

Nietzsche\Connolly:  
Problems of a Nietzschean Democracy

Paper Presented at the 2008 Annual Meeting of the  
Midwest Political Science Association

James Ethan Bourke  
Graduate Student  
Department of Political Science  
Duke University  
Email: [james.bourke@duke.edu](mailto:james.bourke@duke.edu)

A tendency to link the name of Friedrich Nietzsche with contemporary democratic politics has developed over the past 30-40 years or so in the discourse of American academic political theory. Alasdair MacIntyre has called the phenomenon “Left Nietzscheanism.”<sup>1</sup> The typical manner of proceeding among left Nietzscheans is through an effort at translation of submerged democratic possibilities that remain under the surface of Nietzsche’s texts. Most do not insist upon the implausible view that Nietzsche was himself a democrat; rather left Nietzscheans dislodge either ethically palatable or democratically useful elements from Nietzsche’s thought and deploy them, sometimes in radically transfigured ways, in contemporary democratic contexts. This trend can perhaps be said to have been led in America by William Connolly, in his work from the mid-80s to the present.<sup>2</sup> I will argue here that many of Connolly’s most distinctive themes and approaches are at least partly indebted to Nietzsche. But my aim is not merely to point out the many ways in which Connolly borrows from Nietzsche. Rather, it is to critique, by means of an interrogation of Connolly’s major Nietzschean themes, the enterprise of using Nietzsche for liberal democratic purposes, or at least the way this enterprise is carried out in Connolly’s version of it.

There are at least two ways of going about a critique of Connolly’s appropriation of Nietzsche. One would be largely hermeneutic, and might involve an attempt to show that Nietzsche’s politics are aristocratic and inegalitarian in such a way that expropriating whatever we might like from this picture destroys the coherence of calling it a

---

<sup>1</sup> See MacIntyre, Alasdair. *After Virtue*. South Bend, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1984 (second edition), p. 114.

<sup>2</sup> Early engagements with Nietzsche can be discerned in some of the essays of *Politics and Ambiguity*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987, esp. “Democracy and Normalization” pp. 3-16. However, Connolly’s first sustained interpretation of Nietzsche was in the text *Political Theory and Modernity*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1988, pp. 1-15, 137-175. Since those early texts, Nietzsche has figured in large or small ways into nearly all of Connolly’s published work up to the present.

“Nietzschean” view in the first place. To do this successfully one would not merely have to point out some of the many places where Nietzsche either attacks democracy or supports a radical aristocratic political vision.<sup>3</sup> One would have to go further by showing the ways in which Nietzsche’s political views “hang together” in an overall coherent picture, extraction from which for non-Nietzschean purposes makes a mess of the whole. One might add to this the claim that Nietzsche’s politics are embedded in an overall metaphysic (though we might want to qualify the term “metaphysic” with a view to Nietzsche’s perspectivism and epistemological skepticism) of hierarchy and power. I will not attempt such a project here. First, even if, as I think is correct, Nietzsche presents a more or less coherent, though certainly not systematic, view by the time of his late works, it is not clear to me that one could successfully explain away all of the ambiguities and resistances that such a rich and protean thinker as Nietzsche consistently offers up. Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, it is not clear what would be gained from such an effort by way of critical leverage over Connolly. Though this interpretation might advance the aim of getting Nietzsche “right,” if such a thing is possible, it is not clear that Connolly’s project is thereby undermined. For couldn’t Connolly insist that his ideas make sense on their own apart from the accuracy of his interpretations? As Connolly has said in response to this kind of critic, these are questions for the “academic police”<sup>4</sup> to

---

<sup>3</sup> Something like this kind of criticism has recently been advanced against Connolly by Mark Redhead. See “Debate: Nietzsche and Liberal Democracy: A Relationship of Antagonistic Indebtedness?” *Journal of Political Philosophy*, v. 5 no. 2 1997, pp. 183-193, and Connolly’s reply, “Debate: Reworking the Democratic Imagination,” *Journal of Political Philosophy*, v. 5 no. 2, 1997, pp. 194-202. A more comprehensive cataloguing of Nietzsche’s aristocratic politics, not specifically directed at Connolly, is available in Detwiler, Bruce. *Nietzsche and the Politics of Aristocratic Radicalism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990. See also: Gillespie, Michael Allen. “Slouching Toward Bethlehem to be Born: On the Nature and Meaning of Nietzsche’s Superman.” *The Journal of Nietzsche Studies*, no. 30, Autumn 2005, pp. 49-69. And: Berkowitz, Peter. *Nietzsche: The Ethics of an Immoralist*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996.

<sup>4</sup> In Connolly 1997, p. 200.

resolve, while those using Nietzsche creatively and in ways relevant to the present can consider their enterprise separate from the work of scholarly precision and accuracy. Getting Nietzsche right is less important to Connolly than is uncovering ways in which Nietzsche and others disclose political and ethical potentialities that can support the vibrancy of democracy.

A second way of critiquing Connolly's Nietzschean project does not simply frame the problem as a set of hermeneutic abuses, but rather targets Connolly's borrowings from Nietzsche as the sources of unresolved tensions and practical obstacles. Of course, Connolly might retort that he likes unresolved tensions, and that he sees them as generative of the political possibilities of democratic life. However, I am not focusing on the torsional relationships between being and becoming and other dualities that Connolly endorses. My claim is instead that Connolly's use of Nietzsche introduces threats not only to the practicability of his ethico-political program but to the stability of liberal democracy itself. To make this claim, I must answer the question "what problems is Nietzsche brought in to solve, and what are the contours of these solutions?" As we will see, Connolly's debts to Nietzsche are layered. At the first layer lies what I will characterize as the fundamental political problem for Connolly: the problem of identity\difference and the otherizations and marginalizations that accompany it. At this first and fundamental level, Nietzsche is one of Connolly's many sources for understanding the dynamics of identity\difference. A second layer consists in Connolly's solution, or rather his strategy of mitigation, to the problem of identity\difference, a politics of democratic agonism. This strategy is inspired by Nietzsche and closely resembles his valorization of struggle. However, the solution of agonism poses a problem

of violence and instability that Connolly needs to contain if his politics can be pursued without endangering liberal democracy, which it presupposes as a background condition. So Connolly's agonistic strategy for mitigating the pressures of identity\difference introduces a second problem, one of violence, that needs to be addressed. Connolly attempts to address this problem with another Nietzschean borrowing, and it is at this third level that Connolly's debts to Nietzsche are perhaps at their deepest. Here Connolly has a threefold strategy of dampening tendencies to violence and instability inherent in a politics of contestation. First, he directs Nietzschean themes such as an ethics of adversarial respect towards what he calls "agonistic respect." Second, he develops a Nietzschean nontheistic reverence or gratitude for the abundance of being which is meant to bolster ethical relationships to others. Finally, and most recently, he reinvents the Nietzschean ideal of nobility into an ethic of cultivation such that we develop more generous dispositions toward others.

I will argue below that these various Nietzschean moves put Connolly in something of a bind. I take issue primarily with his last, and deepest, Nietzschean debt, his attempts to resolve the problem of agonistic instability through Nietzschean ethical attitudes. These attitudes, it seems to me, are inadequate to the task of securing a stable liberal democratic polity. I do not oppose to them a "teleotranscendental" ethics, some source of respect that goes deeper than what Connolly admits is a thoroughly contestable doctrine. I am not arguing that the insufficiencies of Connolly's Nietzschean ethics throw us back upon a necessary, universal, and/or transcendent ground for political morality. Indeed, I am sympathetic to parts of Connolly's critiques of such perspectives. However, I think that his reliance on Nietzsche does not serve as a convincing solution to the

problems his Nietzschean agonism introduces. It seems to me there are two ways out for someone committed to broadening the scope and deepening the contours of democracy. Either one can abandon the Nietzschean ethical solutions while keeping the agonism and look for other, more robust ways around the problems of violence and instability this agonism threatens. Or one can dampen the emphasis on agonism itself as a political strategy, pushing instead for a politics that, while not devoid of struggle and contestation, does not valorize it in a Nietzschean manner but views it instead as a feature of politics that can lead to good outcomes only when first constrained within the limits of a viable public morality. The two solutions can be woven together, and in conclusion I will briefly suggest a combination of them as a more viable vision for liberal democracy.

### **The Problem of Identity\Difference**

The problem of identity\difference may be seen as the core of Connolly's project since the mid-80s. His work on pluralism presupposes an account of what it is that is being pluralized, and this points us back to the core problem of identity\difference. Similarly, his discussions of agonism and democratic theory are themselves geared toward relieving the problems of identity\difference. Thus, although Connolly's work exhibits a number of themes and issues, it can reasonably be claimed that identity\difference lies at the bottom of most if not all of his reflections. What, then, are the main features of this fundamental theme?

Connolly's thesis can be separated into a few basic propositions. First, life requires identity. Selves must be constituted in some way in order for the business of living to proceed; we cannot make sense of the world unless we first anchor ourselves in

an identity formation of some kind. Second, identities engender differences. Selves and groups are formed by way of constitutive others; the consolidation of an identity refers itself to an outside against which it defines itself. Third, on every identity formation there exists a set of pressures that push it to convert differences into “others,” where “other” carries normatively negative overtones. This is Connolly’s “second problem of evil,” namely that identity formations tend to marginalize and demonize the differences through which they are constituted. “The second problem of evil emerges out of solutions to the first one. It flows from diverse political tactics through which doubts about self-identity are posed and resolved by the constitution of an other against which that identity may define itself. To explore this territory is to struggle against the evil done by attempts to secure the surety of self-identity.”<sup>5</sup> The basic logic is that the more one denigrates one’s others, the stronger one’s own identity becomes, for it is through such otherization that one’s own identity is shored up and reinforced.

Connolly’s distinctive take on the problems of identity\difference is that he insists that both terms of the duality must be protected. That is, identity may be the source of the second problem of evil, but it is also indispensable for life. We can’t simply refrain from the very tendencies that make us who we are, even if various psychic cruelties result from pressures associated with these tendencies. Connolly thus seeks not to *eliminate* identity pressures or to support others without any regard for the larger effects of such a strategy on identity formations, but rather to *mitigate* the pressures that nonetheless cannot be avoided. His project is one that supports the tensions between identity’s necessity and the effort to minimize the cruelties associated with identity consolidation.

---

<sup>5</sup> Connolly, William E. *Identity\Difference: Democratic Negotiations of Political Paradox*. 1<sup>st</sup> ed. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991, pp. ix-x.

Before examining the strategies of democratic agonism that Connolly recommends in order to mitigate and dampen the cruelties of identity, we should consider what Nietzschean elements come into the basic problem of identity\difference. Part of the Nietzschean debt here concerns Nietzsche's insights into the logic of resentment. In the first essay of the *Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche describes the ways in which master and slave morality are both constituted with respect to an other or opposite. The master affirms himself and in order to do so identifies in those opposite qualities of the slave an other labeled "bad." But, and more importantly for Connolly's reading of identity, the slave goes a step further. Here, the identification is first a demonization of the other, the conversion of that which the master calls "good" into the category of "evil." Resentment of the other here makes the first move in forming the identity of the self, which only after pinpointing the qualities of evil goes on to affirm their opposites. Though Connolly would probably insist that this slave-like logic is more the rule than the exception, his debt to Nietzsche on this matter is clear.

Another use of Nietzsche appears in Connolly's generalization of the dynamics of resentment to the very conditions that promote identity\difference dynamics in the first place. Here it is not a question of how identity and otherness are played out, but rather a question of why we seek refuge in identity formations in the first place. To answer this question, Connolly introduces the theme of "existential resentment," a Nietzschean idea that tracks more closely the development of the idea of revenge and resentment in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* as opposed to the *Genealogy*. Connolly borrows here from Nietzsche's diagnosis of the deepest sources of resentment in the desire for revenge against the dead hand of the past and its "it was." What Nietzsche sees as a general resentment at our

inability to turn back the wheel of time, Connolly expands into the idea that every resistance of the world to our attempts to master it generates resentment. Connolly locates existential resentment primarily in the drive to find some locus of responsibility for the sufferings we endure. Existential resentment is resentment toward the recalcitrance of the world to our attempts to explain and master it. As Connolly elaborates,

People tend to demand ... a world in which suffering is ultimately grounded in proportional responsibility. We resent a world in which it appears that this is not so. But resentment must locate an appropriate object if it is to be discharged as resentment. It thereby seeks a *responsible agent* that it can convince itself is otherwise worthy of receiving the load of incipient resentment it carries. ... So, part of the drive to insistent attributions of responsibility flows from existential resentment.<sup>6</sup>

As one might imagine, the drive to pin responsibility on an agent is itself a part of the logic of identity\difference. But more fundamentally, existential resentment illustrates the features of the human condition that give rise to identity formations in the first place. For the resistance of the world to our attempts to master it is part of Connolly's Nietzschean understanding of action and will to power. According to Connolly's Nietzsche, "to do is to forgo," and the will to power is fundamentally "the will to give form to something."<sup>7</sup> In combination, these two ideas suggest a weak ontology in which giving form and actualizing possibilities always leaves a remainder that resists the original effort. In such a world, identity formation suggests itself as a potential way to discharge the resentment that such recalcitrance engenders.

### **Agonism as a Nietzschean Strategy**

---

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 121.

<sup>7</sup> "The will to power is the will to give form to something and to fix it in its form despite resistances it may offer." Connolly 1988, p. 144.

We have seen the ways in which the logic of identity\difference stands at the core of Connolly's thought as well as the ways in which Connolly defines this logic using Nietzsche's ideas. The second layer of Nietzschean indebtedness I identified above concerns Connolly's preferred strategy for mitigating the pressures of identity that lead to the cruelties labeled as the second problem of evil. This strategy is one of agonistic contestation among identity groups. Connolly clearly defines agonism as a strategy of mitigating the second problem of evil. "Is there, then, a practice of democracy ... that responds to the problematic relationship between identity and difference? I suspect there is ... Let me call this political imaginary 'agonistic democracy,' a practice that affirms the indispensability of identity to life, disturbs the dogmatization of identity, and folds care for the protean diversity of human life into the strife of identity\difference."<sup>8</sup>

Agonism consists in the active struggle between identity groups over the conditions of identity\difference. The terms of agonistic confrontation are set by the claims identity groups make to otherize the groups against which they struggle and the counterarguments deployed in the effort to resist these moves. Connolly focuses his theoretical energy on the kinds of arguments and contestations likely to upset or disturb the hegemonic positions of dominant identity groups. Agonism is primarily developed in his thought as a strategy for the marginalized to be used in defusing the power of already entrenched groups.

Several Nietzschean debts and strategies are evident in Connolly's privileging of agonistic contests. On the most basic level, democratic agonism reflects Nietzsche's valorization of struggle as the means to achieving greatness. Without accepting a crude, brutalist interpretation of will to power, we can identify in Nietzsche a strong theme of

---

<sup>8</sup> Connolly 1991, p. x.

the celebration of confrontation, struggle, and war. There are several dimensions to this theme. First of all, Nietzsche sees in struggle a fundamental drive of life itself. Life is will to power for Nietzsche, and though this power may be spiritual and non-violent, it must be admitted that domination and hierarchy form a part of the Nietzschean thematic here. Connolly does not accept an interpretation of Nietzsche as the philosopher of world mastery, as he makes clear in the following passage:

Let me say something, though, about ... the reading of Nietzsche as the consummate philosopher of world mastery. While such a reading is possible, it is not *the* single or necessary reading to be drawn from a thinker as protean as Nietzsche. It tends to be given by those who endorse strong transcendental or teleological perspectives. They presume that any ethic of care and self-limitation must flow from a teleotranscendental perspective, and that since Nietzsche noisily repudiates such a perspective, the coiner of the phrase “will to power” must endorse a ruthless philosophy in which a few exercise mastery over other humans and nature.<sup>9</sup>

However, Connolly smuggles in certain Nietzschean attitudes toward the value of struggle. This is evident in his selection of a passage from “Homer’s Contest” for the epigraph of *Identity\Difference*. “And not only Aristotle but the whole of Greek antiquity thinks differently from us about hatred and envy, and judges with Hesiod; who in one place calls one discord evil—namely the one that leads men into hostile fights of annihilation against one another—while praising another discord as good—the one that, as jealousy, hatred and envy, spurs men to activity; not to the activity of fights of annihilation but to the activity of fights which are *contests*.”<sup>10</sup> Confrontation and struggle are not merely, for Connolly, features of life and politics; rather, they are generative sources of potentiality.

---

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 185.

<sup>10</sup> Nietzsche, Friedrich. “Homer’s Contest.” Quoted in the epigraph to Connolly 1991.

This points us to a second dimension of the Nietzschean attitude toward struggle. Nietzsche sees struggle as one of the means by which greatness is achieved. In his understanding of life as will to power,<sup>11</sup> Nietzsche claims that life is that which must always “overcome itself.” This means, among other things, that life is a continual succession of forms of life by newer, more powerful forms. Nietzsche, it seems to me, envisions the overcoming of life in terms of the succession of peoples, of organizations of life according to a table of values (see *Zarathustra* I.15 “On the Thousand and One Goals”). Each such organization represents a particular amount of power in terms of what its form makes possible. The “self-overcoming” of life can be read as the supercession of cultural forms by more powerful ones, a process which must be played out historically through a confrontation. Now, Connolly’s agonism does not presuppose anything like this ontology of power or the historical understanding of cultural supercession that gives expression to it. However, like Nietzsche, he sees struggle as a means to that which is higher, thinking of those who struggle with themselves and others as those who approach an ideal of democratic citizenship. Agonism, along with the ideal of self-cultivation that I will discuss below in connection with Connolly’s transfiguration of Nietzschean nobility, is a vehicle through which the best possibilities of democratic life can be realized.

Connolly’s conception of agonism also has Nietzschean debts in terms of the kinds of arguments Connolly recommends to be advanced by marginalized individuals and groups. Among the things Connolly explicitly identifies as what he takes away from Nietzsche, he lists “Nietzsche’s skeptical contestation of transcendental and teleological

---

<sup>11</sup> Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. II.12 “On Self-Overcoming.” In *The Portable Nietzsche* ed. and trans. Kaufman, Walter. New York: Penguin, 1976, pp. 225-228.

philosophies ... [and] his genealogies.”<sup>12</sup> Connolly sees in these elements of Nietzsche’s thought a critical disposition to be directed toward the struggle against hegemonic identity formations. Connolly’s favored method of disturbing the domination of identity groups is to expose the elements of contingency that make up their claims to universality, necessity, and normalcy. “The way to loosen the boundaries of that circle [of identity\difference relations] is to render prevailing standards of identity more alert to incorrigible elements of difference, incompleteness, and contingency within them.”<sup>13</sup> In order to execute this strategy, Connolly borrows from a Nietzschean critical attitude. Connolly recommends that agonistic argumentation be carried out through the Nietzschean methods of “skeptical contestation” and genealogy, the latter being precisely the effort to expose historical contingencies underlying concepts and categories regarded as necessary or universal.

Thus Connolly’s vision of agonistic democracy incorporates both a Nietzschean valorization of struggle and a Nietzschean critical method. But it also involves Connolly in a characteristically Nietzschean set of problems. For a political ethos centered on struggle threatens to collapse into violence, and this in turn could destabilize the very liberal democracy that Connolly seeks to reform. Connolly’s agonism might easily slip into antagonism, and parties engaged in struggle with one another would seem to have obvious motives to break out of constrained forums of verbal contestation. As much as Connolly would seek to spiritualize the ideal of Nietzschean struggle, it would seem that his reliance on this ideal introduces the specter of violence and instability into his politics.

---

<sup>12</sup> Connolly 1991, p. 185.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 172-73.

## **Connolly's Nietzschean Ethics**

Connolly is certainly not unaware of this problem, however, and to get around it he relies on Nietzsche to develop a political ethics that might contain the dangers of violence that agonism would seem to push toward. Here his debt to Nietzsche is perhaps at its deepest. The central aim of Connolly's appropriation here is to draw from Nietzsche sources of ethicality. There are at least three such sources that have figured into Connolly's thinking. First, he transfigures the Nietzschean ideal of respect for one's adversaries into an ethos of "agonistic respect." Second, he bolsters this ethic and additional attitudes of generosity with a "non-theistic reverence [later gratitude] for being" that is inspired by Nietzschean senses of wonder and reverence toward the abundance of life and the world. Finally, he develops from the Nietzschean ideal of a "new nobility" an ethic of self-cultivation or self-artistry that aims to develop within the self potentials of care for others as well as to work on the self's internal sources of existential resentment.

The first dimension of Connolly's democratic ethic is what he calls "agonistic respect." Connolly has several ways of supporting this. One is through the generalization of existential resentment that we encountered above. Here, according to Connolly, we can locate a register of shared experience that can lead to identification with our others and thereby a degree of ethicality.

The tenacity and universality of this struggle with finitude might provide a common point of departure through which agonistic respect can be cultivated between contending identities. ... the very contingency of identity and the universality of the struggle with mortality can sometimes solicit in the self a fugitive experience of identification with life that stretches below and above any particular identity. It can invoke an

agonistic respect for difference through the self-experience of life not exhausted by the identity that endows it with definition, predictability, and standing in its society—a respectful strife with the other achieved through intensified experience of loose strands and unpursued possibilities in oneself that exceed the terms of one’s official identity.<sup>14</sup>

The “struggle with finitude” or “struggle with mortality” that Connolly discusses here as a source of ethicality is also among the pressures toward existential resentment. Death is one of the features of the world that remains recalcitrant in the face of human attempts to master or understand it, and this, as we saw, is the key defining feature of existential resentment. So one of the themes Connolly borrows from Nietzsche comes in as a source of ethicality, in that shared recognition of the contingency of identity and mutually felt pressures toward existential resentment leads to the ability to respect an agonistic opponent. Moreover, the general idea of agonistic respect reflects Nietzsche’s thinking on the proper relationships between adversaries. In the section of *Zarathustra* entitled “On War and Warriors,”<sup>15</sup> Zarathustra announces that “you may have only enemies whom you can hate, not enemies you despise. You must be proud of your enemy.”<sup>16</sup> The contrast here between hatred and despising suggests that one who is hated is at least respected as an adversary, whereas one who is despised is treated with contempt and scorn, not regarded as an equal or as an object of respect. For Nietzsche, hatred does not preclude respect, and Connolly’s theme of agonistic respect reflects a somewhat softened version of this Nietzschean idea.

This notion of agonistic respect gets additional treatment in Connolly’s *Why I am not a Secularist*. Here, Connolly interweaves the ideal of agonistic respect with the

---

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 166.

<sup>15</sup> Nietzsche 1976 pp. 158-160.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 160.

Nietzschean theme of a spiritualization of enmity.<sup>17</sup> This passage from *Twilight* expresses what Nietzsche perceived as a difference between his own outlook and the traditional outlook of the church towards enemies.

Another triumph [over Christianity] is our spiritualization of *hostility*. It consists in a profound appreciation of the value of having enemies. ... The church always wanted the destruction of its enemies; we, we immoralists and Antichristians, find our advantages in this, that the church exists. ... Almost every party understands how it is in the interest of its own self-preservation that the opposition should not lose all strength ... A new creation in particular ... needs enemies more than friends: in opposition alone does it *feel* itself necessary, in opposition alone does it *become* necessary.<sup>18</sup>

The above passage shows Nietzsche conferring a certain positive value on his opponents, expressing gratitude for the existence of his enemies while criticizing them at the same time. Connolly's gloss accentuates how the ethos of agonistic respect is exemplified in Nietzsche's own attitudes toward Christianity. "So Nietzsche admired Christianity as an agonistic partner while dissenting radically from the model of salvation that motivates many of its partisans."<sup>19</sup> In this way, Connolly mines not only Nietzsche's ethical ideas about proper relationships toward enmity, but also the stance of Nietzsche himself in his own contestations.

An additional dimension of Connolly's ethic borrows heavily from Nietzsche's "reverence for life and the earth."<sup>20</sup> This is Connolly's post-secular faith, which he terms "non-theistic reverence for being."<sup>21</sup> The idea here is to take Nietzsche's sense of the

---

<sup>17</sup> The term "spiritualization of enmity" is drawn from *Twilight of the Idols*, "Morality as Anti-Nature" #3, in Nietzsche 1976 pp. 488-489. For Connolly's discussion of this passage, see *Why I am Not a Secularist*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999, p. 156ff.

<sup>18</sup> Nietzsche 1976, p. 488. Discrepancies between the wording of my quotation and Connolly's (1999) quotation (p. 157) stem from the fact that I have used Kaufmann's translation while he has used Hollingdale's.

<sup>19</sup> Connolly 1999, p. 157.

<sup>20</sup> Connolly 1991, p. 185.

<sup>21</sup> Later versions of this term exchange "reverence" for "gratitude."

profound abundance of life and transfigure it into the basis of a non-theistic faith that informs ethical attitudes and proclivities. As Connolly puts it, “the post-Nietzschean perspective draws sustenance from an almost always operative attachment to life as a protean set of energies and possibilities exceeding the terms of any identity or cultural horizon into which it is set. This is what Nietzsche means when he says goodness proceeds from abundance rather than a transcendental command.”<sup>22</sup> This attitude of non-theistic reverence/gratitude for being is perhaps the most fundamental dimension of Connolly’s overall ethico-political project. It nurtures and sustains any and all potentials for ethical relationships between selves and others. In his “Letter to St. Augustine,” Connolly articulates something like an “articles of faith” for this post-Nietzschean take on the mysteries of existence:

The earth is fragile; highly organized human economies are interwoven with its fragility; the *sovereign* god was on balance a destructive construction; the hegemony of the modern project of mastery results in the globalization of contingency; nontheistic reverence for life and the earth remains to be cultivated.<sup>23</sup>

This is Connolly’s deepest debt to Nietzsche, and it ultimately underlies his effort to overcome the problems of violence and instability that accompany Nietzschean agonism as a political strategy. Nietzsche, Connolly claims, “combines a tragic conception of life with nontheistic reverence, and ... together these provide a human basis for agonistic care and self-limitation.”<sup>24</sup> Here we see Connolly’s debt to Nietzsche interwoven into a positive ethos, as opposed to the negative patterns of contestation and criticism that go into Connolly’s agonism.

---

<sup>22</sup> Connolly, William E. *The Ethos of Pluralization*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995, p. 28.

<sup>23</sup> Connolly 1991, p. 155.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 185.

While the idea of non-theistic reverence for being underlies Connolly's attempt to overcome the Nietzschean problem of violence with Nietzschean resources, and in turn sustains the ideal of agonistic respect, Connolly adds a further Nietzschean support to his ethics in his more recent work. Here, Connolly attempts to democratize the Nietzschean conception of nobility and to supplement his other-oriented ethics of agonistic respect with an ethics of self-artistry.<sup>25</sup>

Those who are noble in the Nietzschean sense, first, work on themselves to overcome existential resentment against the lack of intrinsic meaning in life (or the uncertainty attached to the judgment that there is such meaning). ... To be noble, then, is to be your own experiment and guinea pig, even as you realize—if you follow Nietzsche on this point too—that modesty in method and objective is appropriate to the uncertain process of self-experimentation. But, second, the noble also cultivate a grace and ease of conduct best established through long practice. ... The third dimension of Nietzsche's new nobility is that for any nobility to be it must enter into affirmative relations with other types of nobility. ... each noble party will respect the fact that its projection is apt to be profoundly contestable in the eyes of others. ... To democratize the Nietzschean conception of nobility, then, is to generalize the noble ethos he admires.<sup>26</sup>

Connolly sees in Nietzsche, then, not only a model for how to engage others in restrained agonistic confrontation, but also a source of inspiration for the micropolitics of the self required to develop precisely the kinds of selves capable of the former ethics. Connolly's broader point in the essay, and perhaps his greatest effort to integrate his Nietzschean borrowings into a vision of democracy, is that the acceleration of pace and tempo characteristic of late modern democratic societies is an enabling condition of greater experimentation and self-artistry. "When the pace of life accelerates, nature ceases and

---

<sup>25</sup> The more recent text in which Connolly attempts this project is "The Nobility of Democracy." In *Vocations of Political Theory*. ed. Frank, J. and Tambornino, J. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000. Large chunks of this essay became the basis for "Democracy and Time," ch. 6 of *Neuropolitics: Thinking, Culture, Speed*. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2002. I will use both texts here in my discussion of Connolly's transfiguration of Nietzschean nobility.

<sup>26</sup> Connolly 2002, p. 165.

becomes art. ... In an up-tempo world people become more alert to elements of historical contingency, accident, and power in the identities that occupy them. ... And this awareness opens up the possibility to work on ourselves, politically and individually.”<sup>27</sup>

Thus we can see that Connolly has developed three tiers of Nietzschean ethicality designed to dampen the threat of instability inherent in an agonistic politics. First, Connolly converts Nietzsche’s recommendations for adversarial respect and actual practice of such attitudes in his polemic against Christianity into an ethos of agonistic respect. Second, Connolly undergirds this ethic and all potential sources of ethicality with a general non-theistic reverence/gratitude for the abundance of being inspired by a characteristically Nietzschean exuberance. And finally, Connolly distills from the Nietzschean ideal of nobility an ethics of self-artistry designed to develop dispositions favorable to the practice of agonistic democracy. By cultivating these ethical dispositions, agonistic foes can maintain one another as fellow citizens despite their bitter struggles. Or so Connolly would have us believe. But, as I will argue in the next section, these Nietzschean sources of ethicality come up short in solving the problem of violence that Connolly’s Nietzscheanism introduces.

### **A Democratic Ethics beyond Nietzsche: Criticisms and Sketches of an Alternative**

Does Connolly’s Nietzschean ethics suffice to contain the threat of violence and instability that seems to be awakened by his Nietzschean agonism and valorization of struggle? Though Connolly does present as strong a conception of ethicality as one is

---

<sup>27</sup> Connolly 2000, p. 308.

likely to get from Nietzsche,<sup>28</sup> it is my view that these sources come up short when it comes to providing the stable background conditions that Connolly's politics seem to take for granted. For if Connolly's agonism tends to erode the stability of liberal democratic societies, his solution of Nietzschean ethicality is a weak rearguard action that is not likely to survive the pressures of Nietzschean struggle for very long. Why should this be the case? What are the specific insufficiencies of Connolly's Nietzschean ethics?

First of all, Nietzsche did not see many of the ethical attitudes he counseled as generalizable in the way Connolly takes them to be. The warrior ethic that Nietzsche promotes, converted by Connolly into agonistic respect, presupposes that one regards one's adversary as a *worthy* adversary, and also as an equal. This is reflected in the passage quoted above, where Nietzsche contrasts hatred, which is available among equals, with contempt, which is a lack of regard for someone as beneath oneself. Here Connolly seems to take an ethic that presupposes relationships of equality (which are not for all that universal) and then use it to answer the question "how can adversaries come to regard one another as equal beings worthy of mutual respect?" If not exactly begging the question, Connolly's move here at least seems to skip the step of establishing the equality of the opponents. This is rendered especially problematic by Connolly's own reading of the pressures of identity\difference, which convert difference into otherness and therefore

---

<sup>28</sup> But see Coles, Romand. "Liberty, Equality, Receptive Generosity: Neo-Nietzschean Reflections on the Ethics and Politics of Coalition." *The American Political Science Review* v. 90 no. 2, 1996. Coles's reading of Nietzsche presents an alternative vision of Nietzschean ethicality that might have more potential than Connolly's own, in that it does not begin with an agonism that it then tries to mitigate but rather starts with the question of how one should properly relate to others. Coles's answer of "receptive generosity" is an ethos of engagement that puts ethicality first and agonism second, effectively dampening (though not eliminating) problems of violence by insisting that we be generous to others before confronting them as opponents. For Coles, the question is not how we can respect those who are first and foremost our adversaries, but how we can engage others in ways that enhance the political and ethical potentialities of the relationship. Coles's reading has the additional merit of a greater degree of hermeneutic precision than Connolly's, though both admit to an "idiosyncratic" approach to Nietzsche's texts.

cut against efforts to see the other as an equal. So the first obstacle to Connolly's Nietzschean ethics would seem to be an underspecification of the bases of equality and therefore of respect.

Similar problems can be discerned in Connolly's democratization of Nietzschean nobility. Here, Connolly assumes that the ideal of nobility and the ethics of self-cultivation that goes with it can be generalized rather unproblematically. However, Nietzsche himself defined his "new nobility" by trading on both senses of the word "noble," i.e., praiseworthy and aristocratic; Nietzsche's vision of nobility is not only an ethic—it is an ethic *for the few*. He substantiated his contention that this nobility was not available for most people by describing the psychological prerequisites of the ethic as extraordinarily difficult. Indeed, if Nietzsche seriously meant what he said about willing the eternal recurrence and gazing into the abyss as necessary steps to becoming an overman, we can easily see that it requires great psychological capacity to even attempt self-transfiguration. This is not to say that Connolly does not have the option of democratizing Nietzsche's noble ethics. On the contrary, such a move would make this dimension of Nietzsche's thought much more relevant to contemporary democratic politics, in keeping with Connolly's aims. However, it would seem that in order to successfully make the democratization of nobility work, one would need to somehow *respond* to Nietzsche's claims about the difficulty and hence the ungeneralizability of the ethic. We need re-descriptions of the ideal and/or reasons for regarding it as within the reach of ordinary people if Nietzsche is to be answered. Connolly's closest attempt to do something like this may be seen in the following passage: "The main difference between Nietzsche and me is that he thinks it best to reserve this effort [of refashioning the self]

for a small set of freethinkers, while I think the compression of distance by the acceleration of pace makes it wise to pursue it among a large number of citizens in a variety of subject positions.”<sup>29</sup> What I am trying to get across here is that Connolly does not seem to me to devote enough attention to the question of how a democratization of Nietzschean ideals is possible. Connolly registers that he thinks self-cultivation should be generalized and Nietzsche doesn’t, but he doesn’t recognize that Nietzsche limited his ethics to a few because his psychology and philosophical anthropology preclude its generalization. Connolly does not answer Nietzsche’s reasons for limiting his ethics to the few, and thus we should remain skeptical of the feasibility of his generalization of Nietzsche’s ethics.

These considerations should highlight why I think Connolly’s use of Nietzsche does not plausibly succeed as an effort to curtail violence and instability. His use of Nietzsche’s ethics of adversarial respect does not address the sources of equality that make such respect possible, and his generalization of Nietzschean ethical attitudes and practices of self-cultivation ignore the ways in which Nietzsche sets up barriers to such democratization. What of Connolly’s post-secular faith, his “non-theistic reverence for being?” Here the criticism is somewhat inappropriate, in that Connolly does not offer non-theistic reverence as a general public morality, but as one source of ethicality among many that *some* (presumably other left Nietzscheans like himself) will find sustenance in. He nowhere (that I am aware) makes the claim that all citizens have to buy into such an ethical stance, but rather sees it as a way to encourage ethical attitudes in people who do not profess a faith in either a god or a transcendent ground of morality. By contrast, his ideals of agonistic respect and self-cultivation *are* things that he encourages as broad

---

<sup>29</sup> Connolly 2002, p. 172.

ethical stances appropriate to all within the version of agonistic democracy he espouses. The insufficiencies of Nietzschean sources to secure such a political ethic seem to me to force us to take a step or two away from Connolly's project and consider what alternative visions of democracy can compete with Connolly's in their promise of enriching contemporary democratic practices.

Unfortunately I am not prepared to supply a full public morality here, and in that sense I do not have an alternative to offer. However, I do think I can point out what directions a new project for revitalizing liberal democracy could (and should) take. It seems to me that there are two paths to take here, and I will recommend a combination of them. First, we might retain Connolly's emphasis on agonism and search for new sources of a public morality that can succeed in containing the problems of violence and instability that agonism threatens. I do not wish to limit the possible avenues such an enterprise might take, but one's sources could be as diverse as John Dewey, Hannah Arendt, Albert Camus, Isaiah Berlin, Emmanuel Levinas, Martin Buber, Stuart Hampshire, and others. Each of these thinkers (and many others) offers resources for the project of constructing a viable liberal democratic ethos. However, attention must be paid to the sources of equality that Connolly seems to take for granted. In this respect, part of a new democratic ethic would seem to me to hang on some suitably reconstructed and detranscendentalized version of the Lockean or Kantian conception of free and equal personhood. Connolly is right to draw attention to the ways in which an ethics based on "the person" can exert normalizing pressures. But it seems to me that some element of such an ethics must be incorporated into whatever new vision of democracy we might think up if the background conditions of stability and equal citizenship that make

democracy possible are to be sustained. The trick is to find a way to affirm Connolly's calls for mitigating the problems of identity\difference without sacrificing whatever it is that has so far undergirded democratic equality, when and where it exists. I hope to have shown that relying on Nietzsche is not the best way to do that.

I mentioned a second option for advancing the project of a new democratic ethics beyond Nietzscheanism. This is to abandon agonism as the central political strategy for a democracy. It seems to me that one way of avoiding the problems of violence that agonism introduces is not to start with agonism in the first place. This is certainly not to say that I think contestation of dominant positions and confrontation between opposing constituencies over issues of significance should be expunged from politics. Far from it. These things are central to any realistic understanding of what politics is. However, I think that in theorizing about the *possibilities* of political life, it makes sense not to start by valorizing struggle and contestation in a Nietzschean fashion. While contestation can be, as Connolly rightly recognizes, the source of many political goods, it is not invariably so, and we should not see in struggle, as Nietzsche did, the vehicle to ever-higher possibilities for life. It seems to me that the question of the enabling conditions of democratic politics should come before the question of how to advance democratic goals, such that first we address the sources of stability *and then* we ask whether agonism is an appropriate political strategy.

It seems to me that the best way forward for a new democratic ethic is to combine each of these two paths that I have laid out. First, the emphasis on agonism in contemporary democratic theory should be lightened somewhat. Struggle, though it can be appropriate as a strategy and generative of new possibilities when the circumstances

are right, ought not to be romanticized or valorized. Nietzscheanism in politics gets this wrong, it seems to me. But more than this, we should bring more voices into the conversation about what a viable democratic ethics might look like. Nietzsche's voice, when taken alone, or at least when taken as the main source of ethicality, cannot meet the needs of contemporary liberal democratic societies. And the two strategies reinforce each other. The more robust our political ethics is, the more we can trust in the ability of the polity to sustain contestations. And the less we emphasize the centrality of such contestation, the more opportunities will open up to support relationships of mutual care and respect between citizens.