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Tobias Joho¹
**Burckhardt and Nietzsche on the *Agōn*:
the dark luster of ancient Greece**

The discovery of the agonal mentality is widely recognized as one of Jacob Burckhardt's two foremost contributions to the study of ancient Greece (the other being his thesis about the distinctive character of the Greek *polis*). The term refers to the Greeks' strong commitment to competition as indeed not just an end itself, but the highest end available in human existence. The paradigmatic manifestation of the agonal spirit was athletic contest, but it took on a great variety of different forms and was eventually disseminated throughout all spheres of life, ranging from poetry to politics and from education to social entertainment. Over the years, several distinguished ancient historians have emphasized that Burckhardt's thesis concerning the agonal mentality has stood the test of time.²

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² See Hans Schaefer, *Staatsform und Politik: Untersuchungen zur griechischen Geschichte des 6. und 5. Jahrhunderts* (Leipzig: Dieterich, 1932), 175-86; Victor Ehrenberg, "Das Agonale," in *Ost und West: Studien zur geschichtlichen Problematik der Antike* (Brünn: Rohrer, 1935), esp. 65, 72-3, 94-6; Helmut Berve, "Vom agonalen Geist der Griechen," in *Gestaltende Kräfte der Antike* (Munich: Beck, 1966), esp. 1, 18-9; Moses I. Finley, *Ancient History: Evidence and Models* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1985), 3; Oswyn Murray, editor's introduction to *The Greeks and Greek Civilization*, by Jacob Burckhardt, trans. Sheila Stern (New York: St. Martin's, 1998), xxxii, xli; *idem*, "Burckhardt and the Archaic Age," in *Jacob Burckhardt und die Griechen: Vorträge einer Internationalen Fachkonferenz in Freiburg i.Br., 1.-5. September 2004*, ed. Leonhard Burckhardt and Hans-Joachim Gehrke (Basel: Schwabe, 2006), 257. Some scholars accept Burckhardt's emphasis on the strong influence of agonal mentality, but they are critical of the idea that it came to define the character of Greek politics: A. Heuss, "Die archaische Zeit Griechenlands als geschichtliche Epoche," *Antike und Abendland* 2 (1946), 57n.20; Leonhard

Burckhardt's *Cultural History of Greece* goes back to a course of lectures he delivered several times at the University of Basel from 1872 onwards, right around the time he became acquainted with Friedrich Nietzsche, who had become professor of classical philology at Basel in 1869. Nietzsche had a strong interest in the lectures on Greek cultural history: he attended some of them in person, asked students to make their lecture notes available to him, and repeatedly discussed Greek matters with Burckhardt.³ Beyond their largely overlapping views about Greek culture and thought, they both took a critical stance vis-à-vis the rising age of modernity and the cultural deformations that, they believed, came in its wake.

Burckhardt and Nietzsche deserve joint credit for their recognition of a distinctly Greek type of pessimism. They draw attention to the Greeks' profound awareness of the misery and suffering of human existence, but they argued that this insight, far from inducing life-denying disgust, found its expression in serene and enchanting artistic form, which ultimately had a life-affirming effect.⁴ Attention to the distinctive ambiguity besetting Greek

Burckhardt, "Vom 'Agon' zur 'Nullsummenkonkurrenz,'" *Nikephoros* 12 (1999): 79, 92.

³ See Felix Stähelin, editor's introduction to *Griechische Kulturgeschichte*, vol. 1, vol. 8 of *Jacob Burckhardt-Gesamtausgabe* (Basel: Schwabe, 1930), xxiii-xxix.

⁴ See Burckhardt, *Griechische Kulturgeschichte* (GK), II, 359-64 [95-9]; Nietzsche, *Geburt der Tragödie*, § 3, KSA I, 34-7. References to Burckhardt's work are to the following edition: Jacob Burckhardt, *Griechische Kulturgeschichte*, 4 vols, (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1977). I explain why I cite this edition in Joho, "The Internal Commotion of Greek Culture: Jacob Burckhardt on the Defeat of Athens in the Peloponnesian War," *Ktèma* 42 (2017): 128n.2. Italicized numbers in square brackets refer to the abridged English translation of the *Griechische Kulturgeschichte: The Greeks and Greek Civilization*, ed. Oswyn Murray, trans. Sheila Stern (New York: St. Martin's, 1998). References to Nietzsche's works are to *Sämtliche Werke: Kritische Studienausgabe*, 15 vols, ed.azzino Montinari and Giorgio Colli (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1980). Nietzsche's posthumously published essay "Homers Wettkampf," originally written in 1872, will be our main reference point for his views on Greek competition. In citations of this work, italicized numbers in square brackets refer to the English translation by

culture, the indissoluble interaction of ennobling and terrifying forces, is Burckhardt's and Nietzsche's shared contribution to the study of Greek antiquity. Their shared interest in the ἀγών reflects this general aspect of their engagement with ancient Greece. In what follows, I will show that Burckhardt and Nietzsche agree that the agonal mentality infused Greek culture with a tremendous vitality, a force that was largely responsible for the rise of individualism and the Greeks' outstanding cultural achievements. At the same time, Burckhardt and Nietzsche highlight that the relentless commitment to competition and exertion also had a dark underside. While they agree about this daemonic dimension, they differ considerably in their specific account, and their ultimate appraisal, of this aspect.

The splendor of agonal Greece

To appreciate the central importance that Burckhardt attaches to *agōn*, one only has to bear in mind the fact that he calls the epoch now designated as archaic the agonal age.⁵ While not restricted to this era, it was then, according to Burckhardt, that the *agōn* fully came to flourish and achieved its pure form (*GK IV*, 88 [165]). For Burckhardt, the central precondition for the rise of the *agōn* is the freedom, combined with equality, that prevailed among the aristocracies of archaic Greece (*GK IV*, 85 [163]): competition for the sake of assessing individual excellence could only take place in the absence of both despotic rule and of rigidly hierarchical society. Freedom was necessary because the high value assigned to individual achievement, the *sine qua non* for genuine competition, would not have been conceivable if a man's worth had been determined, not by personal achievement, but by his fixed place in a strict social hierarchy. Moreover, without basic equality, at least among the aristocracy, people would have lacked peers of equal rank and ability, an indispensable ingredient if a genuine competition with open outcome was to take place.

Christa Davis Acampora in *Nietzscheana* 5 (1996): 1-8. On a few occasions, I have adapted the translation of specific passages.

⁵ Murray, "Burckhardt and the Archaic Age," 253.

The requirement of freedom shows why Burckhardt, and Nietzsche in his wake, took the agonal mentality to be distinctive of Greek culture. In a critique of Burckhardt's thesis, Ingomar Weiler has argued that fondness of athletic competitions was not a unique feature of ancient Greece, and that other ancient societies, too, attached great value to athletic contests and made them the subject of some of their myths.⁶ However, the attitude that Burckhardt and Nietzsche found in the Greeks goes beyond a general liking of athletics and admiration for the victors: on their view, the Greeks alone considered victory in the essentially useless agonal contests to be the highest achievement of human beings, greater than any feat, for instance, in the spheres of war and politics. Only if competition is charged with this extreme degree of significance, and only if success raises a victorious individual in the eyes of the community to otherwise unattainable heights, does commitment to athletic excellence require freedom and become irreconcilable with a rigid social hierarchy.

As a result of the Greeks' extremely high regard for athletic competition, the agonal mentality came to affect all significant areas of Greek life and became one of the driving forces of Greek culture. Both Burckhardt and Nietzsche emphasize this ubiquity of the agonal mentality, each illustrating it by a favorite passage from extant Greek sources. Burckhardt (*GK* IV, 89-90 [166]) refers to Herodotus' account of Cleisthenes of Sicyon, who searched a worthy groom for his daughter Agariste by inviting suitors from the various regions of Greece to present themselves for a competition; he tested them for a whole year in a comprehensive range of disciplines and activities, with a view to assessing their athletic and musical abilities as well as their general character (Herodotus, *Histories* 6.126-130). Nietzsche, in turn, cites Hesiod's description of two types of strife, one good and one bad, in lines 11-26 of the *Works and Days* (*KSA* I, 786 [3]). The good strife is a

⁶ Ingomar Weiler, *Der Agon im Mythos* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1974), 272-313, esp. 310-3. For a defense of Burckhardt's and Nietzsche's position against Weiler's critique, see: Hartmut Schröter, *Historische Theorie und geschichtliches Handeln: Zur Wissenschaftskritik Nietzsches* (Mittenwald: Mäander, 1982), 107-8, 352n.85

pervasive competitive orientation, which pits all ranks of human beings against each other: for instance, not just singer against singer, but also beggar against beggar. Taken together, the two passages show that Burckhardt and Nietzsche regarded *agōn* as a pervasive organizing principle of Greek life.

The third crucial feature that Burckhardt and Nietzsche jointly ascribe to the *agōn* is its effect of calling forth individual talent. Due to the constant urge to excel in direct contest with others and in a wide array of activities, the Greeks had a strong incentive to develop the full ambit of all their capacities to the highest degree.⁷ In a memorable phrase, Burckhardt calls the agonal spirit “a motive power known to no other people—the general leavening element that, given the essential condition of freedom, proved capable of working upon the will and the potentialities of every individual” (GK IV, 84 [162]). Nietzsche agreed: “[E]very great Hellene passes on the torch of the contest; every great virtue sets afire new greatness” (KSA I, 788 [4]).

The fourth central aspect of the agonal mentality stressed by both Burckhardt and Nietzsche, is the stimulation of a singular flourishing of the arts. Nietzsche draws a contrast between what he sees as a deep-seated modern distaste for personal rivalry as a source of artistic production and the Greek tendency to conceive of the artist exclusively in terms of direct competition with his peers (KSA I, 790-91 [6]). Greeks “know the artist *only in personal conflict*,” so that “where modern man senses the weakness of the work of art, the Hellene looks for the source of its highest power” (KSA I, 790 [6]). The modern aversion diagnosed by Nietzsche presumably originates from the suspicion that art, stimulated by the external impulse of rivalry will lack the purity of inner inspiration. Nietzsche implies that the withdrawal of the modern subjective artist into the inner self runs the risk of condemning art to solipsism and lack of urgency; by contrast, the Greek spirit of

⁷ A nice illustration of how the *agōn* led to the full development of innate potentials, and how it climaxed in outstanding individuals, is provided by Burckhardt’s reference to the report in Athenaeus of Alcibiades’s tour of the major regions of Greece (GK IV, 193 [231]). Athenaeus 12.534b [Kaibel]; Aelianus *Varia Historia* 4.15.

rivalry forged a link between artistic production and the vitalizing concern for self-affirmation. Burckhardt, in turn, stresses that the Greeks were unique among all ancient civilizations in forging a link between competition and the cultic sphere, in which the production of poetry and music was embedded. Through the infusion of Greek cult with *agōn*, competition came to dominate literary production: “[T]o a great extent the art of poetry develops under the determining influence of the agon” (GK IV, 113 [182]). Burckhardt cites the rise of tragedy, comedy, and a significant portion of choral lyric, all of which were produced in an agonal framework.

The high regard for competition resulted in the organization of Greek education according to the agonal mentality (KSA I, 789 [5]; GK IV, 115 [183]), which contributed to the establishment of a unified Greek culture. This aspect is important because Burckhardt and Nietzsche regarded the lack of such a vital and authoritative culture as one of the dire impoverishments that confront humanity under the conditions of modernity. Nietzsche remarks that Greek popular education considered it self-evident that “[e]very talent must develop by fighting” (KSA I, 789 [5]). Because education revolved around the most noble agonal pursuits (i.e. gymnastics as well as music and poetry), sophistication in these areas became widespread. As Burckhardt observes, Greek poets would not perform in public if they did not have a jury that would assess them, but this hardly ever posed a problem because, wherever they showed up, sophisticated judges quickly came forward.⁸

While Burckhardt and Nietzsche fully agree on the pervasiveness and formative role of the *agōn* in Greek culture, they give different accounts of the influence of the agonal principle on the sphere of politics and war. For Burckhardt, the *agōn* in the pristine form of the archaic age was an unadulterated striving for excellence as pure end in itself. On Burckhardt’s view, lack of any practical purpose is the very definition of the *agōn* (GK IV, 85 [163]). However, in the fifth century the guiding lights of Greek

⁸ In support of this claim, Burckhardt cites Theocritus, where cowherds and woodcutters are depicted as adept in poetic judgment (GK IV, 114 [182]).

civilization shifted from athletic competition to domestic and foreign (i.e. inter-city) politics: the great triumphs of Athens in the Persian Wars had turned the attention of the entire Greek world to this arena (GK IV, 202-203 [238]). Despite their intensity, Burckhardt considered these political struggles “a false agon” (GK IV, 203 [238]) because the contestants did not seek political ascendancy as an end in itself, but as a source of material gain and self-interested advancement.⁹

By contrast, several examples that Nietzsche cites to illustrate the nature of Greek competition come from the political realm. He even holds that the political instrument of ostracism had an agonal origin. Referring to the episode of the banishment of Hermodorus by the Ephesians, Nietzsche mentions that they resorted to this measure because, on their own admission, they did not want to have anyone among themselves who would be better than all others.¹⁰ From this explanation, Nietzsche draws the conclusion that the standard modern interpretation of ostracism (i.e. that it functioned to banish potential insurgents) misses its original purpose. Instead, Nietzsche thinks that its point was to maintain genuine competition among equally matched contestants. If an individual distinguished himself too much in the political contest, the game lost its appeal because the winner became predictable. Thus, the original purpose of ostracism was to keep the political contest vital and exciting, to function, as Nietzsche writes, not as “a safety valve” but as “a means of stimulation” (KSA I, 789 [5]). Whereas Burckhardt held that competition could no longer be genuine when it came to be about power and influence, Nietzsche thought that the Greeks’ commitment to competition was so strong that they were primarily concerned with competition for its own sake even when competing over political clout.

⁹ On Burckhardt’s account of the political transformation of the agonal principle, see Joho, “The Internal Commotion,” 137-8.

¹⁰ The episode is transmitted in a fragment of Heraclitus: Diels/Kranz 22 B 121 = Strabo 14.1.25; Cicero *Tusculan Disputations* 5.105.

Burckhardt on the dark side of the agonal spirit

Already before Burckhardt, Ernst Curtius, the esteemed excavator of Olympia, had described the Greeks' competitive mentality as a defining feature of Greek culture.¹¹ Curtius, who stood in the unbroken tradition of German philhellenism, regarded competition as an unequivocally beneficent institution, a stimulus that tended to bring out the best in people. In marked contrast, Burckhardt broke entirely new ground as he highlighted several terrifying features of the agonal mentality.

Weiler has pointed out that Burckhardt was the first to use the adjective "agonal" to describe the Greeks' competitive frame of mind.¹² By contrast, Curtius avoided it,¹³ probably because the Greek word ἀγών has some rather gloomy connotations. Moses Finley calls it "an untranslatable word, normally rendered by the pale 'athletic competition' or by 'struggle,' neither of which captures the overtones as well as its English descendant, 'agony.'"¹⁴ Helmut Berve takes a similar view: "The competition, which often was extremely dangerous for the contestants, required a maximum exertion of force, so that the word 'agonia' came to signify exertion or anxiety and the adjective 'athlios,' which was derived from 'athlos,' the word for contest, meant hardship and misery."¹⁵ In choosing "agonal" as his preferred adjective, Burckhardt tries to capitalize on these connotations in order to underline his view of the ἀγών as, in Oswyn Murray's words, "a dark and demonic power, as dangerous as it is creative."¹⁶

¹¹ Ernst Curtius, "Der Wettkampf," in *Alterthum und Gegenwart: Gesammelte Reden und Aufsätze*, vol. 1 (Berlin: Hertz, 1875), 132-47.

¹² Ingomar Weiler, "AIEN APIΣTEYEIN: Ideologiekritische Bemerkungen zu einem vielzitierten Homerwort," 1 (1975): 203.

¹³ Curtius used the term "Wettkampf" (competition). Despite their divergent interpretations of ancient Greece, Curtius and Burckhardt esteemed each other. See: Karl Christ, *Griechische Geschichte und Wissenschaftsgeschichte, Historia Einzelschriften 106* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 1996), 138-40; also Murray, "Burckhardt and the Archaic Age," 251-3.

¹⁴ Finley, *Ancient History: Evidence and Models*, 3.

¹⁵ Berve, "Vom agonalen Geist," 3 [my translation].

¹⁶ Murray "Burckhardt and the Archaic Age," 253.

Burckhardt is most explicit about the daemonic underside of the agonal spirit when discussing its grim effect on the psychic constitution of the athletes: "No true happiness could result from the concentration of the whole life on a few seconds of terrible tension; the suspense must have meant anticlimax, or profound anxiety about the future, for those involved" (GK IV, 103 [175]). In this way, Burckhardt diagnoses a radical split running through the athletes' existence: while bright luster and nearly superhuman glory attached themselves to victors at the great athletic contests, they also suffered from psychic deformation induced by pent up suspense and enervating tension. One must consider Burckhardt's account against the backdrop of philhellenism's cherished tenet that the Greeks achieved an ideal balance of mind and body, and that they integrated physical and mental powers in natural, seamless harmony.¹⁷ Burckhardt's observation that the athletes' splendid physical appearance went along with anguish and mental overextension runs directly counter to this notion.

With the following anecdote recorded by Pausanias (6.8.4), Burckhardt illustrates the pointlessness that imperiled existence once advanced age prevented an athlete from participation in competition. After his retirement, a certain Timanthes, a former pancratiast, submitted himself to the daily exercise of bending a massive bow. Upon return from an extended trip, he found that he was no longer able to perform this exercise. In response, he lit a funeral pyre, placed himself on top of it, and burned himself alive (GK IV, 103-4 [175]). According to Burckhardt, the exaltation of competition risked stripping life of any possibility of satisfaction beyond the narrow confines established by success in the *agōn*.

Weighing the sorrow of the many losers against the happiness of the few victors in the athletic competitions, Burckhardt arrives at the conclusion that, in sum, the unhappiness of the former vastly outweighed the bliss of the latter (GK II, 360 [96]). In addition, he

¹⁷ See, for instance, Ernst Curtius, "Die Kunst der Hellenen," in *Alterthum und Gegenwart*, vol. 1, 83: "The notion of a harmonious development of spiritual and bodily nature has been first conceived and ... actualized by the Greeks" [my translation].

considers even the alleged happiness of the select few to be marred: he harbors doubts about the wisdom of a form of life whose overriding goal was the momentary experience of personal “elation” (“Hochgefühl,” GK II, 360 [96]) derived from the purely external standard set by the judgement of others. Thus, according to Burckhardt, the Greeks, whose exemplary happiness had been a favorite theme of philhellenism, in fact turned out to suffer, in large numbers, from unhappiness.¹⁸ Burckhardt considers precisely the *agōn* to be the source of widespread misery.

Nietzsche on Hesiod’s good strife

Just like Burckhardt, and unlike the idealist school of thought, Nietzsche is fully aware of the intense psychological states evoked by the *agōn*. On Nietzsche’s view, the agonal mentality incited fierce impulses in the contestants, producing a situation that has little in common with the ideal, propagated by philhellenism, of a happy harmony of soul. During his reflections on Hesiod’s bad and good strife, Nietzsche points out that the good strife, which is the origin of all competition, induces emotions of anger (κοτέει) and envy (φθονέει). He observes that “nothing separates the Greek world from ours as much as the coloring...of individual ethical concepts” (KSA I, 786 [3]). The Greeks, in marked contrast to the moderns, regarded seemingly negative impulses such as strife, anger, and envy as beneficial forces.

Whereas Burckhardt thought that the violent impulses stirred up in competition contributed to widespread unhappiness, Nietzsche takes an entirely different view. He tries to reimagine from a first-person perspective how the Greeks experienced anger, envy, and strife: “Greek man is *envious* and does not feel this quality to be a blemish but the effect of a *beneficent deity*” (KSA, I,

¹⁸ The pride of place taken by the idea of Greek happiness is well captured by the beginning of Schiller’s poem *The Gods of Greece*: “Da ihr noch die schöne Welt regiertet / An der Freude leichtem Gängelband ...” (= “Ye in the age gone by, / Who ruled the world ... / In the light leading-strings of careless joy!”). In Friedrich Schiller, *Sämtliche Gedichte*, ed. Georg Kurscheidt, vol. 1 of *Werke und Briefe* (Frankfurt am Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1992), 162. For the English translation, see “The Gods of Greece,” <https://www.poemhunter.com/poem/the-gods-of-greece/>.

787 [3-4]). Instead of turning inward and dwelling on the emotional upheaval caused by strong impulses, the Greeks simply took them for granted: “Greek genius accepted the undisputable existence of this terrible drive and thought it *justified*” (KSA I, 785-86 [2]). Far from being unsettled and aggrieved by aggressive emotions, suggests Nietzsche, the Greeks felt invigorated by their upsurge. Since the Greeks, unlike the moderns, were not given to inwardness and self-reflection, their main concern was not with *how* a specific impulse felt, but *that* one felt it. Burckhardt’s emphasis on the negative emotional effects of the agonal mentality would probably have struck Nietzsche as an instance of a distinctively modern sensitiveness. Nonetheless, Nietzsche admits that the Greeks’ competitive spirit had a dismal origin.

In terms that closely recall the fundamental Dionysian insight as described in the *Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche writes that the Greeks of the pre-Homeric era recognized chaos, eternal flux, terror, suffering, and struggle as the core of the world and the fundamental basis of existence.¹⁹ Faced with the glimpse into this primordial abyss, however, the Greeks avoided the threat of world-denying disgust by saving themselves through the rise of the agonal mentality. Accepting conflict as part and parcel of the nature of existence, they transformed the harrowing principle of strife into a promotive force: the contained and organized strife of competition. According to Nietzsche, the agonal mentality is identical with Hesiod’s good strife: “Wettkampf” supersedes “Vernichtungskampf” (KSA I, 787 [3]).

Nietzsche has packed a complex account of how the Greeks achieved this transformation into his short essay. They based the containment of primordial strife on the arousal of the individual’s desire for self-distinction. This paradox (containment through arousal) is central to Nietzsche’s account of the Greeks’ attempt to channel the explosive energy of strife. A concrete objective came into view, and the pursuit of individual distinction focused the previously blind and sprawling discharge of destructive energy. However, further modifications had to be applied to this clearly

¹⁹ *Die Geburt der Tragödie*, § 3, KSA I, 35-6.

demarcated pursuit in order to endow it with a stable form. The Greeks applied three regulatory mechanisms to primordial strife according to Nietzsche: (1) identification of self-distinction with the city's interest; (2) encouragement of rivalry; (3) homogeneity between human and divine envy. All of these refinements of initially unbounded aggression had the dual purpose of simultaneously unleashing and curbing the force of strife.

The first effort to promote the good strife begins with the realization that the discharge of energy through self-distinction requires freedom: according to Nietzsche, "individuals were freer in antiquity" than their modern counterparts (*KSA I*, 790 [6]). As Herman Siemens has pointed out, "freedom" in the relevant sense consists, not in the negative freedom from any kind of external inference, but in the positive capacity to unfold innate potentials.²⁰ Siemens has also observed that this positive conception of freedom requires "tangible goals" and realization in action.²¹ Both of these requirements must be fulfilled if freedom is not to remain a purely formal and empty capacity. First, one must get clear about the goal in pursuit of which one will actualize one's capacity for freedom. However, the mere identification of such an aim is not enough. For instance, what it really takes to perform at an athletic contest can only be appreciated when one actually goes through the training, travels to the site of the contest, and meets the challenge of the competition. Only through the leap from vague conception to fulfilment in action, can dormant potential realize itself, acquire a tangible shape, and infuse existence with energy.

This picture raises two questions: what goals are worth pursuing, and how can people become aware of them? According to Nietzsche, the Greeks' answer to the first question was that these goals were to be found in a vibrant, exhilarating culture; the answer to the second was that the highest ambition of the *polis* was to commit its members to the pursuit of the objectives provided by

²⁰ Herman Siemens, "Nietzsche *contra* Liberalism on Freedom," in *A Companion to Nietzsche*, ed. Keith Ansell-Pearson (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 443.

²¹ Siemens, "Nietzsche *contra* Liberalism," 443.

culture: "The 'useless' waste of energy (in any kind of agon) as an ideal to which the state aspires (*in opposition to the Romans*)" (NL 1888: 8 [15], KSA X, 336). As Hartmut Schröter points out, culture in the relevant sense consists of "activities which can have their purpose in themselves: in which existence fulfills itself."²² Thus, applied to ancient Greece, the term culture refers to athletic competition as well as the arts. By considering the promotion of culture as its highest ideal, the city came to equate the individual's distinction in intrinsically purposeful activity with the advancement of the city's own glory (KSA I, 789-90 [5-6]): a citizen could do the city no greater service than achieving victory in competition. In binding its citizens to these ideals, the *polis* offered them the inherently valuable objectives without which positive freedom had to remain chimerical. This identification of the purposes of the individual with those of the city seemed natural enough because, as Nietzsche could learn from Burckhardt, the Greeks conceived of the city as a living organism and of the citizens as its integral components (GK I, 74 [55]).

On Nietzsche's account, the identification between individual excellence and interest of the city functioned simultaneously as a stimulus and a check: "with this his selfishness was enflamed, with this it was bridled and restrained" (KSA I, 790 [6]). The desire for self-distinction was curbed because the contestants, receiving the goals indispensable for freedom from the city, also had to accept the restricting rules that likewise came from the city. This acceptance was necessary because a breakdown of the city would have been tantamount to the breakdown of the institution that made intrinsically worthwhile pursuits possible. Siemens draws attention to the paradoxical character of Nietzsche's account: "Where the individual sees himself as a mere instrument for the good of the community, he is free; to be free, an individual's actions must be under the constraints, the pressure imposed by the interests of the community."²³ While the paradox is genuine, it is important to realize that, by inciting competition, the city did not

²² Schröter, *Historische Theorie und geschichtliches Handeln*, 112 [my translation].

²³ Siemens, "Nietzsche *contra* Liberalism," 442-3.

exploit the individual for its exogenous utilitarian purposes, be they economic or military. Instead, according to Nietzsche, it provided the condition necessary for individual self-realization. In this connection, Nietzsche would probably not deny Burckhardt's point that the incitement of competition frequently involved sorrow and hardship for the individual. However, on Nietzsche's view, this is the price to be paid if one wants culture to be capable of charging existence with meaning.

The second, obviously related, measure by which the Greeks turned strife into a beneficial force was the promotion of rivalry. What stands behind it is the realization that action essentially requires obstacles. According to Nietzsche, the indispensability of obstacles for human self-development was the fundamental insight that separates Greek pedagogy from modern educational ideals: "Every talent must develop by fighting" (*KSA I*, 789 [5]).²⁴ The idea that rivalry is necessary for action is an intensification of the aforementioned notion that self-realization requires the imposition of goals by the city. The common denominator is the thought that action cannot take place in the absence of certain external factors. Awareness of goals is by itself insufficient to call forth action and, via action, self-realization. Taken by themselves, goals have an abstract and remote character. It takes the challenge of a rival for aspiration to gain traction. The rival adds a personal element to the relationship between the individual and his or her goal; it makes the relationship between goal and agent compelling.

In rivalry, too, the element of stimulation is complemented by a containing mechanism. The obstacles that rivals put in the way of a free discharge of energy provide a reference point for the individual's striving. The rival functions as a model: by desiring to outdo him, the contender wants to surpass the specific benchmark that his opponent has set. In addition, the permanent challenge by others requires each contestant to prove himself constantly anew.

²⁴ Siemens, "Nietzsche *contra* Liberalism," 445, unpacks this claim as follows: "[E]ach capacity can only become what it is through antagonistic striving against others ... [F]ree action needs the resistance of others as *both* a stimulant *and* a limit on the forms it can take."

It will invariably happen that on different occasions different contenders come out first. In this way, the obstacle set up by rivals forestalls the excess of personal presumption. Burckhardt's example of Agariste's Athenian suitor who danced away his victory provides a nice illustration of this threat: inebriated by his success, the Athenian puts on a grotesque dance performance which offends the standards of aesthetic propriety (GK IV, 147-48 [205]). However, because he is up against competitors who observe the rules of the game, this transgression can immediately be penalized, and the sought-after bride goes to a competitor. Thus, rivalry, too, functions both as a stimulus and a constraint according to Nietzsche.

A third regulatory mechanism of the Greeks' agonal mentality was the notion of divine envy. Nietzsche observes that the Greeks "felt" envy "to be ... the effect of a *beneficent* deity" (KSA I, 787 [3-4]). Nietzsche's phrasing deserves careful attention: when experiencing envy, the Greeks "feel" that a divine force has entered them. Envy is not taken to be a private and purely internal feeling, it is a universal force and has a divine origin outside of the human being. Envy, and the rivalry it induces, therefore, must not be repressed but welcomed. At the same time, Nietzsche emphasizes that the Greeks placed an absolute ban on the human desire to rival the gods lest they attract divine envy. He observes that just this one time, the Greeks did not take up the gauntlet. Instead, they practiced moderation and tried to contain their own splendor in order not to offend the god. This act of submission did not alienate human beings from the gods (KSA I, 787 [4]). "Because he [sc. Greek man] is envious, he also feels, at every excess ... the envious eyes of a god resting on him" (KSA I, 787 [4]).

The Greeks viscerally felt that the envy they experienced was a divine gift: an enlivening force that forged a close link between themselves and the gods. They conceived of their gods in Burckhardt's words, as "ideal humans" (GK III, 19).²⁵ In this way, the gods became the ennobling embodiment of natural human instincts. The Greeks held natural impulses to be sacred: when

²⁵ Cf. Christian Meier, *Politik und Anmut* (Berlin: Siedler, 1985), 27.

feeling sexual passion, they took themselves to be affected by the power of Aphrodite, and when experiencing drunkenness, they thought Dionysus had infused them with his power.²⁶ Denial of the sacredness of the gods would be to deny the sacredness of the Greeks' own vital inclinations. Thus, defiance of divine envy, far from being an act of self-aggrandizement, would in fact amount to self-abnegation. In this way, the divine origin and justification of envy produced the same effect as the identification of the *agōn* with the ideals of the *polis* and the promotion of personal rivalry: it simultaneously activated and curbed the desire for self-distinction.

While he admires the Greeks' transformation of strife into a productive force, Nietzsche also makes clear that the equilibrium between order and primordial chaos was bound to be precarious. In the political arena in particular, it was always possible that one contestant might get so far ahead of all his rivals that further competition effectively became pointless. In this case, the consequences were invariably dire: a relapse to "that pre-Homeric abyss, a horrible ferocity of hate and desire to annihilate" (KSA I, 791 [6]). With reference to Miltiades's transformation after Marathon, Nietzsche illustrates that Greeks who had emancipated themselves from the contest displayed a fatal inclination to indulge in cruelty, debauchery, and megalomania. He says that this regression happened all too frequently: "when a great personality, through a tremendously splendid deed, is suddenly removed from the contest" (KSA I, 791 [6]). This passage implies that rivalry took precedence over the other two regulatory mechanisms dedicated to the promotion of good strife; once rivalry was out of the picture, the remaining two factors were not strong enough to contain the baneful potential of strife. Whereas the identification between individual glory and common good and the fear of divine envy involved the acknowledgment of firm boundaries, the element of rivalry turned on a free play of forces. Thus, the least stable of the three regulatory mechanisms was the only really effective one. For

²⁶ On this notion of the divine, see David K. O'Connor, *Plato's Bedroom: Ancient Wisdom and Modern Love* (South Bend: St. Augustine's Press, 2015), 4-9.

all that it had to commend itself in Nietzsche's eyes, the Greeks' response to the equivocalness of strife was not without fatal flaw.

Nietzsche and Burckhardt *vis-à-vis* the legacy of philhellenism

While the *agōn* could not permanently stabilize the destructive force of strife, Nietzsche nonetheless thinks that competition enabled the Greeks, as long as things went well, to strike a balance between the natural predisposition towards aggressive self-expression and the necessity to curb this impulse. In this way, Nietzsche's account of the *agōn* is in line with one of the central tenets of philhellenism: the idea that the Greeks' signal feature was their exemplary capacity to achieve balance and harmony between opposite dispositions. On this view, antithetical capacities, far from cancelling each other out, achieve a harmonious unity by entering into a dynamic relationship that results in mutual intensification. The relevant dispositions, which seem like polar opposites, resemble complementary colors whose juxtaposition likewise has the effect of heightening the vibrancy of them both.

On several occasions in "Homer's Competition," Nietzsche describes the effect of the *agōn* according to the philhellenic model just outlined. The contestants were to "incite each other to action while keeping each other within the limits of measure" (KSA I, 789 [5]). While the repetition of the phrase "each other" underlines the aspect of mutual intensification, the antithesis between "action" and "limits of measure" as well as between "inciting" and "keeping within," reflects the idea of polarity. The same analysis applies to Nietzsche's observation that every Greek wished to benefit his city through victory at one of the great contests: "with this his selfishness was enflamed, with this it was bridled and restrained" (KSA I, 790 [6]). Compare this with the notebook entry about the benefit of contest: "Competition unleashes the individual, while at the same time restraining it in accordance with eternal laws" (NL 1871/72: 16 [22], KSA VII, 402). In both passages, one and the same institution functions both as a spur and a rein ("enflamed" vs. "bridled and restrained;" "unleashes" vs. "restraining"), thus achieving unity between the antithetical powers of stimulation and containment.

Here, Nietzsche draws on a theme that has deep roots in the tradition of German philhellenism that includes Friedrich Schiller,²⁷ Wilhelm von Humboldt,²⁸ Friedrich Schlegel,²⁹ and G.W.F. Hegel.³⁰ All of these writers provide evidence for the notion that the Greeks achieved a seamless integration of capacities that normally tend to be at odds with each other: natural simplicity and cultural refinement (Schiller and Humboldt), realism and imaginativeness (Humboldt), ferociousness and gentleness (Schlegel), organic rootedness in custom and individualism (Hegel). In claiming that competition induced both vital energy and restraint in the Greeks, Nietzsche is an heir of philhellenic idealism; however, the forces unleashed in strife according to Nietzsche evidently have a harsher and more explosive cast than one typically finds in notions of Greek harmony. Whereas the idealist thinkers tend to emphasize Greek gentleness and describe the harmony evinced by Greek culture as a midpoint between extremes,³¹ Nietzsche avoids language that bears connotations of mildness, balance, concord, and the golden mean. Instead, he emphasizes the dynamic interaction of adversarial impulses, whose unity, as we have seen, always remains precarious.

²⁷ F. Schiller, *Über Anmut und Würde*, in *Theoretische Schriften*, ed. Rolf-Peter Janz, vol. 8 of *Werke und Briefe* (Frankfurt: Deutscher Klassiker, 1992), 334.

²⁸ W. v. Humboldt to F.A. Wolf, December 1, 1792, in *Briefe*, vol. 2, ed. Philipp Mattson (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2015), 107. W. von Humboldt to F. Schiller, November 6, 1795, in *Briefe*, vol. 3, ed. Mattson (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2017), 131.

²⁹ F. Schlegel, *Über die Sprache und Weisheit der Indier*, in *Studien zur Philosophie und Theologie*, ed. Ernst Behler and Ursula Struc-Oppenberg, vol. 8 of *Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe*, ed. Ernst Behler (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1975), 263.

³⁰ G.W.F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1986), 2.25.

³¹ See for instance: G.E. Lessing, *Laokoon*, ed. Wilfried Barner (Frankfurt: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 2007), 14; W. von Humboldt, "Ueber den Charakter der Griechen, die idealische und historische Ansicht desselben," in *Paralipomena*, vol. 7.2 of *Wilhelm von Humboldts Werke*, ed. Albert Leitzmann (Berlin: Behr, 1908), 610; A. W. Schlegel, *Vorlesungen über dramatische Kunst und Literatur*: part 1, vol. 5 of *Kritische Schriften und Briefe*, ed. Edgar Lohner (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1966), 26.

For all his admiration for Greek culture, Burckhardt took a more skeptical line than Nietzsche with regard to the *agōn*: his diagnosis of a split between external splendor and internal deformation dispenses with the idea that the Greeks achieved balance between antithetical inclinations. He thought that the agonal spirit did not just make life among the Greeks more vibrant, but that it simultaneously caused widespread unhappiness. This awareness of contradictory aspects, sharpened to the point of paradox, is typical of Burckhardt's ironic outlook, which often manifests itself in a reluctance to reduce the many-sidedness of historical experience to straightforward unequivocalness. To borrow a phrase used by Karl Reinhardt of the representation of Greek victory in the *Agamemnon* of Aeschylus, Burckhardt juxtaposes image against counter-image³²: recognizing two sides of the agonistic principle (obverse and reverse, one uplifting and the other horrifying), he accepts that both of them belong together and that both are genuine and significant, but he does not see them dovetail in an overarching harmony. Nietzsche, despite his anti-classical willingness to endorse some of the harsh evaluations that he finds in the Greeks, is more inclined than Burckhardt to accept, albeit in altered form, the core belief of classicism.

Conclusion

For the most part, Burckhardt's and Nietzsche's accounts of *agōn* in Greek life run along similar lines. They differ, however, in their evaluation of the agonal spirit: whereas on Burckhardt's view its violent and destructive side was never far away and always afflicted the inner life of the Greeks, Nietzsche thought that the dire excess inherent in strife was contained by the *agōn*, and that it only reared its ugly head when competition broke down.

This divergence has much to do with a basic difference in outlook. In all his historical works, Burckhardt was sensitive to the personal suffering of the losers and the countless anonymous victims of the course of history. In the final section of his so-called *Reflections on World History*, he contrasts the cult of great men with

³² Karl Reinhardt, *Aischylos als Regisseur und Theologe* (Bern: Francke, 1949), 80-1

a general indifference towards the victims of history: "Adopting an attitude of marked indifference, people treat the suffering of countless individuals as a 'passing misfortune;'" [...] "By and large, the proponents of this view enjoy an upbringing and way of life that rest entirely on circumstances attained at such cost, and so they practice leniency."³³ Based on Burckhardt's inclination to take suffering seriously, his conviction that the agonal mentality caused widespread unhappiness carries considerable weight. By contrast, the question of individual suffering is of no great importance to Nietzsche. For him, the central question was what it took for a culture to be vital, spirited, and a breeding ground for great human achievement—in other words, all those things that he found missing in modernity, Germany in particular.³⁴ On Nietzsche's view, an age that assigns the highest value to individual comfort and security may be quite successful in reducing suffering, but it cannot simultaneously hope to unleash the highest of human potentials. In its turn, it will suffer from its own drawbacks: shallowness, loss of striving, pettiness, apathy, depression.

Nietzsche was on a mission to search for ways to overcome the modern malaise, to revitalize life, and to fend off the specter of nihilism. As Rüdiger Safranski points out, Nietzsche's intellectual engagement with ancient Greece became part of this quest, and he was willing to affirm the exemplarity of the Greeks if they could show him what a culture that was genuinely alive might look like.³⁵

³³ Jacob Burckhardt, *Weltgeschichtliche Betrachtungen*, text established by Jacob Oeri, ed. Peter F. Ganz, in vol. 10 of *Jacob Burckhardt Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (Basel: Schwabe, 2000), 532 [my translation].

³⁴ See for instance *Unzeitgemässe Betrachtungen I: David Strauss*, § 1, KSA I, 162-3: "We must be dealing with a confusion when people talk about the victory of German education and culture, a confusion caused by the fact that Germany has lost any genuine notion of culture. Culture is above all unity of artistic style in all manifestations of a people's life" [my translation].

³⁵ R. Safranski, *Nietzsche: Biographie seines Denkens* (Munich: Hanser, 2000), 62-3.

Burckhardt largely agreed with Nietzsche that modernity was well on its way to producing a cultural and spiritual wasteland,³⁶ and that ancient Greece provided the counter image of a vibrant civilization, capable of endowing life with festive splendor and significance.³⁷ As Lionel Gossman wrote, Burckhardt's goal in delivering the lectures on the cultural history of Greece was the wish to uphold, to the extent possible, the continuity of "*Bildung*, the formation of thoughtful and cultivated human beings and citizens through reconnection with a past that is part of who we presently are."³⁸ Thus, Burckhardt, no less than Nietzsche, considered it part of his task to counteract the destructive effects of modernity and to promote cultural ideals, but his aspirations were more modest: the preservation of some sense of cultural continuity and historical awareness, as opposed to a comprehensive revitalization of culture.

In his quest for cultural renewal, Nietzsche was always on the lookout for what he considered to be genuine educators, great individuals such as Schopenhauer, Wagner, or Goethe, who might be able to open up new horizons of existential significance. Only with this concern in mind, it is possible to appreciate the full weight of the following quotation from *Twilight of the Idols*, one of Nietzsche's last works: "Educators are lacking, if we disregard the

³⁶ On Burckhardt's and Nietzsche's shared skepticism vis-à-vis modernity, see Richard Sigurdson, *Jacob Burckhardt's Social and Political Thought* (U. of Toronto Press, 2004), 216.

³⁷ Burckhardt's evocation of the atmosphere prevailing at the Olympian Games gives vivid expression to the luster of archaic Greek culture: "All this [sc. the physical discomfort involved in travelling to Olympia] was made up for by the tremendous mood of exaltation which prevailed there. [A]fter the separate contests are done with, the lovely light of the mild moon shines down and the whole area resounds with songs in praise of the victors ... Before this peaceful conclusion went an experience of tension exceeding anything we know from our modern race meetings, amidst a crowd of spectators all violently excited and showing great expertise in the detail of the various competitions. What is more, the setting was a magnificent site filled with works of art" (GK IV, 106 [177]).

³⁸ L. Gossman, *Basel in the Age of Burckhardt* (U. of Chicago Press, 2000), 313.

most exceptional of exceptions, the *first* prerequisite of education: hence the decline of German culture. One of those rarest exceptions is my venerable friend Jacob Burckhardt in Basel: it is to him above all that Basel owes its preeminence in humaneness."³⁹ Despite their widely different educational ambitions, Nietzsche looked to Burckhardt as one of those rarest of creatures: a true educator.⁴⁰

³⁹ *Götzendämmerung*, "Was den Deutschen abgeht," § 5, KSA VI, 107.

⁴⁰ I wish to thank Christoph Eucken, Heather Reid, and Christina Nurawar Sani, from whose advice this paper has profited substantively. Further thanks are due to the participants at Fonte Aretusa's conference on the *aqōn* for their questions and comments. All remaining mistakes are my sole responsibility.