Nietzsche's Philosophy of Conflict and the Logic of Organisational Struggle
Pearson, J.S.

Citation

Cover Page

The handle http://hdl.handle.net/1887/60927 holds various files of this Leiden University dissertation.

Author: Pearson, J.S.
Title: Nietzsche's Philosophy of Conflict and the Logic of Organisational Struggle
Issue Date: 2018-02-15

SUMMARY IN ENGLISH

NIETZSCHE'S PHILOSOPHY OF CONFLICT AND THE LOGIC OF ORGANISATIONAL STRUGGLE

Since as far back antiquity, philosophers have been inquiring into the nature of conflict. Their persistent interest has produced a rich variety of theoretical perspectives on the topic. Within this multiplicity, however, we can identify a number of recurrent ideas. Among these, perhaps the most prominent is the belief that conflict represents an *undesirable* part of life, one that stands opposed to the ideals of harmony, co-operation and consensus. Those who deprecate struggle in this way can then be split into two groups. On the one hand, there are those for whom conflict and its irksome effects are a *contingent* part of human life. As such, they allege that struggle can therefore be eradicated, or at least minimised, and they duly give us an account of how we might go about achieving this. Plato is undoubtedly the standard bearer of this philosophical position. In the *Republic*, he provides his readers with a detailed blueprint describing how we can substitute discord with harmony, both at the level of the self and that of society. Following in Plato's wake, we then find a slew of philosophers similarly denigrating conflict and professing to give us the means to its eradication. For instance, Kant sketches how we might go about establishing a social condition of "perpetual peace", and,

continuing this line of inquiry, Rawls tries to elaborate on the political means by which such a condition might be concretely achieved. Correspondingly, thinkers such as Spinoza and Descartes have tried to show how we can minimise the painful and often paralysing inner struggle of our passions through the proper exercise of our rational faculties. Nonetheless, among those who criticise conflict, there exists another group of philosophers who don't share Plato's optimism. Thinkers such as Schopenhauer and the later Freud, for example, pessimistically conceive of both social and psychological conflict as an incurable human affliction. In spite of our best efforts, they tell us, we are condemned to destructive war and painful psychological struggle.

In opposition to this widespread tendency to demonise conflict, there then stands a group of thinkers who affirm conflict as a potentially beneficial force. The bellwether of this faction was undoubtedly Heraclitus, who famously praised war as "the father of all things". This group can also be split in two depending on whether they think of war and more violent forms of political oppression as contingent or necessary. First, then, there are those who think of war as an ineluctable part of human life yet nonetheless affirm it as socially rejuvenating force. They claim that belligerence brings healthy hierarchical order to society. Many have situated Heraclitus in this corner of the debate, though others, such as the historian Jacob Burckhardt, also unambiguously propound this view. In the other corner, there are then those who view war and struggles for political oppression to be quite contingent and, simultaneously, undesirable. Yet unlike Plato and his descendants, this group does not favour harmony; rather, they valorise more moderate forms of struggle that they hold to be socially beneficial, such as democratic dispute, for example. They then petition for the *transformation* of the more harmful forms of discord into these productive modes of political contestation. In

more recent times, agonistic democratic theorists such as Bonnie Honig, Jean-François Lyotard and Chantal Mouffe have all defended some variant of this idea. William Connolly, another agonistic democrat, has analogously claimed that we need to cultivate more moderate forms of conflict within ourselves, at a psychological level. Connolly hopes that this approach will replace harmfully repressive struggles that futilely aim at inner harmony.

What this brief survey reveals is that the principal fault lines in the debate form over two questions: Is conflict beneficial or harmful? And what is the modal status of conflict? That is, is it an indelible, or contingent, part of human existence?

One thinker whom the agonistic democrats often invoke in support of their position is the nineteenth-Century German thinker Friedrich Nietzsche. As they point out, he affirmed conflict in the context of both society and the self. Yet within Nietzsche studies itself, commentators remain deeply divided regarding his attitude towards conflict, and it is far from certain that he would have concurred with the agonistic democrats' answers to the two fundamental questions just mentioned. One cluster of commentators proposes what is often called the *soft* reading, and their antagonists defend the so-called *hard* reading. The soft Nietzsche is read as overwhelmingly advocating *measured*, *agonal* struggle. This species of conflict is exemplified by the non-violent artistic, athletic and political contests (or *agons*) that pervaded ancient Greek culture. Proponents of this reading then often conjecture that this type of struggle is epitomised by modern democratic contention. By contrast, the hard readers claim that Nietzsche almost exclusively esteemed and incited *unmeasured* struggle as a means to cultural renaissance. Many have accordingly held the hard Nietzsche to be at least partly responsible for the atrocities committed by the Nazis in the 1930s and 40s. The hard readers

further divide into two subgroups depending of the specific type of unmeasured struggle they think Nietzsche incited. First there are those who allege that Nietzsche prescribed war as a remedy for modernity's ills – I call these his *militaristic* readers. Alongside this group, there are those who read him as promoting a murderous aristocratic struggle of an elite minority to enslave and exploit the masses. This is what I refer to as the *radical aristocratic* interpretation.

Frustratingly, both sides are able to cite texts from Nietzsche's corpus that seem to corroborate their tendentious readings. What is more, both sides tend to read the texts that ostensibly support their opponents as further evidence of their *own* reading. In this way, Nietzsche's soft readers often aver that when he invokes the vocabulary of war, he is in actuality using this language *metaphorically* – namely, to refer to the measured *spiritual* struggle for self-overcoming and the *ideological* struggle for cultural renewal. Conversely, the hard readers often interpret Nietzsche's praise of the Hellenic agon as an *embracing* endorsement of the ancient Greeks' love of conflict – that is, *including* their proclivity for war.

Rather than elucidating Nietzsche's philosophy of conflict, an overview of the critical literature therefore renders it many ways more opaque. The principal objective of this thesis is therefore to address this impasse. Some may be inclined to view this alleged contradiction in Nietzsche's thought as evidence of his being a shoddy thinker, and as further reason not to take him seriously as a philosopher. As I contend, however, such a prejudgment would be misguided. A sustained close reading of Nietzsche's writings reveals a mature philosophy of conflict that is both systematic and coherent. In order to demonstrate this coherence, we of course need to address the aforementioned antagonism in the critical literature. We need to navigate a path between the readings of Nietzsche as an exclusive proponent of measured conflict and those that construe him as an exclusive

proponent of unmeasured struggle. Does Nietzsche exclusively recommend measured or unmeasured conflict? Or are both of the exclusive readings in need of correction?

With a view to resolving this *aporia*, this thesis attempts a critical analysis of Nietzsche's views regarding the nature and value of conflict. I perform a systematic study of his vocabulary of conflict spanning the entire breadth of his corpus. A cursory survey of his writings reveals that Nietzsche thematised his thoughts on conflict under four main clusters of terms. First, we find a cluster of German words that ostensibly refers to murderously violent conflict: *Vernichtungskampf* (struggle-to-the-death), *Krieg* (war), *Mörder* (murder), and *Zweikampf* (duel) (among others). We can then discern another cluster that is closely related to the forms of non-violent contest prolific among the ancient Greeks: *Wettkampf* (contest), *Agon* (agon), *Wettspiel* and *Wettbewerb* (competition), and *Wettstreit* (contention) (among others). Thirdly, he uses a separate vocabulary of conflict (*Kampf*) to describe struggles directed at the *organisation* of complex systems – that is, struggles aimed at the *Einverleibung* (incorporation), *Assimilation* (assimilation) and *Herrschaft* (domination) of certain entities. This form of struggle is then married to another which is directed towards the *Unterdrückung* (repression), *Zurückstoßen* (repulsion), *Ausscheidung* (excretion) and even *Zerstörung* (destruction) of certain entities. In the respective chapters, I dissect each of these different aspects of Nietzsche's vocabulary of conflict and determine whether there is any underlying coherence in his usage.

On the basis of this groundwork, I contend that both the soft and hard readings are one sided and in need of modification. Indeed, the thesis that this dissertation defends is that *Nietzsche promotes both measured and unmeasured struggle in a manner that is entirely coherent*. I also argue that

commentators have neglected the most significant form of conflict in Nietzsche's thought. This form is characterised by a *combination* of measured *and* unmeasured conflict, and Nietzsche thinks of it as necessary for any form of life – individual or social – to exist and extend itself. We might conceive of this species of struggle as analogous to the biological processes of nutrition and digestion. Through these, an organism simultaneously engages in a measured struggle to incorporate useful material from its environment *and* in an unmeasured manner to exclude material that presents itself as redundant or harmful. This dualistic struggle is what I term *organisational* conflict on account of the fact that both incorporation and exclusion form part of a single overarching impetus to achieve healthy organisation.

My analysis illuminates a number of specific shortcomings of the soft and hard readings. We see that the soft reading, which presents Nietzsche as wholly bent on the *transformation* of destructive into culturally productive conflict, misses the fact that there are phases where Nietzsche conceives of violent struggle as ineradicable and culturally beneficial. We also find that Nietzsche is highly critical of *political* agonism, thereby casting doubt on the soft, agonistic democrat appropriations of his thought. Our study of organisational conflict also reveals that Nietzsche valorises a form of struggle that promotes inequality and exclusion in a way that is quite at odds with the soft reading, which is marked by a democratic ethos of egalitarianism and inclusivity. Nonetheless, we see that the hard militaristic reading also has its shortcomings insofar as it wilfully overlooks the non-violent nature of Nietzsche's celebration of the agon. We also witness how the radical aristocratic reading misinterprets Nietzsche's advocacy of exploitation as an endorsement of murderously immoral enslavement. In fact, Nietzsche considers exploitation of this sort to be highly imprudent and unhealthy. The

ideal exploitative relation is rather one in which the commander cares for the commanded insofar as the former has a vested interest in the preservation and strength of the latter.

My hope is that this study will have repercussions for those who precipitously reject Nietzsche for glorifying violence, just as it does for those who unjustly appropriate his thought in the name of a democratic political agenda. In addition to this, by reconstructing and critically assessing Nietzsche's thoughts concerning struggle, my aim is also to throw light on some of the broader philosophical questions concerning the nature and value of conflict.

In Chapter 1, I examine Nietzsche's thoughts regarding struggles of eradication (*Vernichtungskämpfe*) and, more specifically, war. I refute the exclusively agonistic reading by demonstrating that, throughout his writings, Nietzsche gives numerous arguments as to why we ought to value mortal forms of combat. I further contend that many of these arguments, particularly in his early writings, are underpinned by a description of destructive conflict that is seriously problematic for his agonistic readers, all of whom take Nietzsche to be pursuing the *transformation* of destructive into constructive, agonistic conflict *without remainders*. Though there are certainly texts in which he recommends transformation, I call attention to passages where he also conceives of violently destructive struggle as *untransformable*. On this logic, war is portrayed as ineluctable because humans possess an irresistible drive for specifically murderous strife. My solution to this apparent contradiction is to suggest that this problematical conception of destructive conflict is for the most part confined to his early writings. As he moves away from Schopenhauer, from whom he inherits this idea, and towards the natural sciences in the 1880s, he reconceives of destructive conflict as the *contingent*

expression of a general impulse to *overpower* others – one that is not necessarily murderous and can therefore be given an outlet in non-violent modes of conflict.

In Chapter 2, I analyse the mode of conflict that Nietzsche often opposes to destructive struggle – namely, *agonal* contest. I refute the hard, exclusively unmeasured readings and argue that Nietzsche consistently advocates measured agonal relations. In order to determine what this affirmation of agonal contest involves, however, we first need to resolve three interpretive disputes. First, it is unclear whether Nietzsche understands agonal contest as a specifically non-violent form of conflict or whether it includes murderous forms of struggle such as war. We establish, however, that he unequivocally conceives of agonal conflict as non-destructive. We further discover that he views agon as a non-*exploitative* kind of struggle. Agonal contestants fight for fame and personal glory, not instrumental command of their opponents. Second, commentators dispute the *means* Nietzsche proposes for concretely instituting agonal measure in society. How can one stop people from pursuing victory by unmeasured means? For example, how can one prevent political adversaries from resorting to violence in the struggle for power? Some allege that Nietzsche's agonism is founded on the cultivation of *self*-restraint, while others theorise that measure results from balancing equal opponents against one another (we might think of the separation of political powers in the US as exemplary of this). My analysis, however, reveals that *both* self-restraint *and* equality are in fact fundamental sources of agonal measure. I additionally underline the much-neglected importance of religious, educational and legal institutions in Nietzsche's account. On his view, these serve to instil an ethos of self-moderation. Third, there is disagreement as to whether Nietzsche promotes the agon in an

inclusive, non-class specific manner or whether his endorsement is confined to an elite minority of aristocratic equals. I contend that, according to Nietzsche, agonal contest can (and should) take place between any individuals of approximately equal *ability*, irrespective of their class. Nonetheless, he also distinguishes a higher form of agon that is fought over eternal fame, and which is strongly associated with the aristocratic classes.

Having established that Nietzsche only promotes agonally measured conflict under rarely occurring conditions of equality, I then show in Chapters 3 and 4 how he advocates a quite unique form of measured conflict under conditions of *inequality*. This third type of conflict is what I have already described as the exploitative struggle for *organisation*. Organisational struggle is measured insofar as it strives for the *preservation* of that which has been overpowered (albeit in a position of servitude); however, we find that it is conceptually distinct from agonally measured conflict to the extent that a) it is directed at exploitation; b) it occurs under conditions of inequality; and c) it is conditioned by unmeasured exclusionary struggle (recall the analogy we drew with nutrition and digestion, which necessitate excretion).

We further observe how organisational conflict figures far more prominently than either murderous or agonal conflict in Nietzsche's search for a panacea to the ills plaguing modernity. Nietzsche diagnoses both modern individuals and societies as lacking the harmony that enables a flourishing life. The plurality of forces which constitute these forms of life are at present pulling in contrary directions and mutually frustrating one another. This condition leaves both the modern individual and society paralysed and impotent. We observe that Nietzsche by far and away favours the formation of instrumental hierarchies as an antidote to this affliction and claims that these are established by means of organisational struggle.

Psychologically speaking, this means struggling to reign in certain drives (i.e. impulses or desires) so that they obediently serve one's higher goals. However, contrary to existing readings of Nietzsche, which take him to be staunchly opposed to psychological repression, I foreground how he urges his readers to eradicate intractable impulses. Socially speaking, organisational struggle manifests itself as a push to exploit weaker individuals. Yet, contrary to Nietzsche's radical aristocratic readers who understand this exploitation as a murderous form of chattel slavery, Nietzsche's conception of healthy exploitation is inherently *measured*. Either the exploiter wishes to preserve the exploited and therefore attends to their wellbeing, or the subordinate party *voluntarily* serves their superiors on account of the benefits this grants them. At the same time though, Nietzsche also emphasises the need for a society to exclude individuals that are inimical to its vitality. I conclude, however, that this should by no means be equated with an affirmation of genocide (as some have surmised) since we can easily imagine it being realised by less abhorrent means such as, for example, the creation of a truly reformatory penal system.

Although I highlight the similarity between the early and the later Nietzsche's proposed remedies to disintegration, I also emphasise a major point of divergence. In Chapter 3, we see that Nietzsche's early notion of organisational struggle is founded on two key metaphysical presuppositions. Yet, in Chapter 4, we find that these are wholly absent from his later theory of organisation. The early Nietzsche buys into Schopenhauer's conviction that the organisation of any entity is grounded in the unity of its *essence*. Prior to the late 1870s, Nietzsche maintains that we need to identify the true unchanging essence of our self (i.e. our *character*) in order to organise ourselves. Once we know our true calling in life, which is dictated by our essential character, we have a criterion against which we can determine

whether behavioural impulses are potentially beneficial or harmful. Otherwise put, we can deduce whether we should cultivate or eradicate an impulse. For the early Nietzsche, ascertaining and acknowledging the essential purpose of society – namely, to create geniuses – serves a similar function. It gives us the criterion by which we can distinguish the values and social structures that we should promote from those that we ought to abolish. As of the late 1870s, though, Nietzsche goes on to reject the very essences that ground his early theory of organisation. According to the later Nietzsche, there are no human essences – the self is just a contingent plurality of drives – nor can we speak of society as having any essential purpose.

The question we therefore have to ask in Chapter 4 is: how does the later Nietzsche reconceptualise organisational struggle without the metaphysical fundaments of his earlier philosophy? I reconstruct how he uses his readings in the natural sciences to develop a non-metaphysical account of organisation. This involves a detailed exegesis of his theory of the world as will to power (*Wille zur Macht*), according to which existence is framed as a constellation of forces vying to augment their power. According to this theory, organisation results from certain forces within the self or society taking control and unifying the subordinate forces into a functioning unit. As we see at the end of Chapter 4, for the later Nietzsche, it is insight into the nature of the world as will to power – rather than some kind of metaphysical essence – that sets the cogs of organisation into motion.

By way of conclusion, I summarise how Nietzsche's mature thoughts on conflict form a coherent whole. We find that Nietzsche prescribes the various species of measured and unmeasured conflict under quite compatible sets of conditions. With this it becomes evident that the antagonism between the soft (measured) and hard (unmeasured) readings presents us with a false

dichotomy. After enumerating some of the most harmful defects associated with our conventional conception of conflict, I close by gesturing towards how we might, in light of our findings, reformulate the concept in order to facilitate individual and collective flourishing.