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Nietzsche's Will to Power and Politics

In this essay I want to explore Nietzsche's concept of will to power (*Wille zur Macht*) and its bearing on political philosophy. First I present an overview of will to power and its centrality in Nietzsche's thought, where power involves a structure of reciprocal tensions rather than destructive force. After disposing of the idea that Nietzsche is an apolitical or anti-political thinker, I argue that Nietzsche's approach to social structures departs from traditional political theories, especially the modern liberal contract theory of government. Then I revisit an argument marking my previous work, namely that Nietzsche's espousal of the agonistic structure of social life offers a robust alternative for political philosophy, especially with regard to legal institutions and democratic politics.¹

Will to Power

"The world viewed from inside ... would be 'will to power' and nothing else" (BGE 36).² The world, for Nietzsche, is never in a fixed condition but always in process of becoming. Moreover, all movements of becoming are related to other movements, and the relational structure is not simply expressive of differences, but primarily resistances and tensional conflicts (NL, KSA 13, 14[93]). Will to power depicts in dynamic terms the idea that any affirmation is also a negation, that any condition or assertion of meaning must overcome some "Other," some obstacle or counterforce. An 1888 note states:

A quantum of power is characterized by the effect it exercises and by what resists it. [...] it is essentially a will to violation and resisting violation. [...] every atom's effect works out to the whole of existence — if one thinks away this radiation of power-will, the atom itself is thought away. For this reason I name it a quantum of "will to power". [...] (NL, KSA 13, 14[79])

An "atom" is a quantum of will to power, so the latter must refer to the radiating "whole." Indeed an atom is not a "thing" but a *dynamic* quantum "in a tensional relation (*Spannungverhältnis*) with all other dynamic quanta." And

¹ Portions of this essay are drawn from earlier work of mine (Hatab 1995 and Hatab 2008).

² I have occasionally modified published translations.

we are told in another 1888 note that will to power is not a metaphysical unity manifesting particular forms, because with that “one has struck out the character of will by subtracting from its content, its Wohin, its ‘Where to?’” (NL, KSA 13, 14[121]).³

Nietzsche draws out the implications of will to power even further: “will to power can manifest itself only against resistances; therefore it seeks that which resists it” (NL, KSA 12, 9[151]). A similar formation is declared in *Ecce Homo* in reference to a warlike nature: “It needs objects of resistance; hence it looks for what resists” (EH Wise 7). What is crucial here is the following: Since power can *only* involve resistance, then one’s power to overcome is essentially related to a counter-power; if resistance were eliminated, if one’s counter-power were destroyed or even neutralized by sheer domination, one’s power would evaporate, it would no longer *be* power. The will “is never satisfied unless it has limits and resistance” (NL, KSA 13, 11[75]). Power is *overcoming* something, not annihilating it: “there is no annihilation in the sphere of spirit” (NL, KSA 12, 7[53]). Will to power, therefore, cannot be understood in terms of individual states alone, even successful states, because it names a tensional force-field, *within which* individual states shape themselves by seeking to overcome other sites of power. Individual events are understood in terms of *degrees* of overcoming and resistance (NL, KSA 13, 14[79]). An achieved state or goal cannot suffice for explaining will to power, because that would leave out its essential character as a “driving force” (NL, KSA 13, 14[121]).

The “development” of a thing, a tradition, an organ is certainly not its progressus towards a goal [...], instead it is a succession of [...] processes of subjugation exacted on the thing, added to this the resistances against these processes expended every time, the attempted transformations for the purpose of defense and reaction, and the results, too, of successful counter-actions. (GM II 12)

Power cannot be construed as “instrumental” for any resultant state, whether it is knowledge, pleasure, purpose, even survival, since such conditions are epiphenomena of power, of a drive to overcome something (GM II 12, 18). Will to power as a drive is not goal-directed but activity-directed; its “aim” is the *perpetuation* of overcoming, not a completed state.⁴ For this reason, Nietzsche

³ Another note refers to “the absolute momentariness of the will to power” (NL, KSA 11, 40[55]). And we should note a passage wherein the idea of the will “is a unity only as a word” (BGE 19).

⁴ On this point see Katsafanas 2011, which presents a very cogent account of drives, which do not “end” with the attainment of a goal. This helps make sense out of Nietzsche’s requirement of ongoing resistance, even with the achievement of a particular goal. Katsafanas also cites contemporary research that supports Nietzsche’s position: happiness is better realized with *activities* that are built around challenges and the execution of skills.

depicts life as “that which must always overcome itself” (Z II Self-Overcoming). This accounts for Nietzsche’s objections to measuring life by “happiness,” because the structure of will to power shows that *dissatisfaction* and *displeasure* are intrinsic to movements of overcoming (NL, KSA 13, 11[111]), and so conditions of sheer satisfaction would dry up the energies of life. Pleasure “is only a symptom of the feeling of power achieved, a consciousness of difference” (NL, KSA 13, 14[121]). Indeed, “unpleasure” is a *stimulant* to will to power, the experience of a resistance that is to be overcome, a resistance presupposed by any achieved pleasure. That is why “man seeks resistance, needs something to oppose him” (NL, KSA 13, 14[174]).

According to Nietzsche, any doctrine that would reject will to power as he depicts it would undermine the conditions of its own historical emergence as a contention with conflicting forces. Any scientific, religious, moral, or intellectual development began with elements of dissatisfaction and impulses to overcome something, whether it was ignorance, worldliness, brutality, confusion, or competing cultural models. Even pacifism – understood as an impulse to overcome human violence and an exalted way of life taken as an advance over our brutish nature – can be understood as an instance of will to power. Power, Nietzsche tells us, includes human mastery “over his own savagery” (NL, KSA 13, 11[111]).

A refiguration of will to power can be found in an early text, *Homer's Contest* (HC, KSA 1, pp. 783–792). Arguing against the idea that culture is something antithetical to brutal forces of nature, Nietzsche spotlights the pervasiveness in ancient Greece of the *agōn*, or contest, which operated in all cultural pursuits (in athletics, the arts, oratory, politics, and philosophy). The *agōn* can be seen as a ritualized expression of a world-view expressed in so much of Greek myth, poetry, and philosophy: the world as an arena for the struggle of opposing (but related) forces. Agonistic relations are depicted in Hesiod's *Theogony*, Homer's *Iliad*, Greek tragedy, and philosophers such as Anaximander and Heraclitus.⁵ In *Homer's Contest*, Nietzsche argues that the *agōn* emerged as a *cultivation* of more brutal natural drives in not striving for the annihilation of the Other, but arranging contests that would test skill and performance in a competition. Accordingly, agonistic strife produced excellence, not obliteration, since talent unfolded in a struggle with competitors. As a result, the Greeks did not succumb to a false ideal of sheer harmony and order, and thus they ensured a proliferation of excellence by preventing stagnation, dissimulation, and uniform control. The *agōn*, Nietzsche claims, expressed the

5 See my discussion in Hatab 1990, chs. 2–6.

general resistance of the Greeks to “domination by one” (*Alleinherrschaft*) and the danger of unchallenged or unchallengeable power – hence the practice of ostracizing someone too powerful, someone who would ruin the reciprocal structure of agonistic competition.

The Greek *agōn* is a historical source of what Nietzsche later generalized into the dynamic, reciprocal structure of will to power. And it is important to recognize that such a structure undermines the idea that power could or should run unchecked, either in the sense of sheer domination or chaotic indeterminacy. Will to power, especially in the cultural sphere, implies a certain “measure” of contending energies, even though such a measure could not imply an overarching order or a stable principle of balance. Nevertheless there is a capacity for measure in agonistic power relations. Nietzsche tells us in an early note (KSA 8, 5[146]) that Greek institutions were healthy in not separating culture from nature in the manner of a good-evil scheme. Yet they overcame sheer natural forces of destruction by selectively ordering them in their practices, cults, and festival days. The Greek “freedom of mind” (*Freisinnigkeit*) was a “measured release” of natural forces, not their negation. Likewise in a published work:

Perhaps nothing astonishes the observer of the Greek world more than when he discovers that from time to time the Greeks made as it were a festival of all their passions and evil inclinations and even instituted a kind of official order of proceedings in the celebration of what was all-too-human in them. [...] They do not repudiate the natural drive that finds expression in the evil qualities but regulate it and, as soon as they have discovered sufficient prescriptive measures to provide these wild waters with the least harmful means of channeling and outflow, confine them to definite cults and days. This is the root of all the moral free-mindedness of antiquity. One granted to the evil and suspicious, to the animal and backward, [...] a moderate discharge, and did not strive for their total annihilation. (AOM 220)

In line with this Greek precedent, Nietzsche’s concept of agonistic will to power should not be construed as a measureless threat to culture but a naturalistic re-description of cultural measures. Will to power allows a kind of *structured* dynamic rather than an amorphous disarray of forces. Each overcoming and resistance shapes a counter-acting *form* of differentiation rather than sheer repulsion. Agonistic measure cannot be stable, uniform, or universal; it emerges only out of and within episodes of conflict. Yet there are “laws and measures immanent in the contest” (*dem kampf immanenten Gesetzen und Maassen*) (PTAG, KSA 1, p. 826).⁶ The reciprocal structure of agonistic relations means

⁶ Nietzsche even calls the capacity to dwell with negative limits a measure (NL, KSA 11, 25[515] and 35[69]; NL, KSA 12, 2[97] and 9[41]). Conversely, the ascetic ideal’s contempt for life is characterized as lacking a kind of measure (GM III 22; TI Morality 2; NL, KSA 11, 26[167]); the

that competing life forces productively delimit each other and thus generate dynamic formations rather than sheer dissipation or indeterminacy.⁷

Nietzsche's celebration of power is often taken to mean a repudiation of moral and political conceptions of justice; and his emphasis on creativity and free spirits seems incompatible with social norms and institutions; and of course his critique of equality seems to undermine democratic politics. Yet Nietzsche's philosophy does not amount to a repudiation of social norms and political institutions. I want to argue that from a Nietzschean standpoint the state is neither a conventional construct (as in modern political theory) nor strictly "natural" (as in ancient thought), because "nature" and "culture" are not incommensurate spheres for Nietzsche; rather, culture arises out of, and modifies, natural forces, as in the case of the Greek institution of the *agōn*. Nietzsche did recognize the political purposes of the *agōn* (HC, KSA 1, p. 789), but he clearly took it to be an aristocratic activity, where the few talented types would compete for cultural and political status. He did not seem to recognize a connection between an agonistic culture and the emergence and practice of Greek democracy. The philosophical development of a questioning spirit and challenges to traditional warrants helped nurture the practices of open debate and public contests of speeches that came to characterize democratic procedures.⁸

Nietzsche and the Political

Before exploring these questions and confronting Nietzsche's attitude toward democracy, it is important to set the stage by considering the matter of institutions, without which political philosophy could not get off the ground. It is foolish to think that modern societies could function without institutions and

same is said of Christianity's attack upon nature (HH I 114) and of modern aesthetic sensibilities (HH I 221; BGE 224). Moreover, a higher nature is marked by a gathered measure that is fashioned out of a plurality of competing drives (NL, KSA 11, 26[119] and 27[59]).

⁷ For important discussions of this idea, see van Tongeren 2002 and Siemens 2002. See also Acampora 2002. Agonistic measure can be ascertained in the example of athletic games. Particular rules and layouts stem from a more general sense of conditions that must be met for a competitive game: A field of play must carve out scenarios of performance that require skill – in a manner that is neither too easy nor too difficult; and competitors must all be *able* to perform in the game, which rules out actions that disable opponents.

⁸ For a discussion of the connections between Greek democracy and contests, see Vernant 1980, pp. 19–44. On the open atmosphere of uncertainty and interrogation see Castoriadis 1991.

the coercive force of law. Fredrick Appel, like many interpreters, construes Nietzsche's "political" thought as advancing more an "aesthetic" activity than institutional governance (Appel 1999, pp. 160ff.). Nietzsche supposedly envisions elites who compete with each other for creative results in isolation from the mass public; indeed the elite simply use the masses as material for their creative work, without regard for the fate or welfare of the general citizenry. Appel maintains that such a political aesthetics is problematic because it is incompatible with the maintenance of stable institutions. And Nietzsche is also presumed to eschew the rule of law in favor of the hubris of self-policing. If this were true, one would be hard pressed to find Nietzsche relevant for any political philosophy, much less a democratic one.

It is a mistake, however, to read Nietzsche in simple terms as being against institutions and the rule of law on behalf of self-creation. Those who take Nietzsche to be an anti-institutional transgressor and creator should take heed of a passage from *Twilight of the Idols* that clearly diagnoses a repudiation of institutions as a form of decadence. Because of our modern faith in a foundational individual freedom, we no longer have the instincts for forming and sustaining the traditions and modes of authority that healthy institutions require.

The whole of the West no longer possesses the instincts out of which institutions grow, out of which a future grows: perhaps nothing antagonizes its "modern spirit" so much. [...] That which makes an institution an institution is despised, hated, repudiated: one fears the danger of a new slavery the moment the word "authority" is even spoken out loud. (TI Skirmishes 39)

Modern political philosophy, beginning with Hobbes, advances the social contract theory of government, primarily stemming from a baseline notion of free, individual selves in the "state of nature." The collective, coercive character of the state is therefore not "natural" and requires justification. Warrant is found in the "contract" between individuals who agree to limit their freedom with legal constraints that will bring peace and order to the strife intrinsic to the state of nature. In comparison, a Nietzschean emphasis on power and agonistics offers significant advantages for political philosophy, in that we can be freed from the modern project of "justifying" the force of social institutions because of a stipulated freedom from constraint in the state of nature. With Nietzsche's primal conception of power(s), the forces of law need not be seen as alien to the self, but as modulations of a ubiquitous array of forces *within which* human beings can locate relative spheres of freedom. Indeed, for Nietzsche, freedom is a relational term – *not* an individual faculty or possession – that fits the agonistic structure of will to power. Our sense of freedom arises

from the delight in overcoming obstacles (BGE 19), and the measure of freedom can only be gauged “according to the resistance that must be overcome” (TI Skirmishes 38). With human competition understood as a *reciprocal* striving and resistance, freedom can be construed as a *social* phenomenon, and so agonistic political practices need not be shunned as a degradation of an idealized political order or the collapse of social virtues.

Justice and Law in the *Genealogy*

Nietzsche's remarks about justice and law in the *Genealogy* have not received a lot of attention. In GM II 10, Nietzsche says that when a community grows in power and confidence, “its penal law becomes more lenient.” We can even imagine a society “so conscious of its power, that it could allow itself the noblest luxury available to it—that of letting its malefactors go unpunished.” (GM II 10)⁹ This would be consistent with the agonistic structure of will to power, in that an overly superior power can and even should alter its disposition toward an underling, especially when resistance is significantly diminished or absent.¹⁰ Justice, Nietzsche tells us, can “sublimate itself” and move from punishment toward *mercy*. The idea that justice and law are not grounded simply in retribution for injury is articulated further in the next section of the *Genealogy*.

In Section 11, Nietzsche challenges attempts to find the origin of justice (*Gerechtigkeit*) in revenge (*Rache*), which he connects with resentment (of the type indicated in slave morality). In such accounts, justice is based in “reactive affects,” in feelings of being wronged; yet these accounts themselves are said to be based in resentment, owing to their animosity toward “active affects” such as the lust for mastery, which Nietzsche takes to have more value than reactive feelings. We are told that justice does not arise from reactive sentiments because such feelings are “the last territory to be conquered by the spirit of justice.” Echoing section 10, Nietzsche then talks about a heightened development of justice, where a just man remains just toward someone who harms him—a “positive attitude” to be distinguished from indifference,

⁹ In many respects, Nietzsche associates power with a fulfilling sense of achievement and actualization rather than the force of violence. In fact, an impulse to hurt people is a sign of lacking power and frustration over this lack (GS 13), or dissatisfaction over blocked development (GS 290).

¹⁰ Here we can note familiar objections to a dominant position overdoing its mastery, as in running up the score in sports.

a “clear objectivity both penetrating and merciful” that does not diminish even in the face of injury or scorn. Nietzsche calls this attitude “a piece of perfection, the highest form of mastery to be had on earth,” which is more likely to emerge in active types: “The active, aggressive, over-reaching man is still a hundred paces nearer to justice than the man who reacts.” The active type has “a clearer eye, a better conscience on his side,” as opposed to the “false and prejudiced assessment” and the “bad conscience” of reactive sentiments (GM II 11).

Nietzsche maintains that a historical consideration of justice shows that it did not originate in reactive feelings against injury, but rather “with the active, the strong, the spontaneous, and the aggressive.” Justice emerged as a battle waged by active forces “against reactive feelings,” by types who “expended part of their strength in trying to put a stop to the spread of reactive pathos, to keep it in check and within bounds, and to force a compromise.” Wherever justice is “practiced and maintained,” the *stronger* power aims to end “the senseless ravages” of resentment among inferior individuals or groups. It seems that one of the main elements in Sections 10 and 11 is that a strong person is not motivated by resentment and revenge, and that Nietzsche is here augmenting his genealogy of values (GM I 10–12) by claiming that just as in the sphere of morality, the *political* value of justice emerged first not from the interests of weak types but from the active power of strong types. Impulses toward revenge among the people prompted a response from the ruling order, in terms of multifaceted experiments with justice that aimed to remove the *target* of resentment from “the hands of revenge” (GM II 11). These experiments included substituting for revenge “a struggle against the enemies of peace and order,” creating compensations for injury, and “elevating certain equivalences of harms into a norm,” a reciprocal order that resentment would now have to accept as the rectification of offenses.

Then Nietzsche announces a culmination of this process, its most “decisive” development, which occurred when the ruling authorities were strong enough to counter “the stronger power of hostile and sympathetic feelings” by instituting a legal system (*Gesetz*). Nietzsche’s point seems to be that political justice has a genealogical history comparable to his treatment of morality. The establishment of law is not grounded in some metaphysical warrant of “right” (whether divine, natural, or human) because it arises as a *modification* of prior conditions of social power for the purpose of addressing the *problem* of vengeful dispositions (which thus are not the *origin* of justice). With a legal system, Nietzsche says, the ruling authorities create an “imperative declaration” of what counts as just and unjust in *their* eyes. Laws, especially in written form, provide a more formal reference for justice and injustice than the more immedi-

ate settings of harmful behavior and effects. Nietzsche claims that in a legal system—when human offences are now “crimes,” or violations of the law set up by the ruling authority—what is “offensive” about injury can be modulated beyond the injured parties themselves toward the broader sphere of the legal order. Now the vengeful feelings of subordinate, reactive types can be “distracted” (*abgelenkt*) from the immediate damage done to them. Nietzsche judges that such distraction is able to counter the force of revenge by shifting the estimation of injuries away from the narrow perspective of the injured party toward an “evermore impersonal assessment of the action.” It should be noted that the impersonal force of law here is very much in keeping with modern legal conceptions, but Nietzsche situates this idea in more natural forces of power relations, rather than in any grander rubric of “natural law” or universal principles of justice. We could say that for Nietzsche the law aims for an impersonal *effect*, but it is not based in any exalted formula of “impersonal reason.”

Nietzsche continues (GM II 11) that “justice” and “injustice” only arise when a legal system is in place rather than in any pre-legal settings of human injury. Moreover, he says that any concept of justice *as such* is meaningless, because natural life “functions essentially in an injurious, violent, exploitative, and destructive manner.” From the standpoint of natural forces, legal conceptions of justice are “exceptional conditions,” in being exceptions to brute nature. Yet given Nietzsche’s analysis, this would not “falsify” legal conditions, any more than other valuable cultural forms that emerge from and modify natural forces. Indeed, Nietzsche goes on to describe the law in ways that resonate with his treatment of the agonistic structure of Greek culture in *Homer’s Contest*. Legal conditions are “partial restrictions” of natural forces of power, yet not on this account something “other” or even “lesser” than natural power (GM II 11). Legal provisions are called “particular means” serving life-powers, and Nietzsche adds: “as a means toward creating greater units of power.” In other words, legal culture *adds* dimensions of power that nature alone does not exhibit. He concludes by counter-posing this agonistic conception of *legal culture in the midst of nature* against the conception of law as “sovereign and general”—as something secured in its own rational sphere apart from natural life, and especially as a means “against conflict in general” and toward egalitarian equanimity, which Nietzsche calls something “hostile to life” and “a secret path toward nothingness.” For Nietzsche, the law is not a force that strictly speaking secures an end to power and conflict, because it serves and participates *in* an ongoing “conflict of power-complexes.” In other words, justice, for Nietzsche, is not a displacement of power but the cultivated orchestration of power(s).

Democratic Politics

It seems that Nietzsche's analysis of justice and law insists on their aristocratic origins. It also seems evident that his own political vision sustains an elitist character, and that he would deem democratic politics to be a consequence of slave morality. But in my work I have tried to identify elements of democratic politics that might disrupt Nietzsche's account, particularly by considering agonistic features in democratic political practice. How can we begin to apply the notion of agonistics to politics in general and democracy in particular? First of all, contestation and competition can be seen as fundamental to self-development, but also as socially structured, rather than based in individual drives alone. Agonistics therefore helps us articulate the social and political ramifications of Nietzsche's concept of will to power. We have seen that will to power is essentially related to resistances. For Nietzsche, every advance in life is an overcoming of some obstacle or counterforce, so that conflict is a mutual co-constitution of contending forces. Opposition generates development. This is why the modern conception of autonomous selfhood is displaced in Nietzsche's philosophy. The human self is not formed in some internal sphere and then secondarily exposed to external relations and conflicts. The self is formed in and through what it opposes and what opposes it; in other words, the self is *constituted* by agonistic relations. Therefore, any annulment of one's Other would be an annulment of one's self in this sense. Competition can be understood as a *shared* activity for the sake of fostering high achievement and self-development, and therefore as an intrinsically social activity.¹¹

In light of the difference between a cultural *agōn* and natural destruction, it is necessary to distinguish between agonistic conflict and sheer violence. A radical agonistics rules out violence, because violence is actually an impulse to *eliminate* conflict by annihilating or incapacitating an opponent, bringing the *agōn* to an end. In a notebook passage (NL, KSA 12, 10[117]), Nietzsche says that he fights the Christian ideal “not with the aim of destroying it but only of putting an end to its tyranny and clearing the way for new ideals,” and that for these ideals, “the continuance of the Christian ideal is one of the most desirable things there are.” Such new ideals must have “strong opponents, if they are to become strong.” In TI *Morality 3* Nietzsche discusses the “spiritualization of hostility [*Feindschaft*],” wherein one must affirm both the presence and the power of one's opponents as implicated in one's own posture. And in this passage Nietzsche specifically applies such a notion to the political realm:

11 It is significant that the etymology of the word “compete” is “to seek together.”

“almost every party understands how it is in the interest of its own self-preservation that the opposition should not lose all strength.” The structure of competition requires the sustained maintenance of opposing sides, rather than a zero-sum game of individual ambitions. The implication here is that the category of the social need not be restricted to something like peace or harmony. Agonistic relations need not connote a deterioration of a social disposition, and they can thereby be extended to political affairs.

How can democracy in general terms be understood as an agonistic activity? Allow me to quote from my previous work.

Political judgments are not preordained or dictated; outcomes depend upon a contest of speeches where one view *wins* and other views *lose* in a tabulation of votes; since the results are binding and backed by the coercive power of the government, democratic elections and procedures establish temporary control and subordination — which, however, can always be altered or reversed because of the succession of periodic political contests. [...] Democratic elections allow for, and depend upon, peaceful exchanges and transitions of power. [...] [L]anguage is the weapon in democratic contests. The binding results, however, produce tangible effects of gain and loss that make political exchanges more than just talk or a game The urgency of such political contests is that losers must yield to, and live under, the policies of the winner; we notice, therefore, specific configurations of power, of *domination and submission* in democratic politics. (Hatab 1995, p.63)¹²

The agonistics of democracy shows itself at every level of political practice, from local to national formats, from elections to legislation and jurisprudence. In all cases the contestation of different perspectives seems to be a necessary (if not sufficient) condition for democratic procedures. Even though political exchanges locate and can create degrees of agreement by means of persuasive discourse, nevertheless sheer unanimity would not only seem to be a rarity, but in fact it would suggest the end or irrelevance of democratic practices. The open invitation to all perspectives and the employment of vote tabulations to provide contingent settlement of contested issues seems to presuppose an ineradicable economy of differences and the absence of a globally decisive truth.¹³ Accordingly, all the seemingly fractious features of democratic practice — from

12 Here must be mentioned a psychological disposition that is often missed in describing democracy (especially when it is recommended for cultures lacking democratic traditions) but that is essential to the spirit of democratic citizenship: the willingness to *lose* a political contest and not resort to rebellion.

13 In Greek, voting was associated with the word *diapherō*, to differ or go against; *diaphoros/on* meant distinctive, making a difference, disagreement. Naturally the presumption against a decisive truth, which underwrites the call for open competition, can be linked to Nietzsche's critique of objective truth in favor of perspectivism. See Hatab 1995, ch. 6.

local debates to election campaigns to legislative disputations to judicial arguments – are in fact simply the orchestrated rituals of political life, without which democracy would evaporate. The affirmation of conflict does not entail permitting a kind of political donnybrook; there are better and worse, fair and unfair ways of conducting a political contest – actually dictated by the very structure of competition, in that the different sides must be *capable* of winning, which is why rigging an election is not really an election. The point is simply that democracy should not recoil from the disorder and friction of political dispute; something like sheer harmony or unanimity would spell the end of politics or perhaps amount to nothing more than the silhouette of coercion, suppression, or erasure. Still, it is important not to overdo the model of competition, because there is a notable difference between democratic engagements and more strictly competitive formats, like games, where opponents simply play to win and defeat the other side. In democracy, we do not engage in political speech only to win, but also to persuade, which carries the implicit possibility of changing sides, so to speak. In this way democratic debate goes beyond sheer competition to include the self-formation of citizens.

Legal Agonistics

There are many parallels between the political agonistics of democracy and a democratic legal system, at least in the Anglo-American common law tradition. That tradition is often called an adversarial system, to distinguish it from the so-called inquisitorial system that operates in France and Germany, for example. An adversarial model pits two procedurally equal parties against each other in open court, each competing to persuade a jury of the guilt or innocence of a defendant. Most of the procedural rules and the presumptions about the posture of lawyers are built around the notion that each party in a trial is entitled to have its best possible case presented in court and to vigorously challenge the other side's case; the judge in most respects serves as an impartial, procedural referee; the contest is then decided by the deliberations of a jury. An inquisitorial system is different to the extent that a judge is given much more deliberative and evidentiary power. Proceedings are not restricted to the aggressive advocacy of competing parties; the court is responsible for presenting the arguments and is not confined to the parties' presentations; a judge does most of the questioning of witnesses and can guide the course of a case in ways that are impermissible in an adversarial system.¹⁴ One attraction

¹⁴ For an overview of the differences between the two systems see Luban 1998, ch. 5.

of the inquisitorial system is that it is simpler, less restricted by procedural rules, and much relieved of the various lawyerly tactics, probings, and challenges that often frustrate observers of the adversarial system, and that may acquit a seemingly guilty defendant on a technicality or because of evidentiary exclusions.¹⁵

Despite its difficulties, the agonistics of an adversary system can at least be better understood in the context of our discussion of democracy.¹⁶ An inquisitorial system puts much more trust in the performance, integrity, and impartiality of judges and the judicial system. An adversarial system in many ways is animated by suspicions about the competence and possible motives of the government and judicial officials. Adversarial procedures, then, are intended to give competing parties every appropriate means of challenging or subverting possibly unfair, deceptive, fallacious, or discriminatory practices. Cognitive and ethical suspicion are operating here, and this is often forgotten in complaints about legal machinations that clog proceedings or block the government's case against an apparently guilty party. We should at least remember that procedural rules and the so-called presumption of innocence are meant to *contest* the government, to protect citizens from abuses of power – and not, as is often supposed, to express sympathy for the interests of criminals. Accordingly, we should be *willing* to trade the acquittal of guilty persons for protections against the presumably more heinous outcome of convicting innocent persons. Acquitting a guilty person may be morally repugnant, but it upholds the legal *system*, because each case also concerns *any* case that can come before the system. Since the power of government is contested in the system, acquitting a guilty person simply means that the government has failed to prove its case, that the defendant is *legally* not guilty, rather than proven innocent. At a systematic level, the government should affirm such defeats, because the presumption of innocence and the legal tactics afforded the defense constitute the government's own self-imposed *test* of its strength. We might spotlight the dangers of foregoing a more adversarial system by considering the case of Japan. In the Japanese legal system a suspect can be interro-

15 The adversarial system did not exist in England until the late 18th Century, and even then only in a minority of cases. There was a slow evolution, with little legal or philosophical debate about principles or justification. Changes were introduced by Parliament or judges in the face of particular cases' perceived injustices or unfairness. So the system emerged as immanent, contextual, and pragmatic modifications that gradually became common practice. See Langbein 2003.

16 Note that in Greek democracy trials were called *agones* and litigants *agonistai*. *Agōn* also meant "assembly" and "gathering place" (related to *agora*).

gated without a lawyer for up to 23 days. The confession rate of suspects is 92%. Of those suspects brought to trial, the conviction rate is 99.9%¹⁷ We could admire such a system only if the actual rate of guilt and innocence roughly matches these percentages. Yet even a God's-eye view of true guilt and innocence would have to be surprised at the success rate in the Japanese system.

In this way, an adversarial legal system mirrors the separation of powers that marks the American form of government: Legal and political structures are organized around the contestation of power sites, rather than the termination of conflict, and this can accord with Nietzsche's formulation that a legal order is "a means in the conflict between power-complexes," rather than a means of preventing conflict (GM II 11). James Madison (in *Federalist* 51) argued that the division and separation of powers in government provides an internal structure that prevents tyranny by simply *multiplying* the number of potentially tyrannical units and permitting them to check each other by mutual ambition and distrust. This touches on a main reason why I think Nietzsche's philosophy is important for democracy: An agonistic framework is not a "new" model for democratic political thought but a genealogical critique of traditional political *theories*. In its inception and practice, democracy has *always been* agonistic, and political philosophy has tended to suppress or resist this agonistic structure because its radically tensional character disturbs certain principles presumed to be the bedrock foundation of democracy.

The Question of Equality

Needless to say, appropriating Nietzsche for democratic politics faces significant difficulties. Appel, in *Nietzsche Contra Democracy*, has offered a vigorous criticism of attempts to employ Nietzsche for democratic politics, particularly with respect to agonistics. Appel maintains that Nietzsche's thought is radically aristocratic throughout and it cannot be selectively employed for democratic purposes (Appel 1999, pp. 5f.). He also assumes that there is an egalitarian consensus in contemporary political philosophy: that all human beings are of equal moral worth, and they equally bear basic rights that need defending and promoting (Appel 1999, pp. 7f.) – a defense that Appel's book, however, does not provide. He insists that Nietzsche is anti-democratic to the core, and that we cannot succeed in preserving democratic ideals by selective interpretations or by sanitizing Nietzsche with a reading of his elitism as an apolitical call for

¹⁷ Harper's: July 2007, p. 15.

self-creation. In my own work I do not argue that Nietzsche was an overt or covert democrat, but that in the spirit of his own thought he could have, or should have been, an advocate for democracy, but not in terms of traditional political frameworks. For example, I agree that Nietzsche's thought is indeed anti-egalitarian, but I also argue that egalitarianism may not be a necessary condition for democratic politics, and that many elements of democratic practice and performance are more Nietzschean than he suspected (or we have suspected).

Appel concedes that a political agon can be healthy and prevent the establishment of entrenched, permanent hierarchies (Appel 1999, p.162). But he poses an important question: Might not a radical agon all the way down in political life debunk important democratic "verities" such as universal suffrage, equal respect, and human rights? This is indeed a pressing question; yet Appel simply assumes the truth and necessity of these traditional democratic notions, without much articulation of how agonistics threatens these notions, and without any defense of the viability of these notions in the wake of Nietzschean genealogical criticisms. Such criticisms have been effectively advanced by Foucauldian appropriations of Nietzsche that reveal how modern "reason" cannot help being caught up in what it presumes to overcome – namely regimes of power – and consequently cannot help producing exclusionary effects and constraints that belie the modern rhetoric of emancipation.

Nietzsche's philosophy has helped shape familiar critiques of the "dark side" of the Enlightenment and modernity. We have become alert to ways in which self-definition has historically required a demoted or displaced "Other" for its articulation and social placement (Eze 2001). This might give us bearings for decoding the promotion of equality and its decidedly non-ideal history. Universal egalitarianism has been rare in practice and indeed absent until recent periods. Political equality was not universalized in Greek democracy, of course, given the exclusion of slaves, women, and resident aliens. And the modern conception of the "universal rights of man" was dishonest and myopic owing to a host of exclusions and the subordination of "barbaric" peoples in the name of political progress. It seems that the professed confidence in egalitarian ideals was originally based on in-group allegiance (e.g., white male property owners). *Actual* universal equality was absent and even resisted when proposed. Why? Not simply because of an interest in protecting power and privilege; a "positive" sense of equality may not have been conceivable apart from differentiating a "we" from a "they" ("We are all equal" translates as "We are equally not *them*"). Now we might be less surprised by certain racist tendencies in such "enlightened" thinkers as Hume and Kant, among others. Indeed it has been argued that the very idea of "race" was a construction of Modern philoso-

phy, and that the emerging science of “anthropology” was racially tinged in coming to terms with non-European peoples (Eze 2001, chs. 1–3). A Nietzschean analysis can help unmask concealed forms of power in political ideals that presume universality and emancipation but that have not owned up to their exclusionary effects. In fact, the very idea of universalism underwrites the *demotion* of other cultures that do not share or measure up to “rational” principles – otherwise other cultures would simply be *different* rather than falling short of what “any rational being” would or should believe.

An Enlightenment narrative can also give cover to more overt, practical forms of supremacism. Here a few remarks about the social contract theory are pertinent. The state of nature story in modern political thought emerged in a historical setting that can show it in a different light. The story pictures the formation of political society as an act of will on the part of rational individuals to quit the state of nature, as opposed to the ancient idea that the state emerges out of a “natural” social condition. The “artificial” construction of the state accorded with and bolstered the ideal of individual autonomy; it could also help make sense out of the apparent contingency of political forms in the face of encountering new lands in the Age of Discovery. Political “naturalism” could be haunted by contingency when familiar formats were not evident in Asia, Africa, and America. The state as a willed artifice would not suffer from the same difficulty. Yet another consequence of the contractarian alternative was its complicity with colonialism. The artificial willful construction of the political order could underwrite the willful *imposition* of European models upon the supposed pre-political, “natural” condition of native peoples, especially when their forms of life were deemed “backward,” not to mention exploitable.

A glance at Locke can be illuminating here. In his *Second Treatise* (Locke 1980, pp.18–28), Locke framed the social contract in terms of property rights. Each individual is rightfully his own “property,” his own self-possession. When, through artifice, individuals mix their labor with nature, they are entitled to the resulting product as their own property. Locke connects this idea with the divine command to subdue and cultivate the earth, and modern forms of production seem to be the highest expression of following this command. Locke at times mentions American Indians (the “merciless savages” mentioned in the *Declaration of Independence*) and their primitive production in the midst of vast stretches of uncultivated land. He says that even the smallest parcel of cultivated land in England is superior in value to the largest area of untapped land in America. Revealingly, Locke calls this uncultivated land “waste.” Who could fail to notice here the hints of colonialist rhetoric? The “state of nature” in discovered lands not only lacks proper political conditions that can be imposed, it also lacks legally protected property that can *by right* be claimed by

productive settlers – because nature is *wasted* by the natives (besides, as Eddie Izzard puts it, the natives had no flags). One advantage of a Nietzschean genealogy is its capacity to put a critical spotlight on such philosophical moments in the contract theory that otherwise might be only dimly seen, if at all.

I am suggesting that traditional egalitarianism was structurally “alteric” in simultaneously *bringing-down* an aristocratic elite and *keeping-down* existing “others” (women, the poor, savages). The Nietzschean take on this is that the force of such an alteric structure was the fuel for actual egalitarian movements emerging in history (despite their professed metaphysical warrants). And if traditional egalitarianism was fueled by power relations, then equality-talk can be unmasked and shown the dangers of exclusionary effects inimical to its professed rhetoric. Accordingly, it could follow that an agonistic deconstruction of equality is more *inclusive* politically, by foregoing any typological criteria for citizenship and simply inviting all competitors to the contest.

Meritocratic Democracy

A question remains: Can a Nietzschean agonistics be viably democratic? Any democratic appropriation of Nietzsche's philosophy of openness and difference must confront his elitism and affirmation of cultural excellence. Excellence is a form of difference that implies gradations and judgments concerning superior and inferior, better and worse performances. Many have embraced a Nietzschean openness to difference on behalf of a generalized liberation of diverse life styles and modes of self-creation. Such a generalized emancipation, however, would repulse Nietzsche. He was interested in fostering special individuals and high achievements. I wonder whether certain postmodern celebrations of difference conceal a kind of egalitarianism in their avoidance or suppression of Nietzsche's clear comfort with social stratification. And it is important, in my view, to sustain a sense of excellence that is vital for both democratic politics and cultural production. Excellence and democracy are compatible as long as excellence is understood in a contextual and performative sense, rather than a substantive sense of permanent, pervasive, or essential superiority.

I have argued for a meritocratic sense of proportional justice modeled on Aristotle's conception of justice in the *Politics* 1280a10–15 (Hatab 1995, pp. 111–119). What is usually missed in Aristotle's formulation is that sometimes it is just to treat people unequally, if they are unequal in a certain attribute relevant to a certain context. For example: it is just to deny children the right to vote since they do not have the maturity to engage in political practice; it is just for teachers to treat students unequally when they assign different grades to their

work. Similarly, we can grant praise, status, even privilege to certain performances in social and political life as long as they exhibit appropriate levels of distinction that fit the circumstances. We can still be “democratic” in opening opportunity for all to prove themselves, without assuming fixed or protected locations of excellence. Yet we can be “aristocratic” in apportioning appropriate judgments of superiority and inferiority, depending on the context, and thus we can avoid what Nietzsche took to be the most insidious feature of egalitarianism, resentment in the face of excellence. We can also borrow from Nietzsche’s denial of a substantive self on behalf of a pluralized sphere of actions (BGE 19–21) in order to keep the contextual apportionment of excellence open both between and within selves, so as not to slip into any essentialistic aristocratic confidences about superior selves per se.

What is helpful to democratic political philosophy in appropriating a Nietzschean comfort with stratification is that we are no longer bedeviled by puzzles surrounding so-called “democratic elitism.” Whenever democratic practice has exhibited unequal distributions of power, authority, function, or influence, it has seemed to be incompatible with democratic ideals because equality has usually been the baseline principle defining democratic life. But as long as opportunities are open in a democratic society, a meritocratic, contextual apportionment of different roles and performances need not be undemocratic. Such phenomena as representative government, executive and judicial powers, opinion leaders, and expertise can be understood as appropriate arrangements in political practice. One way to ascertain this is to realize that the only way to guarantee purely egalitarian practices would be to have all political decisions produced by a direct tally of all citizens, or to have political offices distributed by lot. Any reservations about such prospects will open space for a non-oxymoronic conception of democratic elitism.

A Nietzschean promotion of agonistics and non-foundational openness can go a long way toward articulating and defending democratic practices without the problems attaching to traditional principles of equality. My earlier suggestion that traditional equality was alterically structured can account for the fact that contemporary egalitarianism generally operates with non-substantive conceptions of equal treatment or procedural equality. The reason for this may be that the greater inclusiveness of contemporary politics inevitably chipped away at substantive conceptions so that equality would no longer have much descriptive force or would be harder and harder to identify. The now vague and questionable character of equality may be due to the *loss* of its alteric structure owing to genuine inclusiveness. The source of the alteric character of equality can be described as follows: Evident differences among humans and no evidence of substantive sameness in the natural sphere meant (absent any tran-

scendent warrant) that the only possible version of equality was a differentiated “we” who are equally not “them.” With no alteric “Other” in inclusive politics, the equal “we” loses its specific, positive contours. An *agonistic* model of political practice need not track any positive quality of sameness and can simply be construed as non-exclusionary, in the sense that no citizens capable of thinking about their political fate can be excluded from the contest to decide that fate.

Along these lines, I offer some final reflections on power and politics. We can distinguish between *power-for* and *power-over*, the former suggesting individual freedom for self-development, the latter suggesting domination or control of other selves. Advocates of democracy obviously stress *power-for*, not *power-over*, and they would likely read Nietzsche's will to power as *power-over* and thus incompatible with democratic politics. This is why some who try to find room for Nietzsche's thinking in liberal politics want to take his promotion of self-creation as the primary meaning of will to power, even to the point of reading Nietzsche's rhetoric of domination as a mask for self-creation; in other words, that power for Nietzsche is not *power-over* but *power-for*.¹⁸

There is much to be said for locating in will to power forms of *power-for* and self-creation. First of all, *Macht* can be associated with capability and potency. And certainly self-development is an important theme in Nietzsche's writings (see, for instance, GS 290). As noted earlier, Nietzsche traces human abuse not to a flagrant expression of power but to a *lack* of power and frustration over this lack (GS 13), and to self-dissatisfaction (GS 290). Nevertheless, the neutralizing of Nietzsche's references to political power and domination is dubious. Will to power certainly includes social force, although we must remember the ongoing reciprocal structure of such forces (which is distinct from raw destructive powers in nature). Moreover, I do not think that *power-for* can be separated from *power-over* in Nietzsche's thought. With his agonistic model of selfhood and his rejection of atomistic individuality, it follows that self-development never leaves the world untouched; some “Other” will always be affected. Any form of self-assertion will produce some kind of diminishment or differentiation in the social field of play, a certain “pathos of distance” (TI Skirmishes 37). Finally, *power-over* need not refer only to crude control and domination; it can include both informal and institutional forms of *authority*, which is another connotation of the word *Macht*. Usually authority is a form of warranted, even granted, power, in milieus such as governance and educa-

¹⁸ See, for example, Warren 1988, pp. 157–58 and ch. 7. This approach would accord with common interpretations of Nietzsche as an anti-political, or at least apolitical, thinker (which I think is mistaken).

tion. I think that Nietzsche's account of power (which he never took to be exclusively a matter of overt force) helps us understand the complex permutations of social relations and roles, which cannot be properly understood by way of binary opposites such as individual freedom and political coercion. The *limits* of freedom and force mark the ongoing debates in political philosophy, and the negotiated orchestration of these reciprocal limits marks the perennial deliberations of democratic politics.

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