the scholar. It is with a deep awareness of this complex philosophical and historical background behind Nietzsche's work that Tuncel takes up the task of an interpretation of Nietzsche's notion of agon. His book is among the recent trend of works that consider agon a central concept of

⁷ Nietzsche specifically makes the following accusations against the Germans: (1) they are not thinkers; they write no books (Kant is a "nihilist with the intestines of a Christian dogmatist"); they are motivated by a desire for profit (the Reformation, according to Nietzsche, only succeeded because Luther knew how to appeal to the German spirit "to plunder and . . . to economize"); they misuse history ("in relation to the *imperium romanum* they are the bearers of freedom, in relation to the eighteenth century they bring back morality, the 'categorical imperative' . . . There is a German, imperial way of writing history . . . there is even an anti-Semitic way"); they are psychologically unclean and lack depth ("What is considered 'deep' in Germany is precisely this sort of instinctive uncleanliness with respect to oneself: people do not even *want* to be clear about themselves"); they have no instinctive feeling for rank and distinction ("the German places every one on an equal footing"); they are given over to melancholy ("How much sullen heaviness, dullness, humidity, pyjamas, how much *beer* there is in German intellect"); and their music is "constipated, [and] constipating." This litany of accusations contrasts starkly with the tradition of praising German intellectual life and wishing to be seen as a part of it before and after him (see next note).

⁸ John Hare has argued of Kant's project in *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* that "he [Kant] is translating the theology he encountered in the Lutheran catechisms of his youth, and which he was not much interested in changing." John Hare, "The Place of Kant's Theism in his Moral Philosophy," in *Kant on Practical Justification: Interpretive Essays*, ed. Mark Timmons, Sorin Baiasu (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 313; Manfred Kuehn cites interpreters who hold that Kant's moral philosophy "is not much more than a secularized form of pietism." Manfred Kuehn, "Kant's Jesus," in *Kant's Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason: A Critical Guide*, ed. Gordon Michalson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014). In the case of Hegel, there is much less room for debate: he explicitly sees his philosophy as being in the service of a justification of Lutheranism ("I have there explained and expressed Luther's teachings as true, and as recognized by philosophy as true") and makes no secret about the fact that he considers Lutheranism a superior religion ("We Lutherans (I am and will remain one) have a better faith."), while also arguing for the role of his philosophy in confirming his Lutheranism ("I am a Lutheran, and through philosophy have been at once completely confirmed as a Lutheran."). After Hegel, the next philosopher to emphasize his links to German Protestantism will be Heidegger who, according to Hans-Georg Gadamer, expressed his desire "to be a new Luther." When reading Nietzsche in the 1930s, Heidegger scribbles the word "un-deutsch" in the margins, meaning it as a criticism of Nietzsche.

Nietzsche's philosophy (the other is Christa Davis Acampora's *Contesting Nietzsche*⁹). In this careful study, Tuncel shows how the thought of agon, although only explicitly the subject of Nietzsche's reflections in the period 1870–74, continues to organize all of Nietzsche's later philosophy. Even though words denoting agon (Tuncel lists *Wettkampf*, *Wetteifer*, *Wettbewerb*, *Wettspiel*, *Wettlauf*, and *Wettstreit*) rarely make an appearance after this period, Tuncel argues that the *thought* of agon remains central to Nietzsche's philosophy inasmuch as the latter is essentially undertaken as an agonistic struggle with the other value-creators of history (one need only think of Nietzsche's polemics against Socrates, Plato, Jesus, Luther or also implicitly with Kant). Yet, Tuncel's book is about much more than a historical reconstruction of Nietzsche's philosophy: at the limit, Tuncel is interested in understanding how agon forms and makes possible not only a certain kind of society but also a specific type of individuality, the agonistic individual, and what the loss of this type of individuality means for contemporary culture. This task (i.e., of understanding what happens when the culture of agon declines and what the possible ways of reversing this decline are) is undertaken, Tuncel says, not "not to imitate but to learn at the symbolic level" (236). It is this genuine interest in understanding what role agon plays for culture and what we lose when we lose the ability to see ourselves as striving in an agon that gives the book its unmistakable pathos.

In the introduction, Tuncel sets up his project as the attempt "to explore the connection between Nietzsche and Greek agon by studying a variety of sources from ancient Greece on the culture of competition, how Nietzsche directly relates to this culture, especially in his early works, and finally how this influence appears in his later writings." (8) This project required

⁹ Acampora's book is structured around four major historical figures, Homer, Socrates, Paul and Wagner, and engages in a historical reflection on them from the standpoint of Nietzsche's agonistic philosophy. In contrast, Tuncel's book focuses only or mostly on the agonal age of ancient Greece, its micro-dynamics, and how Nietzsche interprets it and how his inter-operation plays out in his more mature late writings. His reflection on history ends, to a large extent, with fifth-century ancient Greece (although there are some reflections about the later decline of the culture of agon).

Tuncel to examine a rich collection of sources, many of which would not have been accessible to Nietzsche. Each chapter of the book thus represents a free-standing attempt to elucidate specific aspects of the Greek culture of agon. The first chapter, titled “Mythic Context of Agon,” looks at some of the myths that relate to contests between mythic figures or the founding of contest sites. Chapter 2 and 3, titled “The Sacred in Agon” and “Suffering, Destruction, and Transfiguration,” respectively, continue with this theme of looking at agon in the context of religion and responses to human suffering. Chapter 5, “Agon and War,” discusses the relation of agon to the culture of war-making in ancient Greece; without reducing either one to the other, Tuncel argues for a “chiasmatic relation” between them that allows Nietzsche to “move back and forth from the symbolism of one to the other.” (91) Chapters 5, “Agonal Feelings,” examines certain feelings in human beings (e.g., hate, ambition, and envy) that arise from the situation of competition and how those can be purified by directing them into the proper channels. Chapter 6, “Agonistic Unity and Justice,” seeks to understand how the Greeks, though living in a culture characterized by agon, nonetheless regarded themselves or constituted themselves as a unity. The concept of “agonistic unity” is very closely related to the concept of “agonistic justice,” which, Tuncel argues, is a precursor of Nietzsche’s concept of “active justice” in his later works. In Chapter 7, “From Agonistic Individualism to the Overhuman,” Tuncel discusses the emergence of a specific ideal of individuality in the agonal age – that of the agonistic individual. He identifies three different but related types of individualities – mythic, heroic, and agonistic – that Nietzsche discusses in his early works. Mythic individuality reflects the Titanic order where the individual does not have much role; the heroic is the Homeric individual who knows mostly war but not agon, who has not channeled his destructive urges into competition to excel; finally, the agonistic individual is both mythic and heroic, but has evolved into a higher being, as the mythic and the

heroic take on different meanings. This chapter contains some of Tuncel's most pertinent and astute remarks on the concept of individuality.¹⁰ Finally, chapters 11 and 12, "Festival and Spectacle" and "Political Theory," respectively, look at the political aspects of agon. Tuncel makes the wise choice of deferring this aspect to the end, even though it is one that, for most modern readers, would have appeared primary. Here he is concerned to work out the differences between modern ideas of competition or of sport (as embodied, for instance, in the modern Olympic games) and ancient ones as a prelude to his concluding chapter, "The Decline of the Agonal Age," which explores the various reasons that might have contributed to the end of Greek agonistic culture.

Tuncel makes a strong case for the fact that agon is the thread that links Nietzsche's writings from the early to the late period. "Although his discussion of ancient Greek culture gradually loses its primary focus after this period, the spirit of ancient Greece is always present in his thought and writings, and almost all of his major areas that are developed later (including the eternal return, the Overhuman, and the will to power) can be traced back to it. This spirit, no doubt, includes the spirit of agonism." (8) Each of the chapters constitutes a self-contained, yet detailed meditation on one aspect of Nietzsche's philosophy of agon. (Both in its systematic arrangement and in its intimate knowledge of the Greek sources Tuncel's book clearly demonstrates the influence of Tuncel's teachers Reiner Schürmann and Joan Stambaugh, the latter a major Nietzsche scholar.) I especially appreciated the discussion of "the macro- and micro-world of the agonist" in its relation to "the rise of the individual and the principle of

¹⁰ See, for instance, his discussion in this chapter of an understanding of individuality that does not juxtapose freedom and causality: "the *agonal* individual sustains within himself both the mythic individual and the heroic individual; that is, he is both *destiny* and *freedom* at the same time. He has adjusted his individual *freedom* to the flow of eternal cycle instead of standing against it like a motionless soldier. Contrary to the common opinion that tragic man is all destiny, bound by destiny, he is, insofar as he is also an *agonal* individual, *free* to the extent that or because he knew and lived out his destiny and mortality. It was out of this *freedom* that many *works of culture* were created in the *agonal* age of ancient Greece from Homer to Socrates" (142).

individuation, the Dionysian state, the mythic, heroic, and agonal individuals, and the Overhuman” (139) (in chapter 7). Tuncel also casts a revealing light on the value of agon for Nietzsche *as a principle* and not just as a historical concept. An “important aspect of the agonistic philosopher is to hold, within his own self or his own world-view, the multiplicity of *necessary forces of culture* in their *agonal* togetherness” (254); “The agonistic culture Nietzsche contemplates in his works can be gathered from his writings on culture and from his world-view. This is a culture, which brings and holds together its various expressions, its various *forces* in their agonal togetherness, where they are ranked as highest values and where the highest types are appropriated for its strife for the highest” (255). In contrast to many commentators who avoid discussion of the topic, Tuncel also appropriately recognizes the role played by Greek polytheism in fostering or preserving a sense of agon: “With the ancient Greeks, the agonal spirit had already existed in poetry, mythology, arts, and athletics, before it re-produced itself in thought with the rise of philosophy. And the primordial core of agon resides in the polytheistic genius of the Greeks” (255).¹¹

I found the book well-researched and Tuncel is obviously well-informed about the history of Nietzsche scholarship. He recommends a reevaluation of the role played by Burckhardt in the formation of Nietzsche’s thought, whose influence is often downplayed in favor of Wagner and Schopenhauer. Brief discussions of Bataille, Foucault, Burkert, Eliade, Kerenyi, Freud, and Girard enrich the book. Tuncel has an interesting reading of eternal recurrence, which he connects to the idea of sacred, mythic time in Eliade, and which he argues can be understood as the manifestation of “an agonistic play between creative and destructive forces” (43) unfolding over cosmic cycles. (This reading interestingly complements the reading of eternal recurrence as

¹¹ Ed Butler has recently made a strong case for polytheism as an essential element of Greek philosophical life; see Edward P. Butler, *Essays on a Polytheistic Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Edward P. Butler, 2014).

a motif to be taken “literally” so that one can experience the full “existential force” of Nietzsche’s challenge of Lawrence Hatab as well as the “performative understanding” reading of eternal recurrence of Paul Loeb, and shows that the final word on eternal recurrence is not yet spoken.) In the background of Tuncel’s work, I clearly detected the influence of Schürmann, whose own philosophical project was informed by agonal thinking, derived from Nietzsche. Schürmann’s philosophy of uncovering a structure of “tragic differing” at work in thinkers from Parmenides to Heidegger obviously shapes much of this book (as, for instance, in this observation: “No thinker has stretched the individual as the one as far as Parmenides has done, without, at the same time, detaching it from the larger unity it belongs to, namely, the One,” 141).

As the iconoclast of Christianity enshrined in secular modernity, Nietzsche is of immense importance to us standing in the demise of modernity. Tuncel has written a timely and sensitive book that helps the reader navigate Nietzsche’s retrieval of Greek culture in a milieu of modernity, philology, and Christianity. Yet, he has also done much more than simply write another introduction to Nietzsche. His book is motivated by his desire to engage with Nietzsche and to see in him the “agonistic philosopher,” who holds, “within his own self or his own world-view, the multiplicity of *necessary forces of culture* in their *agonal* togetherness. . . “ (254)¹² In raising himself to the level of philosophical agon, Tuncel has paid his teacher Schürmann, described in the dedication as “a pure agonist,” a fitting tribute.

¹² Tuncel is correct to emphasize, via Nietzsche, the significance of agon to philosophy. In ancient traditions in general, agon is a structural principle of existence; its significance is thus limited neither to the political nor to the cosmological spheres. Although Nietzsche may or may not have known about the Indian sources, the Sanskrit epic, the Mahābhārata, offers further confirmation of his approach to agon. (For a good introduction, see Alf Hiltebeitel’s *The Ritual of Battle* [Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990].)