**The Will to Power**

Nietzsche’s genealogy of morality gives a prominent role to power, evident in the historical junctures at which new interpretations of old phenomena become dominant. You might say (with Nietzsche – see OGM II 12) that Nietzsche’s genealogy takes the will to power as its guiding principle.

In this respect, Nietzsche’s genealogy reflects a broader theme in his work. But what is the will to power? Many important passages on the will to power occur in *Beyond Good and Evil*. For example:

1. Physiologists should think twice before positioning the drive for self-preservation as the cardinal drive of an organic being. Above all, a living thing wants to discharge its strength - life itself is will to power -: self-preservation is only one of the indirect and most frequent consequences of this. - In short, here as elsewhere, watch out for superfluous teleological principles! - such as the drive for preservation (which we owe to Spinoza's inconsistency -). This is demanded by method, which must essentially be the economy of principles.

*Beyond Good and Evil* §13

In some sense, it seems, Nietzsche thinks that the will to power is constitutive of life. This suggestion is further explored in *Beyond Good and Evil* §36:

1. Assuming that our world of desires and passions is the only thing "given" as real, that we cannot get down or up to any "reality" except the reality of our drives (since thinking is only a relation between these drives) - aren't we allowed to make the attempt and pose the question as to whether something like this "given" isn't enough to render the so-called mechanistic (and thus material) world comprehensible as well? … The question is ultimately whether we recognize the will as, in effect, efficacious, whether we believe in the causality of the will. If we do (and this belief is really just our belief in causality itself -), then we must make the attempt to hypothetically posit the causality of the will as the only type of causality there is. … **The world** **seen from inside, the world determined and described with respect to its** **"intelligible character" - would be just this "will to power" and nothing** **else. -**

*Beyond Good and Evil* §36

Relevant passages can also be found in Nietzsche’s notebooks, many of which were published after his death in a volume entitled *The Will to Power*. For example:

1. **…my Dionysian world of the eternally self-creating, the eternally self-destroying, this mystery world of the twofold voluptuous delight, my "beyond good and evil," without goal, unless the joy of the circle is itself a goal;** without will, unless a ring feels good will toward itself-do you want a name for this world? A solution for all its riddles? A light for you, too, you best-concealed, strongest, most intrepid, most midnightly men?- **This world is the will to power-and nothing besides!** And you yourselves are also this will to power-and nothing besides!

*The Will to Power* §1067, note from 1885

**NB:** though many interpretations have liberally used notes published in *The Will to Power* as uncomplicated evidence of Nietzsche’s views, many others urge caution about the use of unpublished material.

Nietzsche: depending on interpretation, either human behaviour, or organic life, or all of reality is will to power. But what does Nietzsche mean by “power”?

1. I assess a man by the quantum of power and abundance of his will: not by its enfeeblement and extinction; I regard a philosophy which teaches denial of the will as a teaching of defamation and slander- **I assess the power of a will by how much resistance, pain, torture it endures and knows how to turn to its advantage; I do not account the evil and painful character of existence a reproach to it, but hope rather that it will one day be more evil and painful than hitherto**

*The Will to Power* §382, note from 1888

1. “A table of virtues hangs over every people. Behold, it is the table of its overcomings; behold, it is the voice of its will to power”

*Thus Spoke Zarathustra,* ‘On the thousand and one goals’

**An exegetical dilemma**

“The world is will to power”. This looks like a metaphysical claim. But what about Nietzsche’s scepticism about metaphysics?

1. Metaphysical world. - It is true, there could be a metaphysical world; the absolute possibility of it is hardly to be disputed. We behold all things through the human head and cannot cut off this head; while the question nonetheless remains what of the world would still be there if one had cut it off…one could assert nothing at all of the metaphysical world except that it was a being-other, an inaccessible, incomprehensible being-other; it would be a thing with negative qualities.

*Human All Too Human* Vol 1 §9

And even if we can render Nietzsche’s scepticism consistent with metaphysical claims about the will to power, why think that not just people but all of reality is fundamentally a drive towards domination and overcoming?

It seems we have two unappealing options

1. Take Nietzsche at his word, but end up with a bizarre and possibly inconsistent metaphysics
2. Read him charitably, render him plausible, but be forced to deny certain passages

**Non-Metaphysical Readings of the Will to Power**

The will to power has metaphysical/cosmological interpretations, and non-metaphysical/non-cosmological interpretations. Let us look first at the latter.

One very famous and relatively old example is Walter Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist* Princeton University Press, 1950.

According to Kaufmann, the will to power doctrine is Nietzsche’s attempt to make explicit what had been already implicit in his earlier work. Specifically, the doctrine is a methodological framework for psychological explanation of human behaviour. Nietzsche’s psychology on this reading will tend to find attempts to establish power under the surface of ostensible motivations. Will to power often lies, for examples, behind gratitude:

1. Gratitude and revenge. - The reason the man of power is grateful is this. His benefactor has, through the help he has given him, as it were laid hands on the sphere of the man of power and intruded into it: now, by way of requital, the man of power in turn lays hands on the sphere of his benefactor through the act of gratitude. It is a milder form of revenge. If he did not have the compensation of gratitude, the man of power would have appeared unpowerful and thenceforth counted as such. That is why every community of the good, that is to say originally the powerful, places gratitude among its first duties. Swift suggested that men are grateful in the same degree as they are revengeful.

*Human all too Human* vol I §44

Kaufmann: even when later Nietzsche work extends the will to power principle to non-human organic life, the principle is roughly the same: a guiding commitment for explanation that finds attempts to establish power among the empirical evidence available to Nietzsche.

Maudemarie Clark’s reading owes a lot to Kaufmann (see Maudemarie Clark, *Nietzsche on Truth and Philosophy,* Cambridge University Press, 1990)

But she sees a problem with Kaufmann’s reading: if all human behaviour/life is will to power, then what explanatory value is provided by observing that a phenomenon is caused by the will to power?

Clark’s answer:

* the will to power is a second-order desire
* specifically WTP is the desire for greater fulfilment of (more opportunities for and ability to) fulfil first-order desires
* explanations are still varied in their content

For a more recent account of the psychological reading see Bernard Reginster ‘The Will to Power’ in *The Nietzschean Mind* edited by Paul Katsafanas (2018, Routledge)

**Metaphysical Readings of the Will to Power**

Examples of metaphysical readings:

* Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche, Vols1-4,* Harper Collins, 1991
* Giles Deleuze (1962) *Nietzsche et la philosophie* (Paris: PUF); tr. as *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, by Hugh Tomlinson, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983.
* Alexander Nehamas, *Life as Literature*, Harvard University Press, 1985
* John Richardson, *Nietzsche’s System,* Oxford University Press, 1996

Richardson: the will to power has application in Nietzsche’s psychology, but is first and foremost a theory about the basic constituent elements of reality.

Richardson’s Nietzsche: all of reality comprises drives or forces, the nature of which is will to power:

1. …The victorious concept "force," by means of which our physicists have created God and the world, still needs to be completed: an inner will must be ascribed to it, which I designate as "will to power," i.e., as an insatiable desire to manifest power; or as the employment and exercise of power, as a creative drive, etc. Physicists cannot eradicate "action at a distance" from their principles; nor can they eradicate a repellent force (or an attracting one). There is nothing for it: one is obliged to understand all motion, all "appearances," all "laws," only as symptoms of an inner event and to employ man as an analogy to this end. In the case of an animal, it is possible to trace all its drives to the will to power; likewise all the functions of organic life to this one source…

*The Will to Power* §619, note from 1885

One possible reading of such a metaphysics: all drives have power as their end or goal – perhaps specifically political power. But this seems implausible in cases of e.g. the will to truth, or hunger. Surely it is possible to have a drive that does not tend towards political power?

Richardson: power is not the end of drives, but the will to power is a formal quality of all drives i.e. all drives, regardless of their end or goal, take the form of the will to power.

The will to power form of drives means: all drives will their own enhancement. Enhancement means:

* first, self-overcoming of the drive into a higher form of itself e.g. the development of hunger from the drive for minimal nutrition needed for survival, into a desire for aesthetically complex meals.
* second, the incorporation of other drives, such that the overpowering drive becomes (a) more complex and (b) stronger

What reasons does Nietzsche give us for thinking that not just psychological drives but also physical forces must be this way?

A reconstruction of one of Nietzsche’s arguments (adapted from Peter Poellner ‘Nietzsche’s metaphysical sketches: causality and the will to power’ in *the Oxford Handbook of Nietzsche* ed by John Richardson and Ken Gemes, Oxford, 2013)

1. For Nietzsche, modern mechanics in physics can identify lawlike regularities but cannot tell us anything about the qualities of objects that make them behave as they do (description, not explanation)
2. But we can only observe the regularities – how could we know anything about the qualities or forces that explain those regularities?
3. Nietzsche’s answer: one force we do know is the will, known through familiarity with our own will and its efficacy
4. How are we familiar with the efficacy of our own will? Via negativa: we know it by contrast to moments when something is not under our control (say, an earworm, when you cannot get a particular song out of your head)
5. The efficacy of the will is the only efficacious force we know of. So we must posit this as the same force in reality. Further analysis of this will provides us with the particular qualities of the will to power

**Metaphysical or non-metaphysical?**

How do we adjudicate?

A problem for the psychological reading: a number of passages appear to attribute the will to power to more than just our psychology (e.g. BGE 13, 22, 36, OGM II 12, WTP 619, 1067)

Clark’s response: (a) many of those passages are from notebooks published posthumously, and are not legitimate sources without support from the published works (b) passages in the published works that appear to give arguments for a metaphysical will to power in fact present arguments that Nietzsche himself disagrees with (they are ironic, parodic). Consider for example step iii in Poellner’s reconstructed Nietzsche argument. Nietzsche explicitly denies this in some passages.

(A problem for the metaphysical reading: if Clark is right, then the tables are turned and the textual basis for *this* reading is now undermined!)

A second problem for the psychological reading: the division between passages where Nietzsche is ironic and where he is not seems either arbitrary, or is based on a distinction between the human and non-human that elsewhere Nietzsche is keen to deny:

1. But we hermits and marmots, we convinced ourselves a long time ago and in all the secrecy of a hermit's conscience that even this dignified verbal pageantry belongs among the false old finery, debris, and gold dust of unconscious human vanity, and that the terrible basic text of *homo natura* must be recognized even underneath these fawning colors and painted surfaces. To translate humanity back into nature… - with courageous Oedipus eyes and sealed up Odysseus ears, deaf to the lures of the old metaphysical bird catchers who have been whistling to him for far too long: "You are more! You are higher! You have a different origin!" – This may be a strange and insane task, but it is a task - who would deny it!

*Beyond Good and Evil* §230

For more on Clark v Richardson see the exchanges between them in: International Studies in Philosophy, 32, no. 3 (2000): 107-17 (Richardson), and 119-35 (Clark); and in International Studies in Philosophy, 39, no. 3 (2007): 117-33 (Clark), and 135-47 (Richardson).

**A suggested compromise: the will to power as a competitor to modern moral ideology**

Nietzsche considers modern science not just deficient in its mechanistic tendency, but also democratic in its sensibilities:

1. … this "conformity of nature to law," which you physicists are so proud of… exists only because of your interpretation and bad "philology." It is not a matter of fact, not a "text," but instead only a naive humanitarian correction and a distortion of meaning that you use in order to comfortably accommodate the **democratic instincts of the modern soul!** "Everywhere, equality before

the law, - in this respect, nature is no different and no better off than we are”

*Beyond Good and Evil* §22

The thought here appears to be that just as moral values and beliefs have infiltrated modern practice of history, so too moralism has corrupted the practice of science. Compare what he says about the problem with history in *On the Genealogy of Morality*:

1. How have the moral genealogists reacted so far to this matter [the history of punishment]? … they highlight some ‘purpose’ in punishment, for example, revenge or deterrence, then innocently place the purpose at the start…On the contrary…the origin of the emergence of a thing and its ultimate usefulness…are *toto coelo* [utterly]separate…anything in existence…is continually interpreted anew, requisitioned anew, transformed and redirected to a new purpose by a power superior to it…

[and then later in the same passage]

…The **democratic idiosyncrasy** of being against everything that dominates and wants to dominate…has gradually shaped and dressed itself up as intellectual, most intellectual, so much so that it already, today, little by little penetrates the strictest, seemingly most objective sciences…indeed, I think it has already become master of the whole of physiology and biology

*On the Genealogy of Morality*  II §12

Nietzsche thinks philosophies and ethical codes tell us more about the people who believe in them than about anything else. So too, it seems, with the way that his contemporaries practice history and science; they betray moral values.

But it stands to reason that Nietzsche would think that his own doctrine of the will to power – whether it is psychological, biological, or metaphysical, would also be first and foremost the expression of a way of valuing, rather than something that may or may not be true.

Nietzsche thus proposes the will to power not as a series of truth claims about reality, but as a competing interpretation, a rival, in an attempt to overpower the dominant interpretation of his age – modern morality. If this is correct, we can accept all of the passages in which he writes about the will to power, without committing him to a view that seems to be far from demonstrably true.

**Additional Admin**

1. Lecture schedule this term:

Week 1 – Nietzsche the immoralist

Week 2 – Suffering and tragedy

Week 3 – Master and slave moralities

Week 4 – Moralism and guilt

Week 5 – Genealogy

~~Week 6 – Freedom and fate~~ **cancelled due to UCU industrial action**

Week 7 – Will to power

Week 8 – Truth and perspectivism

1. Reading group: *The Gay Science*

Fridays **12.15-1.15pm**, weeks 2 - 8 **NB New time**

Faculty of Philosophy Graduate Common Room

Schedule:

24 Jan: The Gay Science, Book 1, sections 1-21  
31 Jan: The Gay Science, Book 1, sections 22-51  
7 Feb: The Gay Science, Book 2, sections 52-91  
14 Feb: The Gay Science, Book 2, sections 92-107  
~~21 Feb: The Gay Science, Book 3, sections 108-152~~ **cancelled due to UCU industrial action**  
28 Feb: The Gay Science, Book 4, sections 276-311  
6 Mar: The Gay Science, Book 4, sections 312-342

*Matt Bennett*

*Email* [*mpb74@cam.ac.uk*](mailto:mpb74@cam.ac.uk)

*Website (including teaching materials): drmattbennett.weebly.com*