

# NIETZSCHE'S CONCEPT OF THE WILL TO POWER<sup>1</sup>

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The will to power in Nietzsche is a huge subject on which it would be much easier to give a series of lectures than a brief summary. What I shall try to do is to open up a few topics schematically without trying to exhaust any one of these topics.

The conception of the will to power is central in Nietzsche's philosophy. In his early aphoristic works he had found will to power, without as yet using that term, at work in all sorts of human behavior and valuations. Then in his book *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, in the early 1880's, he used the term, and proclaimed the will to power man's basic motive, suggesting further that it is to be found in all living things. And in some of his works in the later 1880's Nietzsche even ascribed it occasionally to inorganic nature as well.<sup>3</sup>

The will to power is presented by Nietzsche explicitly and emphatically as a hypothesis which he does not claim to have proved, not even in the realm of psychology (8, sect. 36). And it is only in the realm of psychology that he amassed a considerable body of evidence for it. As a metaphysical theory about the universe, that the ultimate reality is the will to power, it seems to me that the doctrine does not deserve to be taken very seriously.

Martin Heidegger, in his two-volume *Nietzsche* (4), makes the metaphysical aspect of the will to power the central fact of Nietzsche's philosophy. In this he totally disregards the context of the passages that he cites and the Gestalt of Nietzsche's thought generally. Heidegger assigns to Nietzsche a role that is totally uncongenial to him and places him in the history of Western thought in a way that does not do justice to Nietzsche's own express intentions. Still, Heidegger like

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<sup>3</sup>For details see W. Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist* (5), Chapter 6, "The Discovery of the Will to Power"; cf. also Chapters 7 ("Morality and Sublimation"), 8 ("Sublimation, *Geist*, and Eros") and 9 ("Power versus Pleasure").

all serious interpreters of Nietzsche, rejects the notion that the will to power is a proto-fascist notion. While there are passages in Nietzsche in which it is suggested that the will to power is the ultimate reality and something of a metaphysical principle, these are much less interesting than Nietzsche's suggestion that it is the basic *human* motive and the ultimate *psychological* fact; this is to my mind one of the most interesting theories in 19th century psychology. And it is about this that I want to say a few things.

#### POWER VS. LIFE

First, I want to contrast will to power with will to life because I believe that is the way Nietzsche himself thought of it. He suggested that what men want is power. What he had in mind first of all, was that they wanted power rather than life. The basic psychological fact was not a will to life, which he associated primarily with three of his predecessors: Schopenhauer, Spinoza, and Darwin.

First and in some ways most immediate to his own mind was Schopenhauer, the German philosopher by whom Nietzsche in his early days was much influenced and against whom he turned in his mature work. For Schopenhauer the basic psychological motive was the will to life. Nietzsche came to think that Schopenhauer was right in regarding the element of will as basic, but wrong about its being the will to life.

The second thinker in whom Nietzsche found the will to life was Spinoza (*Ethics*, Part III, Proposition VI ff.). The third thinker by whom Nietzsche was stimulated and with whom he disagreed was Charles Darwin whose *Origin of Species* had come out in 1859, when Nietzsche was fifteen. Nietzsche came to think that the will to survival, the will to existence, was really the wrong kind of principle, and it was against this that he defined the will to power. And so we find Nietzsche saying in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, in the chapter on self-overcoming—Nietzsche strongly associated the will to power with self-overcoming, and it was in this chapter that he proclaimed the will to power—"There is much that life esteems more highly than life itself" (7, pp. 227-228). So what man wants most, suggests Nietzsche, is not life but something else, namely power. The kind of evidence he had in mind here was that there are many circumstances under which life is sacrificed for more power. Again and again men risk life for more power. You don't necessarily have to think of anything very dramatic or romantic here; you can think of things as simple as skiing

—not the kind of skiing perhaps that some of you do, but the kind of skiing that some people do where life is risked for a superlative sense of power.

#### POWER VS. PLEASURE

The second topic with which I want to deal at slightly greater length than power vs. life, is power vs. pleasure. This was equally close to Nietzsche's mind. Again there is the contrast: pitting power against life, pitting power against pleasure. And in the setting of this particular symposium it is appropriate for me to stress the second contrast a little more, because the opposition of power vs. pleasure came up again in psychoanalysis. The early Freud stressed the desire for pleasure. Here he was still under the influence of 19th century psychology. He assumed that the pleasure principle was the basic psychological principle. As I see Freud, he changed his mind about that during World War I, probably mainly under the impact of the events of this war, possibly to some extent also because he was getting older and because he had developed a cancer. In any case after World War I, Freud developed a more dualistic philosophy—metapsychology as he called it—in which the pleasure principle was no longer the only principle.

The struggle between the ideas of pleasure and power was at the basis of Adler's break from Freud in 1911. At his last joint meeting with Freud, Adler criticized Freud for tracing neurosis to a yearning for once experienced pleasures and in this connection significantly quotes from Nietzsche. Reinterpreting Freud's "ego drives" as "the tension and attitudes toward the environment," Adler saw them as "a striving toward power, toward dominance, toward being above" (I, pp. 63-64).<sup>4</sup>

The struggle between the ideas of pleasure and power was central in Nietzsche's philosophy, and I want to open up a few sub-topics in this opposition of power vs. pleasure in Nietzsche.

#### PLEASURE VS. HAPPINESS

First of all—and about this I shall be very brief, but it is important—there are some people who fail to distinguish between pleasure, on the one hand, and happiness, on the other; and then more or less by a slight of hand, an unconscious slight of hand, come

<sup>4</sup>I owe this reference to Dr. H. L. Ansbacher.

to the conclusion that by definition it is self-evident that what everybody wants is pleasure. You find something of this confusion in the Utilitarian philosophers—in Bentham and Mill—but also in many 20th century thinkers. So it seems to me well to make some distinction here. I propose to use for the remainder of my remarks the word “happiness” for what people desire, what people want, leaving open whether that is pleasure or not.

Secondly, let us then use the word “pleasure,” again not going far I think from ordinary usage, for a conscious state that is free of pain, free of displeasure, and free of discomfort. It is not self-evident or logically necessary that this is what everybody wants. In fact it is Nietzsche’s point, and I think he is right about this, that pleasure is *not* what everybody wants.

Thirdly, one could introduce—not that it matters very much, but it is somewhat helpful—a term for the conscious state, if any, that is a component of what men actually desire and want. If we were to find that what men actually desire and want is Nirvana, and if we assumed that Nirvana involves the extinction of consciousness, then there wouldn’t be any conscious side to the state that men most want. But if we assume that what men most want is the kind of experience that is, for instance, involved in skiing at breakneck speed, if we assume that what men want is, to quote Nietzsche, “to live dangerously” (6, sect. 283); if we assume that what people want is the maximum of creativity or something of that sort, then there might well be a conscious side to that, but it would not necessarily be pleasure as I have defined it—a state of consciousness that is completely free of all elements of discomfort, pain, displeasure. Let us then call this conscious side joy. And in joy, pleasure might be a component along with pain, along with discomfort.

This was the first point about the opposition of power to pleasure. There is nothing paradoxical about suggesting that what people most want is *not* pleasure.

#### FAUTE DE MIEUX

Secondly, I have to introduce a concept for which Nietzsche, although he loved French phrases, did not use the French phrase that I am about to introduce, *faute de mieux*. People may want something which is not really what they want most, but something they would settle for, *faute de mieux*, lacking something better. Because they

give up any hope of getting what they really want, they settle for something second best or, more typically, for something third, fourth or fifth best, which is, to use a Nietzschean term now, a foreground goal, something that they think they want, but it is not really what they want most. This is crucial for understanding Nietzsche's version of depth psychology.

### *Pleasure*

The hunt for pleasures is for Nietzsche very much a *faute de mieux*. That is not really what people want; that is almost a way of drugging oneself, and it is something that does not, by any stretch of the imagination, ever lead to happiness. A book that I have liked and admired very much, ever since I first read it in my teens, makes this point very beautifully. Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, which deals entirely with a man who hunts for pleasure and does not find happiness in that way. This is how Nietzsche would see hedonism, and I see it the same way and would be willing to argue for this in my own way without in any way relying on his authority.

### *Nirvana*

Secondly, Nietzsche might deal in this way—and I personally certainly would—with the concept of Nirvana. This, too, has to be understood *faute de mieux*. It's a way of throwing in the towel, it's a way of giving up. Seeing how horrible the world is, a sensitive and prudent person might very well come to the conclusion that the best thing is to give up. The concept of Nirvana and the search for Nirvana command tremendous respect, and the Buddha is one of my heroes. Nevertheless, the search for Nirvana has to be understood as a *faute de mieux*. Once one has come to feel either that one personally can't make it, or that the whole of mankind—and this was the Buddha's teaching—is in such a horrible situation that it is hopeless to live a creative and happy life, one might well come to the conclusion that Nirvana is the best solution open to us. Think of a person who is in horrible pain that cannot be assuaged in any way. He may find that salvation lies in getting a shot of morphine, of *Demerol*, or some other drug that extinguishes consciousness. The approaching extinction of consciousness may then be experienced as bliss unspeakable, as pain gradually ebbs away. But this, Nietzsche would say, is not what is wanted most.

*Lording it over Others*

Thirdly, still under the heading of the *faute de mieux*, there are—and this again is crucial for understanding Nietzsche—such phenomena as lording it over others. Aggressive behavior, militarism, some forms of patriotism, the conviction that at least I'm better than so and so, at least I'm better than members of some other race, for example, all these forms of power Nietzsche understood as something that is wanted *faute de mieux*. In the same way he saw mediocrity, opposition to competition, conformity, settling for a drab life. That is not what man really wants most.

## EXAMPLES OF POWER

What man really wants most, Nietzsche suggests, is power. Here it may help us to think of forms of power that all of us would desire, at least on some occasions (the examples once again are mine rather than Nietzsche's): power to revive the dead, not *all* the dead, but some; power to restore the sick, again not necessarily all people who are sick, but certain people who are sick; power to do certain things. To the extent to which we feel frustrated or desperate, or cry, isn't it at some form of impotence, at lacking the power to do something?

Or if we think of various professions, why does one become a therapist, or a doctor generally? Isn't it because one has once been impressed in one's childhood by somebody who had the power to help in a certain situation and one wants this particular kind of power? This is a noble motive. Of course, some people merely like the prestige and the money; but that would also be a form of power. What I have just said about doctors would apply in exactly the same way to lawyers, to ministers, to professors, to politicians. The power that one wants can be a rather low and gross form of power, but it can also be a very honorable form of power; say, the power to help other people.

Now think of it in an entirely different sense. As we all know, the automobile industry spends millions if not billions of dollars, on finding out how one can advertise and sell cars. Is it not interesting that they make cars that have so much more horsepower than anybody is allowed to use on the roads of America? People obviously are willing to pay money for the sense that there is terrific power that they have when they sit behind the steering wheel, even if they are not allowed to use it. Why do we have power brakes, power steering, power seats, power windows, and why is it all called "power"? This

is a word that sells, and I am mentioning this, although it may seem funny and trivial, because a great deal of consumer research has gone into it, and that word is used because it has been found to "ring a bell," because people want it.

Ask yourself not only about things like skiing, but why do people take up smoking? I take it that in their teens it suggested power to them—being grown up, being big, being sophisticated. And so they got hooked.

#### SUBLIMATION<sup>5</sup>

The last topic that I still want to touch on, under this dichotomy of power *vs.* pleasure, is the other side of the *faute de mieux*. One cannot understand Nietzsche at all unless one associates the notion of the will to power with what Nietzsche called sublimation. He did not coin the word "sublimation"; it is an older word. He was the first one, however, to use it in its distinctively modern sense that some of us associate with psychoanalysis. Nietzsche used it in that sense, and the will to power must be understood in Nietzsche in conjunction with sublimation and with creativity, which according to Nietzsche, is the highest form of power. It contains an ingredient of pain and discomfort. John Stuart Mill said in rebutting attacks on his making so much of pleasure that it was not the utilitarians but their critics who suppose "human beings to be capable of no pleasures except those of which swine are capable" (*Utilitarianism*, Chapter 2, paragraph 4). In just the same way one can say it is not Nietzsche but his critics who assume that man is not capable of any higher *powers* than swine.

#### CRITIQUE OF THE WILL TO POWER

With this I come to the last point of my presentation, and that is just a suggestion as to how one might criticize Nietzsche, which I would be prepared to do. But he is a subtle thinker, and therefore I cannot make good on this criticism in any detail. I can only mention an avenue of criticism. Let me call attention to a superficial contradiction in Nietzsche which merely brings out that he used "power" in two senses, which is not in itself a wicked thing. In one of his late writings Nietzsche says: "Power makes stupid." What he is referring to here—and this does him credit—is the German empire of Bismarck

<sup>5</sup>cf. footnote 3 above.

and Kaiser Wilhelm and the kind of power Bismarck and the Kaiser represented. He also remarks that ever since the German victory over France in 1871 the center of cultural power in Europe is Paris, while Germany has become the "flat lands of Europe"; while when Napoleon smashed Germany in 1806, it was Germany—militarily, economically, without any power, smashed to its foundations—that was the great cultural power in Europe. Think of Beethoven, Goethe, etc., etc. Thus there is one sense in which Nietzsche disapproves of power and another sense in which he thinks of Goethe and sometimes Socrates as the acme of power.

Nietzsche's position depends on suggesting that cultural power is more power, is greater power. Perhaps you, like myself, sympathize with Nietzsche here, and feel that this is the redeeming feature of his philosophy, which makes his philosophy attractive. But from a theoretical point of view, there is a difficulty here. How can one show that this sort of power really is greater, that it really is quantitatively greater? Nietzsche never quite succeeds in proving and demonstrating that.

Let me put this criticism in conclusion a little bit differently. It is itself open to criticism and is a sketch merely; it is not a detailed critique, which would take much longer. What is open to criticism is Nietzsche's assumption that the only thing that is wanted for its own sake is power. To be sure, it is not true that by finding the will to power at work everywhere Nietzsche, as some critics have supposed, necessarily empties power of all meaning. To me it is surprising and important to note, how much of human behavior Nietzsche does illuminate by calling attention to the will to power and its hidden workings.

It may be heresy to say this in this gathering, but it seems to me that there is no other psychological theory besides Nietzsche's, except Sigmund Freud's with its emphasis on sex, that throws so much light on human behavior, as does Nietzsche's theory of the will to power. But what Nietzsche overlooks is, I think, a point that Freud made in his first major psychoanalytical book, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, in a footnote (2, pp. 183 f.)—one of the great footnotes of world literature—that in subsequent editions he moved into the text (3, pp. 271 f.). This note contains Freud's interpretation of *Hamlet* as well as a point that Freud formulated beautifully, but that Nietzsche overlooked—and, Freud sometimes overlooked it, too. Still the point is worth making. Freud claims to have illuminated Hamlet by calling



attention to Hamlet's Oedipus complex. But he disowns having found *the* explanation of Hamlet, and then generalizes that neurotic symptoms, dreams, works of literature and, I might add, human behavior generally, are "capable of overinterpretation, and indeed, demand nothing less than this in order to be fully understood."

To put it into my own words, even if almost all behavior can be illuminated by finding the will to power at work in it, it does not follow that this is the only ultimate motive and the only way of illuminating such behavior. And in some cases, an appeal to the will to power is farfetched and not very illuminating. My criticism of Nietzsche then is that he never gave systematic attention either to apparently negative instances or to possible alternative hypotheses.

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