

Nietzsche on the will to power

THE WILL TO POWER

The will to power is perhaps the key concept in Nietzsche's philosophy. It is strongly connected to his concept of 'life'. So in *Beyond Good and Evil* §13, Nietzsche says 'A living being wants above all else to release its strength; life itself is the will to power'. And he claims that 'all animals... strive instinctively for an optimum combination of favourable conditions which allow them to expend all their energy and achieve their maximum feeling of power' (*On the Genealogy of Morals*, III §7). Each form of life has a particular constitution, with its instincts having different strengths, such that certain conditions will favour its form of life. This brings different types of life into conflict with each other, as each wants different conditions to prevail: 'life itself in its essence means appropriating, injuring, overpowering those who are foreign and weaker' (§259), though this language suggests that such activity is immoral, when it is simply a function of being alive.

And 'life' does not refer just to biological life; the same is true of societies, of classes within society, wherever we find different 'types' of people. The 'original fact of all history' is that society originates in and is based upon 'exploitation'. History is, then, a history of the forms of life through which the will to power has been expressed, the various moralities, values, social institutions and structures and cultures. The will to power, claims Nietzsche, even underpins philosophical theories.

So what exactly is the will to power? There are three possible interpretations:

1. Metaphysical: that everything that exists is the will to power;
2. Organic: that the will to power is specifically related to all life;
3. Psychological: that it is related to living creatures with a will.

THE METAPHYSICAL INTERPRETATION

Two passages in *Beyond Good and Evil* seem to support the metaphysical interpretation, §22 and §36. In §22, Nietzsche argues that the scientific idea of 'laws of nature' is an interpretation driven by the value of equality. Someone could just as easily 'read out of [nature] the ruthlessly tyrannical and unrelenting assertion of power claims'. But Nietzsche does not say that such a reading would be more correct or that we should read nature in this way.

In §36, he raises this question

Assuming that nothing real is 'given' to us apart from our world of desires and passions...may we not...ask whether this 'given' also provides a sufficient explanation for the so-called mechanistic (or 'material') world... as a world with the same level of reality that our emotion has - that is, as a more rudimentary form of the world of emotions... - as a preliminary form of life?

Nietzsche has argued repeatedly that how we understand what appears depends on our perspective, which embodies our values, which originate in our instincts. We cannot go

beyond the reality we experience, grounded in our instincts, to some ‘deeper’ reality. So can we understand the physical world in analogous terms? The hypothesis to be tested is whether ‘all mechanical events, is so far as an energy is active in them, are really the energy of the will’. If so, and if the will is the will to power, then we could say that all energy is the will to power.

But is Nietzsche asserting that this is how we should understand the world? Some support is given to this reading by his remark in §12 – that Boscovich has demonstrated that we should give up the idea of ‘atoms’ of substance in physics. Boscovich, an 18th-century physicist, argued that matter is comprised of force fields. Is Nietzsche suggesting that each force field is essentially a drive to expand its field and so increase its power relative to other force fields? Some philosophers have interpreted Nietzsche this way, but there are three good reasons to resist. First, Nietzsche says that the question comes down to ‘whether we believe in the causality of the will’, then arguing that it is the only form of causality. But he explicitly rejects both causality (as real) and the causality of the will. In §21, he says that “‘cause’ and ‘effect’ should be used only as pure concepts, as conventional fictions for the purpose of description or communication, and not for explanation’. If we think the world ‘itself’ contains causation, which the metaphysical interpretation claims, we project our concepts mistakenly onto it. In §§16 and 19, he argues that willing is a highly complex phenomenon, that it depends on what happens outside our consciousness and outside our control. ‘Willing’ is not something we can identify as the truth about reality.

Second, Nietzsche repeatedly rejects the projection of philosophical theories onto nature (§9, §16, 21, 22). In an earlier work, he explicitly claims that will is only to be found in creatures with an intellect and that the idea of will ‘has been turned into a metaphor when it is asserted that all things in nature possess will’ (*Human, All Too Human*, II §5). It would be very curious for him, therefore, to take his idea of will to power and project it onto nature.

Third, as discussed below, he claims that some forms of life can ‘lack’ the will to power.

THE ORGANIC AND PSYCHOLOGICAL INTERPRETATIONS

The organic interpretation has a stronger basis in the text – Nietzsche explicitly asserts that life is the will to power (§§13, 259). Will to power would then be the force that distinguishes what is living from what is inanimate. But if by ‘life’ Nietzsche means life in the biological sense, he is still projecting a psychological theory onto nature. And we have just seen that he asserts that only creatures with an intellect possess will – which excludes all forms of life that are not animals. Furthermore, Nietzsche talks of societies being ‘alive’ and exhibiting the will to power (§259), which again indicates that ‘life’ is not meant biologically. So what does he mean ‘life’ in this context?

One passage in particular helps: ‘Life itself is...the instinct for growth,... for power: where the will to power is lacking there is decline. It is my contention that all the supreme values of mankind lack this will’ (*Antichrist* §6). The will to power cannot be life in the biological sense if something alive, such as the human race, can lack the will to power. In the sense of ‘life’ used here, somewhat paradoxically, some forms of life (and some values, such as the ascetic ideal) fail to express or value life. This is the sense in which we talk of someone as ‘full of life’ or as ‘rather lifeless’. The psychological interpretation of ‘will to power’ is therefore best, bearing in mind that for Nietzsche

psychology is very firmly rooted in physiology, in biology. It also fits with Nietzsche's use of the idea of will to power in providing accounts for a wide variety of human behaviour and thought.

The will to power is the basic character of our drives or instincts. The essence of a drive is to assert itself. To do so successfully, to achieve expression, is for it to have power. Power is not a separate aim of the drives. In asserting itself, each drive comes into competition with others, and with the drives of other individuals. And so drives are always in relations of power to each other.

The will to power is not, therefore, a will to political power, although this may be one form it can take. Instead, Nietzsche understands its greatest expression to be a genuine creativity – of art, of insight, and of course, of new values.

What does the will to power explain?

Is the will to power meant to explain all human behaviour? If so, how can we understand the passage quoted above from Antichrist §6? Does 'lacking' mean 'absent' – so not all actions and values exhibit the will to power? Or does it just mean 'weak'? Nietzsche says that the supreme values of mankind, i.e. the ascetic ideal, lack this will; but he also argues at length that the ascetic ideal is an expression of the will to power. A better interpretation is to say that the ascetic ideal does not express the will to power forcefully, that in such people as adopt it, the will to power is weak. The will to power manifests itself throughout all human life for Nietzsche, but in differing strengths.

Objection

We can challenge Nietzsche's claim that so much, if not all, of human life – actions, thoughts, values – can be understood in terms of the will to power. First, would we not do better to say that, e.g. decadence, despair, and passivity are not will to power at all (rather than weak forms of it)? But what force combats the will to power, and can even overcome it? Nietzsche leaves us with a very incomplete understanding here. Second, can we accept that all love and thought are expressions of will to power? Even if they are, are they to be understood as nothing more?

But does Nietzsche want to claim they are 'nothing more' than the will to power? Or only that the will to power is one very powerful and much overlooked factor in human behaviour? I suggest that Nietzsche approves of those understandings and expressions – of love, of thought – that fit with and express the will to power, without necessarily concluding that they are nothing but the will to power.

WILL TO POWER, VALUES, AND NEW PHILOSOPHERS

Nietzsche understands the new philosophers as the greatest and purest expression of the will to power.

1. To say 'yes' to life is to say 'yes' to the will to power. Affirming eternal return is an expression of just how strongly they want to live. To understand why Nietzsche makes the will to power the basis of the new values they will create, one has to remember the sense of joy that comes from exercising power. This is not necessarily power over other people, but any successful attempt to overcome obstacles and suffering to achieve something genuinely creative.

2. The new philosophers recognise the will to power for what it is and its place in human life; they are also the will to power recognising and affirming itself. Their whole lives, thought, values are a channel for the will to power; they are its embodiment.
3. They are commanders with a strong will, by contrast with the mentality of obedience that characterises all ordinary people.
4. They will conduct experiments in breeding that will make the will to power in the human race stronger.

We can object that Nietzsche moves from a factual claim – that the instinctual life of human beings is the will to power – to evaluative claims about the new philosophers. But what is natural is not necessarily what is good, or again, we cannot infer from how things are to how things should be. Just because life is the will to power does not make the will to power a standard of what should be valued.

Nietzsche's argument occurs in the context of his rejection of a transcendent source of goodness. We create values. So without life, valuing is not possible. Therefore, any values that deny or impoverish our living undermine their own foundations. We must, therefore, take the affirmation of life to be the basis of all values; and that means the will to power is the evaluative standard we should endorse.

But this argument uses 'life' with two meanings. The sense in which Nietzsche approves of 'life' is life as the strong expression of the will to power. But the sense of 'life' that is necessary for valuing is simply a matter of being alive. People with a 'weak' will to power still have values. In fact, the forms of life Nietzsche calls weak are doing very well at staying alive (§199). The 'higher' form of life he praises is not what makes valuing possible. So we can coherently ask why we should value it over what he calls the 'lower' forms.

Until we have discussed the values and virtues of the higher and lower forms, we cannot settle the issue. So we must defer the objection for the handout on 'Herd morality'.

THE WILL TO POWER, PHYSIOLOGY AND PSYCHOLOGY

Nietzsche emphasises that we cannot be 'great' simply through aspiration or education: 'There is no way to efface from a person's soul what his ancestors best and most regularly like to do... It is simply impossible that a person would not have his parents' and forefathers' qualities and preferences in his body' (§264). However, this quotation reveals Nietzsche's poor understanding of evolution (evolution was itself poorly understood at the time Nietzsche wrote). He subscribes to a form of Lamarckism, the theory that the characteristics an organism acquires in its lifetime, e.g. certain preferences, can be passed on to its offspring. We now know this to be false. You inherit traits from your parents via genes, and the genetic code is not altered by their behaviour. So you do not carry your ancestors' preferences in your 'body'.

But Nietzsche doesn't distinguish biological inheritance (via the genes) from social inheritance (e.g. he sometimes refers to 'races', sometimes to 'classes', sometimes just to 'types') – and there is a strong tendency for people to have the same values and preferences as their parents (see also §194). He is concerned with the idea of inheritance in general, not biological inheritance specifically. His mistake, perhaps, is to connect the psychological aspect of inheritance too closely to the physiological.

However, this forms an objection. If there is a gap between genetics (physiology) and psychology, then the 'will to power' is not as connected to 'bloodlines' as Nietzsche claims. Social circumstances, rather than biological history, will be far more important for strengthening someone's will. We therefore need to reconsider his claim that we are each a 'psycho-physiological type'. If psychological types, e.g. having a strong or weak will, having the instinct for commanding or obeying, are not based in physiology, then we need to reinterpret many of his analyses and criticisms of people with weak will. For example, sceptics are not sceptics because they suffer from a physiological complaint of 'bad nerves' (§208).

Furthermore, if a strong will to power is not based in a healthy physiology, a weak will in a sickly physiology, then Nietzsche's claims about life itself being the will to power must be reconsidered. It seems his views on the will to power are not reflections of what is 'necessary' for (physiological) life itself, but value judgments that we can question.

This is too quick. Suppose the 'vitality' Nietzsche values is a psychological vitality, not a physiological one. As human beings, we are not concerned with, nor do we value, mere physiological life. A human life is a psychological life – to lose our minds is to lose everything, we may think. If Nietzsche can defend the idea of psychological types, perhaps he can meet these objections. For example, in §200, he speaks of the degeneration that occurs when the 'races' are mixed. But his concern is that such a person embodies contradictory values, and so feels in conflict with himself. As a result, his idea of happiness will be tranquillity. A stronger person, he continues, will exercise his will to power to make something productive of the tension within him. So while Nietzsche bases his remarks in 'race', his concern is psychological throughout. We can read the story of mixed 'races' in terms of mixed value systems instead.