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***Contesting Nietzsche*, by Christa Davis Acampora.
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Readers of Nietzsche will be struck by a series of puzzling oppositions that run through the fabric of all of his works: oppositions between the Apollinian and the Dionysian, between noble and slavish modes of valuation, between the will to ignorance and the will to knowledge, science and art, freedom and fate, and so on. What is puzzling about these pairings (at least to a careful reader) is that Nietzsche never seems to stand unequivocally on the side of any one of these oppositions, even if he appears to assign some kind of preferential value or priority to one of the opponents (say, to the noble mode of valuation over that of the slave, in *The Genealogy*). It is as if Nietzsche had wanted to keep these opposing forces on an equal footing so that no one contender could completely displace the other. As if what he was really after was the conflict itself and not its resolution in anyone's favor.

One of the virtues of Christa Davis Acampora's new book, *Contesting Nietzsche*, is that it tries to shed some much needed light on the significance of these unresolved (perhaps, unresolvable) tensions in Nietzsche's work. The principal thesis of the book is that, from very early on, Nietzsche was interested in a form of productive agonism or contest that could elevate and ennoble society as a whole, and not just its greatest exemplars. According to Acampora, one thing that was particularly important to Nietzsche is the way in which this productive contest could serve as a model for the project of carrying out a life-affirming reevaluation of values (a project that Nietzsche became increasingly concerned with, specially toward the end of his productive life).

In order to draw out the features of Nietzsche's understanding of creative agonism, Acampora organizes her investigation around five case studies that are elegantly woven together by a dialectical progression in which the philosophical issues surrounding one case naturally into the next one. The book begins with an examination of Nietzsche's inquiry into the origins of creative contention in ancient Greece as was manifested in the Homeric contests and, especially, in Attic Tragedy (chapters 1 and 2). The focus then shifts towards Nietzsche's criticisms of the Socratic model of psychic agonism that eventually came to replace Tragedy (chapter 3). According to Acampora, Nietzsche's alternative to this Socratic model consisted in developing the option that, in *Birth of Tragedy*, had already been suggested to him by the symbol of a music playing Socrates: that of renewing the agon between art and science, instead of simply capitulating to the latter, as the tone-deaf Socrates had done. Artful naturalism is the name Acampora gives to this nietzschean alternative. In examining it, she turns her attention to the different conceptions of the self, agency, and responsibility that spring from this new understanding of philosophy. In her view, Nietzsche sought to oppose such notions to those developed by radicalizers of the Socratic model, such as Paul and Wagner (chapters 4 and 5).

Although Acampora provides ample textual support for her claims, she does not really spend a lot of time carefully scrutinizing Nietzsche's writings. The reason for this, is that, as she herself lets on in a footnote, her main concern is to draw out from the texts features of Nietzsche's

agonism, not to defend novel interpretations of the texts themselves (p.217, n20); the footnote applies to her discussion of Tragedy, but it is indicative of pretty much the approach of the whole book. In my view, this strategy results in an unfortunate tendency to overlook important aspects and concerns of the passages being discussed, and to, therefore, often misinterpret their real import.

The analysis at the beginning of the book concerning the precise nature of the kind of agonism Nietzsche sought to promote is very insightful and illuminating, but it raises questions that, in my view, Acampora does not adequately address. Chief among them is the problem of understanding the way in which this kind of positive agon can provide some model for carrying out a reevaluation of values.

The principal lesson Acampora draws from her investigation is that agonistic institutions, such as Tragedy, enable opportunities for ennobling struggle by provoking a contest in which contenders do not seek to annihilate each other, but instead incite each other to creative reciprocal action while keeping each other within bounds (pp.64-65). At first, Acampora seems to claim that the potential for reevaluation in this arrangement is found in the fact that competitors in the contest “aspire to become standard bearers and thereby bring about a reformation of judgment generally” (p.25). The suggestion, then, is that in besting their opponent, and not simply in eliminating him, the momentary victor has an opportunity to reform the values that govern the institution in which he is participating by serving as the new measure for what constitutes distinction in the contest.

It seems clear, however, that this kind of reevaluation cannot be of the sort Nietzsche was really after. For on this model, the reevaluation consists simply in providing a new standard of excellence *within the value structure* that governs the contest, it does not consist in reformulating or questioning that value structure itself. Acampora herself acknowledges that it is the latter form of reevaluation that interests Nietzsche, when she criticizes those who would like to use his concept of agonism to articulate healthier forms of democratic practices for not being nietzschean enough,

since they are unwilling to admit as contestable larger democratic values, like those of freedom and equality (p.26). It is hard to see, however, how a model in which participants are simply trying to outdo each other in a contesting game that is structured around some mutually-agreed-upon and community-sanctioned value, like honor, strength, promise-keeping, or the like, can really afford the type of radical tools that would be needed to make any value contestable. For that to happen, something in the contest itself would need to incite its participants to try to break the rules of the game, so to speak, and renege on the value around which the contest revolves, or at least to radically transform it.

But, as far as I can tell, Acampora does not really provide examples that show this kind of dynamic; and, in fact, some of the examples she discusses raise worries that push in the opposite direction. This happens, for instance, in her discussion of Pindar’s ode in praise of Hagasidamos’s Olympic triumphs (pp.27-33). On Acampora’s analysis, the poem is meant to reinforce and restore the social practices of the community at the same time that it allows Pindar to increase his own value, but not at the expense of that of the community at large or of the boy whose triumphs he is singing about (pp.31-33). On this reading, then, there is a profoundly *conservative* undercurrent running through productive contests: they are meant to protect the economy of values sanctioned by the community, not to challenge it in any significant way. This aspect of the contest might be something to praise when the community in question is a Greek Polis of life-affirming and noble values, but what happens when we are dealing with decadent, life-denying communities of the sort Nietzsche thought modern societies were? Would the institutionalized contests, then, stand in the way of revaluing values and serve merely to reinforce the oppressive conservative structure already in place?

To be sure, in fairness to Acampora, it must be said that the nietzschean models of reevaluation she really has in mind are the ones exemplified by the Homeric Contests and Tragedy. Acampora claims that both of these examples fuel prospects for revising and reevaluating the ideals they themselves promote, by drawing others to contest

the aims and ends of the struggles that characterize human life (pp.48; 56). But – at least for this reader – the details of Acampora’s account of how these models draw us into revising our values are unclear, and at this point her discussion gets too caught up in generalities that hinder rather than promote a full appreciation of the mechanics that are supposedly involved. This is a place where her strategy of extracting lessons from the texts, instead of engaging in a careful interpretation of the texts themselves seems to work against her.

If I understand her correctly, at least in the case of Tragedy, the principal way Acampora sees this art form as inviting us to reevaluate our values and ends is by showing us their fragility and changeability (through the renewing and destructive influence of the Dionysian element operating within Tragedy), and by suggesting that they could be reissued in the light of new desirable ends we might wish to pursue (presumably through the influence of the Apollinian element, though, again, the details of how this is happening exactly are unclear to me) (pp.56; 61-62). But merely showing us that our values are not eternal and that we could reissue them if we reorganized our desires, does not seem to me to amount to an invitation to actually change them or to think that we do need to radically revise them; it does not seem to add up to an impulse or a desire to engage in the type of reevaluation that Acampora thinks Nietzsche sought to promote. Of course, Acampora also holds the – in my estimation – more controversial view, that in the play of the Dionysian and Apollinian forces in Tragedy “new economies of wants and needs and possibilities for satisfaction emerge and become shared with others” (p.63). For Acampora, Tragedy gives us ethical dilemmas that teach us “how to live our lives, how to *define* our ends and the means to their satisfaction” (p.64), which would imply that Tragedy gives us new goals to value, and therefore perhaps serves as a model for reevaluation.

I wish, however, that Acampora had provided a little more textual support for this claim for, when I read *Birth*, I do not find Nietzsche suggesting that Tragedy taught the Greeks new wants and needs, and new ways to satisfy them. In my view, if there is a lesson to learn from Tragedy, it is instead the one that Nietzsche himself

extracts in his own analysis of the tragedies of Oedipus and Prometheus in section 9: that fate is the price you pay for being free; that the dignity of man, his capacity to erect ever new and higher circles of culture, his freedom, in other words, to manipulate nature in novel ways instead of simply being manipulated by it like all other animals, is paid for with the flood of suffering and death that we all have to endure, and that often makes us wish we were not born in the first place (BT 9: p.71). According to Nietzsche, Tragedy reverses the potentially life-negating power contained in this realization, and allows us to instead become proud of our freedom by letting us experience directly the joy involved in being like the god (Dionysus) himself, that is, the joy in free creativity and destruction of the sort nature engages in blindly and that we can engage in deliberately. This is indeed a lesson, but one that does not teach any new goals or the means to attain them, instead it is a transformative (or transfiguring) lesson through which we learn to affirm our condition as free beings, and the necessary consequence that attaches to it: through Tragedy we learn, then, to pay gladly the price of our freedom, which is to suffer in a way in which no other creature does (among other things, by sometimes continuing to be tormented by the consequences of our free actions). Of course, the claims I am making about Tragedy will seem controversial, and others, presumably also Acampora, would disagree with my reading, which I cannot defend here. My complaint is not principally that Acampora does not have the correct reading of Tragedy, but that she does not take the time to interpret Nietzsche’s text in the careful way that would be needed to warrant the controversial reading she is defending.

Another place where it seems to me that Acampora’s otherwise very insightful analysis gets muddled is her discussion on “artful naturalism”, which in her view constitutes Nietzsche’s attempt at revitalizing the agon between science and art (p.77). On her reading, for Nietzsche both science and art are supposed to be equally preserved in their opposition without reducing either one to the other. Partly this means promoting a form of scientific and philosophical knowledge that is really a type of *Schein* (semblance)-making and

not a form of falsification (p.82). Acampora does not really elaborate much on what she means by falsification here, but she seems to be referring to a popular reading of Nietzsche as someone who thought that all our beliefs about the world (scientific or otherwise) are systematically false and, as a matter of principle, could never be true. There are, of course, many reasons why commentators would like to spare Nietzsche from this view, not the least of which is that in his writings Nietzsche himself appears to advance claims that he takes to be true and to oppose them to those of others which he thinks are false. But while it may be understandable why we might wish to distance Nietzsche from a falsification thesis, it is unclear to me what *Schein*-making amounts to if it is not a type of falsification.

For Acampora, what is distinctive about *Schein*-making is that it consists in applying inventive conceptual structures that are more suitable for capturing the real features of the world (p.92). At times she appears to suggest that such inventive conceptual structures are totally fictional, like when she claims that “[she takes] Nietzsche to be saying that our delusions and errors, our overly rough approximations and inventions, enable us, nevertheless, to acquire knowledge” (p.89). But if these conceptual schemes are fictitious because they do not really capture the reality of the world, then it is unclear how Nietzsche thought that they could nonetheless allow us to have veridical knowledge of that world. If the knowledge we gain is at bottom an error because we gain it through totally fictitious devices, then this would amount, contrary to what Acampora claims, to a kind of falsification thesis: what we call truth is in essence a falsehood with which we traffic, perhaps because we are in need of it in order to live our lives, or because we are so constituted that we cannot really shake it off. In my judgment, Acampora should have taken a little more time explaining the way in which these erroneous conceptual schemes are different from a falsification thesis of the garden variety sort; a lapse that is all the more worrisome to me because in two of the principal passages she cites in support of her view, namely, BGE 34 and 230, Nietzsche actually – on the face of it – seems to be endorsing a falsification thesis of some kind.

Of course, at other times, Acampora appears to claim that the conceptual schemes are not really erroneous in the sense I just implied, but consist rather in the creative “activities of selection, identification, coordination, and classification that are involved in naturalistic, scientific inquiry” (p.91). The creative conceptual schemes are thus *not fictional*, but simply *partial*; they give us an incomplete and simplified look into the world that helps us apprehend truths about that world. The error would consist of taking this partial picture to represent a complete one, something, of course, we should always guard against doing; but the schemes themselves are meant as veridical.

Overall, I think this is the picture that Acampora’s analysis is mainly wedded to. It is the one that seems to underlie her assertion that Nietzsche’s new soul hypotheses are better than Kant’s faculties in that, unlike the latter, they are not mere inventions (i.e. totally fictional) (p.94). This kind of *Schein*-making is indeed different from a falsification thesis, since on this view there is a veridical way the world is and our partial imaginative constructs (for example, Nietzsche’s soul hypotheses) are helping us to grasp it. But I wonder what is so distinctive about Nietzsche’s artful naturalism in that case; is this not the way all science, or at least all good science, has proceeded since its inception? When scientists proposed the existence of “phlogiston” in the 17th century, they were creatively attempting to image some scheme that could help them account for the empirical data available to them. Later, they found that a different imaginative scheme, “oxidation”, was better on that score, and they rightly rejected the “phlogiston” postulate as false. Good science always uses the powers of imagination and creativity to find better conceptual schemes through which we can understand the natural processes at work in our world. Scientists also, for the most part, seem to take those imaginative constructs as really true or, at the very least, as better approximations to what must be actually true of the world. In this sense, the “artistic”, understood as the imaginative, inventive, creative, and the like, has never been opposed to the “scientific” and it would seem really bizarre for Nietzsche to have ever thought that it was.

I am, thus, puzzled as to what Acampora thinks remains of the alleged opposition between science and art, that Nietzsche's "artful naturalism" is supposedly reigniting on her reading?

And this brings me to what, in my mind, is the most problematic aspect of Acampora's argument in the second part of the book and one that, I think, reveals a profound tension in her analysis that she never resolves. This consists in the fact that Acampora seems not to have sufficiently learned the very insightful lesson she herself imparted to us in the first part of her investigation: that for Nietzsche what was valuable about the contest is that the opposing forces are kept in a productive tension that should not be overcome, reconciled, or relaxed in some kind of synthesis or compromise (pp.72-73). The artful naturalism that Acampora is describing, however, is one in which not only does there seem to be no longer any real tension between art and science, but the former also has completely capitulated to the latter, and the main issue has become how to accommodate whatever is valuable about art to the truth as revealed by science. That sounds an awful lot like compromise to me, and moreover one that is dominated and dictated principally by the concerns of science. God forbid we should ever desecrate the temple of truth, with the soles of some little piece of untruth we might dare think is valuable for life, like the belief that we have agential control over our actions, if indeed it turns out that this belief is in conflict with our best science. Strangely, given her valuable insights into Nietzschean agonism, Acampora struggles in chapters 4 and 5 to develop a Nietzschean conception of the soul, agency, and responsibility that can be reconciled with what our science says about nature, on the premise that Nietzsche sought this kind of reconciliation and that he wanted to combat the modern ideal that prizes willing and ties it to responsibility, autonomy, and freedom (p.101; 133).

Not surprisingly, the last part of Acampora's book is teeming with ambiguity and tension: some times Acampora appears to argue that Nietzsche was really only trying to reignite the conflict against triumphant slave morality, but not in order to defeat this morality or do away with its values, say, for instance, by rendering obsolete all considerations of intention and intentional action

(pp.127-128); she thinks that for Nietzsche the morality of promising that relies on the concept of intentional agency will be overcome by superseding the values and concepts essential to that way of thinking, but that "this is not to say there is nothing retained in this process, that promising could have *no* place or value at all" (p.136); she insists that, although the production of memory as described by Nietzsche has made us resentful, it "also produced creatures that possess an uncanny capacity for willing ... [that] has tremendously creative possibilities, which is what makes humans so interesting" (p.137); she even believes that we have significant attachments to the idea that we have agential control over our actions, and she lets on the thought that we may have good reasons not to renege altogether on this idea (p.145). And yet, interspersed throughout all these claims, and often within the same breath, Acampora spends most of the time trying to argue that Nietzsche's moral psychology *did aim*, after all, at rendering slave morality *obsolete*, impotent, and no longer an issue, and that part of that project involved ridding ourselves of the conception of agent causation that motivates the view that individuals are responsible for what they do (pp.128; 130-39; 142-43; 172-86; to point to just some of the many places where the attack is conducted).

Acampora thinks Nietzsche sought to replace agential causal responsibility with a different account that was based on the sort of caring relation that a mother has to her child. I should say that her analysis of this new type of responsibility is really interesting and insightful, and I do think something of this view is part of Nietzsche's philosophy. But I am not sure that this caring model of responsibility can be so readily divorced from conceptions of causal responsibility as Acampora seems to want to claim (pp.145-50; 176-80). It might be true that for my children I have hopes and aspirations that can turn out well or not, but do I not attempt to make those hopes a reality through the exercise of my agency? My hopes are not merely a spectator's sport on the sidelines as I passively wait to see whether my children's future turns out well. As a parent, I take an active role in the shaping of that future, which is why all the choices surrounding what school to send your children to, what to feed them, what values

to expose them to, and so on, can be a source of immense anxiety for parents. The anxiety springs from the sense that, as a parent, I am responsible for my children's future because it can be affected adversely or favorably by my intentional choices. Acampora herself acknowledges that causal responsibility is very much part of how we think about parental responsibility (p.148). And here one can see the tension in her analysis surfacing once again: does she think Nietzsche wanted to do away with agential causal responsibility or not? Does she herself want to? All this, of course, is not to negate the point Nietzsche makes, and that Acampora stresses in her analysis, that there may be also a profound sense of *irresponsibility* that attaches to the parental relation (p.178). But the source of this irresponsibility need not be the feeling that I am not causally responsible for my children, but rather my sense that I am *not solely* the one that is so responsible. After all, if I have done my job properly as a parent (and, indeed, even if I have not), my children too will have a say in how their future turns out, because I will have raised them to be autonomous human beings who are causally in charge of that future.

In closing, let me say that, by focusing on these points of contention, my aim has not been to make readers wary of picking up this book, for Acampora has written a wonderful, thoughtful, and – as I hope is evident from this review – thought-provoking work that is very much worth the reader's while. There are many insights into Nietzsche's thinking that I believe she gets fundamentally right, not the least of which is her emphasis on the broadly political, community-centered aspect of Nietzsche's philosophy, which helps rectify the view of him as someone solely concerned with individual greatness. But the most important lesson that I have derived from my encounter with *Contesting Nietzsche*, is how right Nietzsche was in his diagnosis of modernity, in foreseeing that even the best philosophers among us (and I certainly place Acampora on this list) would all be, nonetheless, and perhaps unbeknownst to them, beholden to the ascetic ideal and the slavish morality that springs from it. As Nietzsche would put it: "we knowers of today, we godless anti-metaphysicians, still take *our* fire, too, from the flame lit by the thousand-year old

faith, the Christian faith which was also Plato's faith, that God is truth; that truth is divine..." (GS 344). We are convinced that the best life, the good life, can only be led in the clear light of truth, so we labor strenuously to find ways in which to make what we take to be valuable, like responsibility and agency, conform and be reconciled to what our science is telling us the truth must be.

There is a very telling moment in Acampora's analysis where she writes: "what Nietzsche seems to want in a music-practicing Socrates is a figure whose life is organized around the desire to know but whose drive for knowledge is informed by the desire to create" (p.84). When I read this phrase it struck me as getting things exactly backwards. For it seems to me that what Nietzsche wanted in a philosopher of the future is someone whose life is organized around the desire to create, and whose drive to create is informed by his will to truth, but – one should immediately add – *also by his will to untruth*. In other words, for Nietzsche truth (or its opposite) is merely a tool for the more important project of being creatures that can and should overcome themselves by, among other things, having wills of our own and being creatively in charge of our own lives, i.e. by not being slaves to external authorities we can never under any circumstance contravene, like the authority of science and truth. It is understandable why we might be hesitant to follow Nietzsche down that road, since it appears to put him uncomfortably close to science-deniers (of the creationists sort) or to relativistic nihilists who show contempt for the facts (here we do well to remember that Nietzsche described himself as dynamite, not to be handled by just anyone).

But the cost of not following Nietzsche to the place he might be leading us into could be even more deleterious, for we may end up contributing to what he saw as the debasement of the human being. We philosophers of today seem bent on avoiding falsehood *at all costs*, and on making all our values and commitments fall in line with the truth. But what if this means that we are missing out on the positive contributions to our lives that can be made by our own aspirations to be more than what we are; what if we are precluding the possibility that we could perhaps one day learn how to fly by imagining ourselves to be winged

creatures when in fact we are not? Maybe by dreaming that we are free, causally responsible beings who are in control of their actions, we could end up, in a sense, making it so; we may end up, that is, modifying our real behavior to make it conform to the (false) image we have of ourselves as free... But, as Nietzsche would say, who among us today has the time or the will to concern himself with such dangerous and subversive *maybes*?

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