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# Domination, Individuality, and Moral Chaos: Nietzsche's Will to Power<sup>1</sup>

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of 2009 as an Adrian Tinsley Program Summer Grant project under the mentorship of Dr. William J. Devlin. Angel has presented her research at the 2009 Adrian Tinsley Summer Research Symposium and will be further presenting her research at the Undergraduate Mid-South Philosophy Conference. Angel plans to go to graduate school for Philosophy in the fall of 2010.

**O**ne of the most well known, but deeply debated, ideas presented by the philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche, is the will to power. Scholars have provided a variety of interpretations for what Nietzsche means by this concept. In this paper, I argue that, under each interpretation, Nietzsche may still face what I call, the problem of moral chaos, or the problem of endorsing the claim that immoral acts, such as murder and torture, are justifiable as they exemplify the human will towards power over others. I ultimately argue that Nietzsche's philosophy avoids this problem: though Nietzsche proposes it is possible to harm others as a way to power, we should not direct our will to power in this manner. To illustrate this point, I investigate common interpretations of the will to power, arguing that the psychological interpretation is the most compelling. From here, I demonstrate through Nietzsche's passages that he clearly inspires humanity to direct the will to power towards individual inner growth, and not as a form of domination. Therefore, Nietzsche does not fall into the problem of moral chaos.

## Part I. The Will to Power: Metaphysical, Metaphorical or Psychological?

In order to understand the moral connotations of the will to power, we need to first determine what Nietzsche really means by the will to power. There are generally three different interpretations: the metaphysical, metaphorical, and psychological interpretations. In this part, I examine each of these interpretations, arguing that the psychological interpretation is the most compelling.

Those who explain the will to power as a metaphysical description of nature assert that Nietzsche expresses the will to power as being the nature of reality, and of all things inorganic or organic. There are two essential components to this metaphysical interpretation: human beings and the world. Regarding human beings, the will to power is emphasized as something real in human behavior. A being is presented as different forces of energy that are constantly fighting for power (Danto 2005, 199-200). In his posthumously published notes, Nietzsche presents the will to power as a system of "dynamic quanta" (WP:635), where such quanta are in a relationship of struggling to overpower one another. This power must be commanded or balanced to promote a healthy individual. If it is not, and one force has excess power in deficient areas, then the individual is insufficient, sick, or weak (Richardson 1996, 39-43).

The world is also understood as will to power. John Richardson (2006) maintains that Nietzsche characterizes all of nature as the will to power. Nietzsche introduces this idea in *Beyond Good and Evil*, where he states:

Suppose, finally, we succeeded in explaining our entire instinctive life as the development and ramification of *one* basic form of the will—namely, of the will to power, as *my* proposition has it; suppose all organic functions could be traced back to this[,] [...] then one would have gained the right to determine *all* efficient force univocally as –will to power. (BGE:36)

This passage illustrates that Nietzsche was working with the theory that all things are reduced to the one underlying metaphysical substance that he calls the will to power. Nietzsche describes this substance as a “dynamic quanta” of energy and a “force” (WP:619) that is directed outward to overcome, master, or encapsulate other wills. According to Richardson, the will to power is an act of “taking power over something else, ‘incorporating’ it” (Richardson 1996, 22). All things in nature are consuming other things in an act for power and growth. As Nietzsche puts it, “*This world is the will to power—and nothing besides!* And you yourselves are also this will to power—and nothing besides!” (WP:1067). Thus, following this interpretation, we *are* a force of power. Whether power is described as an “effortful pursuit” (Richardson 1996, 22) or a drive to “overcome obstacles” (Danto 2005, 207), it is always what we are. Here, power is a drive in everything to move outward and consume space.

Although the metaphysical interpretation can be supported in Nietzsche’s writings, I argue that there are several problems with this interpretation. First, it is based primarily on Nietzsche’s notes and not his originally published works and it is inadequate to base an interpretation on information arrived at through Nietzsche’s notes, as it may be the case that these ideas weren’t fully developed yet. Second, this interpretation is inconsistent with Nietzsche’s ideas in his published works because it conflicts with his view of perspectivism, the epistemic claim that we only have knowledge and understanding through our human perspective, and know nothing beyond this. According to perspectivism, we cannot see the world-in-itself, or the metaphysically real world, but only a world that is envisioned through our human perspective. Therefore, we can never truly know anything about nature. However, the metaphysical interpretation implies that we can know the truth about nature, since nature truly is the will to power. Thus, there is an inconsistency between this interpretation and Nietzsche’s perspectivism. Third, when we examine Nietzsche’s published accounts of the will to power, we find he primarily presents the

will to power only in humanity, and not in nature as a whole (see, for example, GM:II:12; GM:III:18; BGE: 19; BGE:259; Z:II:2). It is only obvious in his notes that he expands the notion to nature. So, though this interpretation may be grounded in Nietzsche’s notes, it is inconsistent with his published ideas on the will to power.

Finally, Nietzsche’s published passages of the will to power that seem to suggest a metaphysical interpretation can be explained in a non-metaphysical sense. Take a famous passage, BGE:36, as an example. Aphorism 36 seems to be expressing that all of nature is will to power. However, Maudemarie Clark (1990) and Linda L. Williams (1996) each identify that this passage has a “hypothetical form” (Williams 1996, 454). Nietzsche begins with the statement, “*Suppose* all organic functions could be traced back to this will to power [.]” Thus, since it is a hypothetical statement, it is a mistake to say that Nietzsche here espouses the reality of the content made in the hypothetical statement; rather Nietzsche is only ‘speaking hypothetically,’ as it were. For these reasons, then, we can dismiss the metaphysical interpretation.

The next view, the metaphorical interpretation, maintains that, since we cannot know anything about the world-in-itself, we must create a fiction for the human world, thereby creating meaning in our lives. Nietzsche does this by creating the will to power, a fictional worldview. The will to power is thus not real in nature or humanity, but is, as Wayne Klein puts it, “one way among others of describing nature, a form of description that Nietzsche recognizes as explicitly metaphorical” (Klein 1997, 156). This metaphorical description is valuable for Nietzsche, as it is a creation that inspires humanity to say “yes” to life. Nietzsche proclaims, “For the game of creation, my brothers, a scared ‘yes’ is needed” (Z:I:1). Here, “The game of creation” is a fiction that establishes value in life, allowing us to embrace life and derive strength from it.

According to this interpretation, Nietzsche created the fiction of the will to power because he values humanity’s strength in life. Instead of viewing the will to power as real in humanity, here it is understood as a perspective of Nietzsche’s that he places onto humanity. Following perspectivism, the will to power is one perspective Nietzsche offers as a means to envision the world. If we accept this image, we will constantly strive to overcome what we are and better ourselves or, in Nietzsche’s words, through the process of overcoming, “you shall become the person you are” (GS:III:270).

I maintain that this interpretation falls short as well. First, there are passages from Nietzsche’s published works that describe the will to power as a psychological drive in all humanity, which

cannot be explained by the metaphorical interpretation. For example, in BGE:259 Nietzsche explains that each human being has a will to power and hence “belong[s] to the *essence* of what lives, as a basic organic function; it is a consequence of the will to power, which is after all the will of life” (BGE:259). Since we have already determined that the metaphysical interpretation is incorrect, and because here Nietzsche describes the essence of human beings, we can clearly understand this passage as a psychological explanation of humanity. Nietzsche is proposing that the will to power is an observed psychological trait in humanity, and not just any trait, but the trait that motivates human beings to live. The metaphorical interpretation cannot explain this passage, as Nietzsche makes no indication here that he implies the will to power as a psychological *metaphor*. Instead, he expresses it as a *literal* psychological characteristic in human nature. Second, the metaphorical interpretation doesn’t provide criteria to determine which passages and ideas of Nietzsche’s are fictional and which are not. Though Nietzsche endorses perspectivism, he allows for one to have knowledge about human truths. Since Nietzsche allows for human truths in his philosophy, this implies that some of the ideas or observations he describes about humanity are real. Now, given this point, although it is not inconsistent to determine that the will to power is a fiction for Nietzsche, following the metaphorical interpretation there is no deciding factor for why this is so. Here, the metaphorical interpretation faces a slippery slope. If the will to power is considered a fiction and there is no criterion to adjudicate fictions from human truths, then all of Nietzsche’s explanations are fictitious. But this entails an inconsistency with Nietzsche’s purported truths about humanity. Thus, due to these reasons, I reject the metaphorical interpretation as an accurate account of the will to power.

The final interpretation of the will to power, the psychological interpretation, emphasizes the will to power as a secondary drive that influences first order drives. In other words, it is a drive to overcome or improve our desires, activities, and passions. For instance, one may have a first order drive, or desire, to be a writer, while the secondary drive – the will to power – underlies this desire and psychologically motivates one to overcome, or become better as a writer. The psychological interpretation proposes that Nietzsche conveys the will to power as *only* a drive in humanity. Rex Welshon explains that power for Nietzsche is striving to better one’s own activities and passions (Welshon 2004, 180-181). Nietzsche suggests this point in *The Genealogy of Morals* as he describes the will to power as “the strongest, most life-affirming drive” and states that we are “obedient [...] to the same basic instinct” (GM: III:18). That is, the will to power is a drive in humanity and an instinct inherent in us. Furthermore, Welshon notes that the will to power (the secondary drive) shapes a specific desire

(the primary drive) by constructing a new ability and changing not just a person’s ability, but his or her whole self (Welshon 2004, 180-182). This is related to Nietzsche’s notion of self-overcoming, as “realizing a drive or intention, the activity itself [...] can result in our overcoming our goal in pursuing it” (181). Through shaping our activities, the will to power allows us to overcome ourselves by changing or growing, which reconstructs our whole being so that we have not just obtained a goal, but changed something fundamental in ourselves.

I maintain that one can defend the psychological reading of the will to power from common objections presented against it. The first objection holds that this interpretation cannot account for Nietzsche’s obvious endorsement of humanity creating a fictitious world, in passages like BGE:5, where Nietzsche speaks of philosophers creating “truths” and openly accepts that we create the world through images. To defend the psychological interpretation against this argument we must return to Nietzsche’s perspectivism and acceptance of human truths. If we consider the will to power a human truth about human psychology, then this interpretation is still consistent with BGE:5. In this case, the will to power as a psychological drive urges philosophers specifically to find truths about the world-in-itself. Since they cannot find such truths, philosophers create truths from their own values that they believe to be real truths about nature, so as to fulfill their need for understanding. These truths however, are not real about nature. Therefore, philosophers are only creating fictions. Thus, following the psychological interpretation, the will to power is a human truth, meaning it is something we can observe in humanity through the human perspective. It is not something we have created, but something we recognize as a drive in humanity that motivates us to create an image of the world through our values.

A second objection holds that the will to power cannot be an underlying psychological drive for human beings because we first need a primary desire, and then we feel the motivation for growth and overcoming in this desire (Clark 1990, 211). I argue that this objection fails because it is conceivable for the will to power to exist independent of any other drive. It is common to feel the need to struggle and better oneself without that need being initially inspired from a specific desire. It is plausible to have an underlying drive to struggle to overcome and then focus or direct that drive onto one’s passions and desires. For example, I may love to write, but my wanting to write better could come from the general motivation or desire to overcome all obstacles, and thus I would focus this drive towards writing because I enjoy doing it. Also, I may feel the desire to master any skill, so as to better myself or be the best at something, where the activity I am mastering is of less importance than the

feeling of mastering, itself. It is possible, then, for one to have a drive to struggle before having a desire. As Nietzsche puts it, “What does not kill me makes me stronger” (TI:Maxims:8), thereby suggesting the inherent value of struggling, itself.

Thus, after examining all three interpretations of the will to power, I find that the psychological interpretation is the most compelling. This interpretation can defend all the objections presented against it, which the metaphysical and metaphorical cannot do. It has no strong arguments to refute it. Having determined that the psychological interpretation is the correct account, we must now question if the will to power leads to the problem of moral chaos.

## Part II. The Will to Power: Strong Overmen or Brutal Tyrants?

In this part, I explore two questions: (1) Does Nietzsche maintain, descriptively, that violence can be a form of the will to power?, and (2) Does Nietzsche, normatively, maintain that one *should* perform violent acts to increase power? I argue that though the answer to the former is yes, the answer to the latter is no, thereby showing us why Nietzsche’s will to power does not lead to the problem of moral chaos.

Through two specific passages from Nietzsche concerning the will to power, we can clearly observe that he does recognize these harmful acts towards others as an expression of the will to power. The first passage presents the will to power in those who are strong:

Human beings whose nature was still natural, barbarians [...] men of prey who were still in possession of unbroken strength of will and lust for power, hurled themselves upon weaker, more civilized, more peaceful races[...] Their predominance did not lie mainly in physical strength but in strength of the soul[.](BGE:257)

Nietzsche describes the will to power in these “barbarians” through their attacking and dominating of weaker societies. We normally understand barbarians as those who have little sympathy, are uncaring, and are cruel. It is clear that Nietzsche traces these uncaring and unsympathetic acts of men dominating weaker men as an example of the will to power. Notice, however, that he describes these individuals as growing in their *soul* and not simply in physical strength. Although it can be directed in different ways, any overcoming is a form of the will to power, and Nietzsche illustrates here that these men are overcoming by dominating the weak.

The second passage presents the will to power in the weak:

“The will of the weak to represent *some* form of superiority, their instinct for devious paths to tyranny over the healthy—where can it not be discovered, this will to power of the weakest!” (GM:III:14). Nietzsche explains that the will to power is even in the weakest of beings, but it is also expressed here as tyranny, domination, and oppression of others. As Kaufmann explains, “[t]he assumption is that the powerful and the impotent are both imbued with the will to power, and that extreme or prolonged oppression and frustration may easily pervert this drive and make the oppressed look for petty occasions to assert their will to power by being cruel to others” (Kauffman 1974, 194). The act of hurting is not the expression of the will to power for the weak. It’s the superiority they feel in hurting others and a feeling of strength from this superiority is how they self-overcome (191). They become stronger and more assertive individuals by overpowering others. They grow inwardly by harming outwardly.

Thus, after examining these two passages, it follows that Nietzsche accepts domination and cruelty of others as a form of the will to power. Since the will to power is the drive for self-overcoming, as long as individuals are growing and recreating themselves in some way, any act is a form of will to power whether it is harmful or generous. The answer then to the first question is yes, harmful and violent acts towards others are a form of the will to power.

We now need to determine if Nietzsche believes we *should* use violence as a way to gain power. If so, then the problem of moral chaos arises, because he would endorse a society whose members torture, murder, and manipulate others for their own gain. However, if not, then Nietzsche avoids the problem of moral chaos, because he will promote a society whose individuals focus on themselves in an effort to self-overcome and will not dominate and harm others as a means for strength. Richardson argues that Nietzsche expects humanity to use violence as a form of struggling to gain the greatest amount of strength that is possible for them (Richardson 1996, 30). The argument here is that some of Nietzsche’s passages unmistakably praise injury, violence, and exploitation of other individuals as a way to gain power. Richardson explains that, for Nietzsche, “[a] drive’s strength level is measured by whether it is able to rule or master others in some way [...] whereas growth or decline lies in ruling more or fewer [...]” (30). He further holds that Nietzsche accepts violence and domination as one of the primary struggles for gaining the highest degree of power, claiming that “he most often and most emphatically identifies growth as ‘increased’ mastery of others” (32).

However, there is some bias in Richardson’s assessment that

Nietzsche accepts violence as a means to power. Richardson's argument springs from the metaphysical interpretation and, therefore, is faulty. When arguing that Nietzsche endorses violence through the will to power, Richardson writes, "will to power aims at a real condition, specified independently of any perspectives *about* power" (Richardson 1996, 32). We have already determined though, that, for Nietzsche, we cannot disconnect ourselves from our perspectives, so the will to power cannot be explained as a phenomenon we understand contrary to a perspective. This is precisely what Richardson is claiming when he suggests that Nietzsche endorses mastery over others as a primary means towards power, because the drive for power is something fundamentally real in everything. Thus, Richardson's argument fails because it is dependent upon the metaphysical interpretation of the will to power, and so carries with it, all of the problems attached to this interpretation.

Richardson also argues that there are passages from Nietzsche that suggest violent acts towards others should be a primary direction of the will to power. For instance, Nietzsche declares, "mankind in the mass sacrificed to the prosperity of a single *stronger* species of man—that *would* be an advance" (GM: II:12). This statement appears to endorse harmful acts or manipulation of other beings for one's own sake. However, neither here nor anywhere else in this passage does Nietzsche refer to a sacrifice as something violent or harmful for this mass of mankind. Nietzsche elsewhere explains the sacrifice of the weak as "serving a higher sovereign species that stands upon the former and can raise itself to its task only by doing this" (WP:898). Nietzsche here does not propose that the strongest men harm the weak, but that they must stand upon them. That is, the strong need the weak to achieve their strength.

Furthermore, it is not evident that Nietzsche describes his ideal being, who he calls the overman (Z:P:3), as dominating or using weaker wills in a harmful or violent manner.<sup>2</sup> He describes 'strong men' or 'barbarians' as being harmful to others, but this is not the overman. He may respect the strength in these brutal types, but he aspires for us to become overmen, not barbarians. Nietzsche advocates a struggle to improve ourselves beyond what we have ever achieved. He urges us to advance beyond this master morality (BGE:260) and become overmen, and he does not associate violence with these men.<sup>3</sup>

Thus, although Nietzsche has a few passages that initially appear to endorse or lead to violent and harmful acts towards others, when examining these passages closely and relating them to the rest of his philosophy it is evident that they are not advocating violence and torture towards others. Nietzsche is presenting his description of human nature and his admiration of creation here. He illustrates, not that there are violent traits in humanity

that must be intensified, but merely that humanity *already has* such traits, and we must accept this before we can further advance our species.

Following Kaufmann, I maintain that while Nietzsche acknowledges harmful and violent acts towards others as a way to power, he does not encourage humanity to direct their will to power in this form. Kaufmann argues that "[w]hile Nietzsche, as a psychological observer, offers no evaluation, it is plain that he does not consider the neurotic's will to power admirable. [...] [A] will to power is recognized of which Nietzsche, by all indications, does not approve" (Kaufmann 1974, 184). Nietzsche does not approve of weak individuals harming others as a direction of their will to power because "the will to power is a positive motive which would make us strive for something" (1974, 190). What is important for Nietzsche is that the will to power is a drive to overcome, not that one can be driven to violence. This drive towards self-overcoming inspires us to be beyond what we are today, what we are this very moment. And for Nietzsche this is life affirming, which is one of his most esteemed aspirations.

In *Twilight of the Idols* we may identify Nietzsche's admiration of overcoming, as well as his disregard for either a domineering ruler or a weak slave for others to rule. He writes, "How is freedom measured, in individuals[...] One would have to seek the highest type of free man where the greatest resistance is constantly being overcome: five steps from tyranny, near the threshold of the danger of servitude" (TI:Untimely Man:38). Here, Nietzsche explains that the highest man is one who must always overcome. He is close to servitude, but not a servant, because if he was a servant he would not be able to struggle to overcome; he would be crushed instead. But this man is also *not* a tyrant, because if he were a tyrant he would care only for what he acquired and not for his inner growth and personal strength. Nietzsche makes it clear here that the highest man, the freest man, is the one who is neither a tyrant dominating weaker beings nor a servant who cannot rule himself.

Not only does Nietzsche expect us to avoid becoming tyrants in the quest for power, but there comes a point where the strongest man can be more merciful and less harmful than we are today. In *The Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche discusses a society that is so strong it has no use for such notions as exploitation to the individuals within it:

It is not unthinkable that a society might attain such a *consciousness of power* that it could allow itself the noblest luxury possible to it—letting those who harm it go *unpunished*. [...] This self-overcoming of justice: one knows the beautiful name it has given itself—

mercy; it goes without saying that mercy remains the privilege of the most powerful man, of better, his—beyond the law. (GM:II:10)

Nietzsche maintains here that the will to power may lead us to become so strong a society of individuals that we will not need to punish or harm others. He equates this act of “mercy” to “overcoming itself,” which is something he regards as beautiful. Following Kaufmann, we can say that such acts are part of Nietzsche’s ideal direction of the will to power since although “the will to power may be ruthless and a source of evil doing [,] power itself does not corrupt but ennobles the mind” (Kaufmann 1974, 194). Mercy, then, is one form of nobility. Thus, Nietzsche finds this expression of the will to power superior to an expression of strength derived from violence.

Although Nietzsche does acknowledge violence and domination as a form of the will to power, and even at times praises master morality as one of strength, I argue that this is only a descriptive tool for him. He uses this type of man to illustrate strength and counters it with those who embody weak wills. However, in the passages we have examined here, Nietzsche does not encourage us to be like these men, but like the overman. In such passages, he describes the overman as a stronger, more merciful, and braver being than the masters. Thus, I find that Nietzsche does not espouse cruel and violent affects that we would normally think of as horrible. Rather, he encourages us to be stronger than this and to aspire to become overmen, those who have no need or desire to dominate weaker men.

### Conclusion: Overcoming Moral Chaos

Through the examination of Nietzsche’s works and scholars’ arguments on the subject, I find that Nietzsche does not fall into the problem of moral chaos through his philosophy of the will to power. In other words, Nietzsche does not propose violence, murder, or torture of others as a viable or worthwhile form of the will to power, and thus is not led to a chaotic society, where all individuals struggle solely for their own personal advancement by any means necessary. Instead, he inspires us to become overmen, who are individuals which have such attributes as strength, bravery, and manners, and who aspire to live in a society in which there may be mercy for others, not domination of them. Nietzsche here is advocating a society that is not chaotic or psychotic, but instead strong, merciful and always overcoming itself so as to advance its laws and its people. Its members will reach beyond revenge and punishment, and be able to have healthy conflict with one another. This is Nietzsche’s ideal society. It is formed by overmen, and therefore does not fall into the problem of moral chaos.

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### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> I will use the following abbreviations for Nietzsche’s works: BGE: *Beyond Good and Evil*; GM: *On the Genealogy of Morals*; GS: *The Gay Science*; TI: *Twilight of the Idols*; WP: *The Will to Power*; Z: *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*
- <sup>2</sup> The overman is the free spirit who actualizes the drive towards self-overcoming, and lives his or her life authentically.
- <sup>3</sup> Nietzsche refers to *master morality* as the morality which endorses nobility, strength, and honor, and the domination of the weak. He contrasts this kind of morality with *slave morality*, the morality that espouses weak virtues such as vengeance, pity, and the herd mentality. See Essays 1 and 2 from the *Genealogy of Morals* and Chapter 9 from *Beyond Good and Evil* for Nietzsche’s assessment of these two moralities.