

Philosophical Psychology as a Basis for Ethics

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ABSTRACT: Nietzsche claims that “psychology is once again the path to the fundamental problems” (*BGE* 23). What are these “fundamental problems”? I provide a partial answer by focusing upon the way in which psychology informs Nietzsche’s account of value. I argue that Nietzsche’s ethical theory is based upon the idea that power has a privileged normative status: power is the one value in terms of which all other values are to be assessed. Yet how could power have this privileged status, given that Nietzsche denies that there are any objective facts about what is valuable? Nietzsche’s account of psychology provides the answer: he grounds power’s privileged status in facts about the nature of human motivation. In particular, Nietzsche’s account of drives entails that human beings are ineluctably committed to valuing power. So Nietzsche’s ethical theory follows from his philosophical psychology.

Introduction: Psychology as the Path to the Fundamental Problems

Near the beginning of *BGE*, Nietzsche writes, “Psychology shall again be recognized as the queen of the sciences.” Psychology, he continues, “is once again the path to the fundamental problems” (*BGE* 23).¹ These intriguing remarks about the status of psychology raise a number of questions. What are these “fundamental problems” that psychology helps us to answer? How exactly does psychology bear on philosophy?

In this article, I provide a partial answer to these questions by focusing upon the way in which psychology informs Nietzsche’s account of value. I argue that Nietzsche’s ethical theory is based upon the idea that *power* has a privileged normative status: power is the one value in terms of which all other values are to be assessed. If this is the correct interpretation of Nietzsche’s ethical theory, though, it raises a question: how could power have a privileged status, given that Nietzsche denies that there are any objective facts about what is valuable? I argue that Nietzsche’s account of psychology provides the answer: he grounds power’s privileged status in facts about the nature of human motivation. In particular, Nietzsche’s account of *drives* (*Triebe*, *Instinkte*) entails that human beings are

ineluctably committed to valuing power.² So Nietzsche's ethical theory follows from his philosophical psychology.³

An Apparent Tension in Nietzsche's Ethical Thought

We typically accept a wide variety of values and normative claims, such as "you should not lie," "compassion is good," and "egalitarianism is valuable." These claims purport to have a certain authority over us. They purport to be principles that should constrain our actions, telling us to perform some and refrain from others. But what justifies this claim to authority?

Much of Nietzsche's writing is concerned with this question. Nietzsche insists that we must study and critically assess normative claims, asking what compels us to obey them: "Your judgment 'this is right' has a prehistory in your drives, inclinations, aversions, experiences, and lack of experience: you must ask 'how did it arise?' and then 'what is really driving me to listen to it?'" (*GS* 335). Nietzsche pushes this kind of questioning quite far: he famously wants us to scrutinize *all* of our values, engaging in a "revaluation of all values." As he puts it, "We need a *critique* of moral values, *for once the value of these values must itself be called into question*" (*GM P*:6).

Nietzsche's critiques of values take a variety of forms. For example, he sometimes conducts genealogical investigations of values, revealing the ugly, disagreeable ways in which certain values arose. He sometimes uncovers hidden tensions in our sets of values, as when he claims that egalitarianism conflicts with will to power. He sometimes brings into view the psychic costs of embracing a value, as when he claims that valuing pity is bad both for the person doing the pitying and the person being pitied. In these approaches, the mechanics of Nietzsche's revaluative judgments are clear enough: we acquire a deep and comprehensive understanding of the value's history, its connections to other values, and its effects, and we then assess the value. But what is the *basis* of this assessment? Once we have amassed a set of facts about the value's history and effects, which of these facts count as good reasons for accepting or rejecting the value?

Nietzsche makes it clear that it is not the value's distasteful origin as such that matters: "The inquiry into the *origin of our evaluations* and tables of the good is in absolutely no way identical with a critique of them, as is so often believed: even though the insight into some *pudendo origo* certainly brings with it a *feeling* of diminution in the value of the thing that originated thus and prepares the way to a critical mood and attitude toward it" (*KSA* 10:24[31]). Here, Nietzsche claims that acquiring information about a value's history serves as a *preparation* for critically assessing the value. So, the mere fact that a value has a disagreeable history has no direct bearing on the question of whether the value should be accepted.⁴

A similar problem arises with respect to the discovery of internal inconsistencies in our set of values. Suppose Nietzsche is right that compassion conflicts with power. It seems that we might respond to this discovery in any number of ways: we might reject compassion; we might reject power; we might simply live with the fact that our values cannot all be jointly realized to the fullest extent, and strike a compromise.⁵ Indeed, Nietzsche explicitly rejects the idea that inconsistency as such is problematic: he praises those who embrace contradictory values (see *HH* 618; *BGE* 212; *BGE* 284; *GM* III:12; *KSA* 11:26[119]).

Nor does the mere fact that a value generates psychic costs necessarily impugn its authority. Consider an example: Nietzsche often points out that the valuation of knowledge generates immense psychic tensions by undermining our most cherished beliefs and values. As he puts it, “Truth has had to be fought for every step of the way, almost everything else dear to our hearts has had to be sacrificed to it. [...] The service of truth is the hardest service” (*A* 50). However, Nietzsche nonetheless values the pursuit of knowledge. He writes, “How much truth does a spirit *endure*, how much does it *dare*? More and more that became for me the real measure of value” (*EH* P:3).

Thus, Nietzsche’s insistence that we revalue our values raises a question: what, exactly, are we supposed to be looking for when we make these critical assessments of values? If disagreeable histories, inconsistencies, and psychic costs don’t matter, what does? In fact, Nietzsche provides a clear and explicit answer to this question: we are supposed to examine the relationship between a given value and *will to power*. Thus, Nietzsche declares that the “principle” of revaluation is “will to power” (*KSA* 12:2[131]). Or, as he elsewhere puts it, “What is good? Everything that heightens in human beings the feeling of power, the will to power, power itself” (*A* 2). Apparently, then, Nietzsche wants us to investigate our values to determine how they relate to will to power. If a value conflicts with power, it is to be rejected; if it harmonizes with power, it is to be accepted. The genealogies and other investigations are designed to uncover these facts about the relationship between power and other values.⁶

Nietzsche pursues this strategy throughout his texts. To choose just a few examples: Nietzsche complains that the effects of “liberal institutions” are “known well enough: they undermine the will to power” (*TI* “Skirmishes” 38). He opens the *Genealogy* by suggesting that modern morality might “be to blame if the *highest power and splendor* actually possible to the type man were never in fact attained? So that precisely morality were the danger of dangers?” (*GMP*:6). He warns that “our weak, unmanly social concepts of good and evil and their tremendous ascendancy over body and soul have finally weakened all bodies and souls and snapped the self-reliant, independent, unprejudiced men, the pillars of a *strong civilization*” (*D* 163; cf. *BGE* 62; *A* 5). And in the *Antichrist* he quite directly states “where the will to power is lacking there is decline. It is my

contention that all the supreme values of mankind *lack* this will—that the values which are symptomatic of decline, *nihilistic* values, are lording it under the holiest names” (A 6). In all of these passages, and many others, Nietzsche implicitly or explicitly examines the connection between a given value and power.⁷

So on Nietzsche’s account, we revalue a value by inquiring into the relation between the value and power. If the value conflicts with power, it is to be rejected; if it promotes power, it is to be accepted. However, this strategy presupposes that power has a privileged normative status. Usually, when we discover inconsistencies between two values A and B, we have three options: rejecting A, rejecting B, or striking a compromise. But with power, Nietzsche maintains that things are different: the only possible response to a discovery of conflict is to reject the value that conflicts with power. In this sense, power has a privileged normative status: while all other values can come up for review and possible rejection, power cannot.

However, the claim that power has a privileged normative status seems to be in tension with another aspect of Nietzsche’s view: his claim that there are no objective values. Nietzsche writes, “Whatever has value in our world now does not have value in itself, according to its nature—nature is always value-less, but has been *given* value at some time, as a present—and it was *we* who gave and bestowed it” (GS 301; cf. D 3). In this passage, Nietzsche claims that all values arise from human activities. If there were no human beings, there would be no values. Presumably for this reason, Nietzsche denies that there can be any objective facts about what is valuable: “There are altogether no moral facts. Moral judgments agree with religious ones in believing in realities where there are no realities” (TI “Improvers” 1). So Nietzsche maintains that all values are created by human activities, and that, as a result, there are no facts about what has value.

This denial of objectivity seems to be in tension with Nietzsche’s insistence that power has a privileged normative status. After all, the claim that there are no objective values suggests that there are no constraints on what can be valued. If all values are created, then there seems to be no reason for preferring will to power to any other value. Thus, we have a set of claims that seem to be in tension with one another: values are created, springing from human activities, but not just any value is justified; rather, all legitimate values must be in conformity with power. The claim that values are created suggests that values are subjective, whereas the claim that power is a principle of revaluation suggests that there are objective facts about what is valuable.⁸

Will to Power

I am going to suggest that this tension is merely apparent: Nietzsche has a way of reconciling the claim that there are no objective values with the claim that power has a privileged status. In particular, he grounds power’s privileged status in

facts about philosophical psychology. To see this, we must begin by explicating the concept of will to power.

What is will to power? Nietzsche's characterization of will to power can seem quite vague. He tells us that willing power involves "giving form," "expanding," "imprinting," "overcoming," "mastering," and "shaping."⁹ He writes that will to power is "the will's forward thrust and again and again becoming master over that which stands in its way" (*KSA* 13:11[75]). Moreover, Nietzsche does not attribute any specific end to those who will power: he claims that we can will power in the pursuit of a diverse range of activities, such as artistic creation, the pursuit of knowledge, asceticism, and so on (see *GM* II:17–18).

In order to see exactly what will to power *is*, we will need to determine what these characterizations of will to power have in common. Although Nietzsche's descriptions tend to be rather indeterminate, he does repeatedly and insistently emphasize two points about will to power. First, Nietzsche claims that will to power can never enjoy permanent satisfaction, but instead involves perpetual striving. Nietzsche often makes this point by contrasting will to power with the wish to abide in a certain state, or the desire to preserve oneself: "The wish to preserve oneself is the symptom of a condition of distress, of a limitation of the really fundamental instinct of life which aims at *the expansion of power*, and wishing for that frequently risks and even sacrifices self-preservation" (*GS* 349). And in a notebook entry, he says, "A *state achieved* would seem bound to preserve itself were there not a capacity in it precisely *not* to want to preserve itself [. . .]. Spinoza's law of 'self-preservation' ought really to put a stop to change: but this law is false, the *opposite* is true. It can be shown most clearly that every living thing does everything it can not to preserve itself but to become *more* [. . .]" (*KSA* 13:14[121]). In these passages, Nietzsche emphasizes that will to power involves perpetual striving.¹⁰

Second, will to power manifests itself as a particular form of striving—striving for resistances or obstacles. Consider the following series of passages:

1. The will to power can manifest itself only *against resistances*; therefore it seeks that which resists it. [. . .] (*KSA* 12:9[151])
2. The will is never satisfied unless it has opponents and resistance. (*KSA* 13:11[75])
3. What man wants [. . .] is an increase in power. [. . .] [O]ut of that will man seeks resistance, needs something to oppose him. (*KSA* 13:14[174])

When Nietzsche refers to "resistances," he means impediments or challenges to one's ends. For example, the ascetic manifests will to power by overcoming his body's resistance to suffering, the artist overcomes the difficulties inherent in turning a blank canvas into a painting, the scientist overcomes the obstacles and challenges inherent in her quest for understanding. In the passages quoted

above, Nietzsche makes it clear that willing power involves actively *seeking* these resistances, in order to overcome them.

Thus, the will to power manifests itself as the aim of seeking challenges and resistances that impede the pursuit of one's ends. Of course, one doesn't want these challenges or resistances to serve as *permanent* impediments to one's ends; rather, one wants to *overcome* the impediments. As Nietzsche puts it, will to power is "the will's forward thrust and again and again becoming master over that which stands in its way" (*KSA* 13:11[75]). For example, the ascetic doesn't want to face his resistance to pain and then freeze in the face of it; rather, he wants to overcome this resistance, by managing to inflict the pain on himself. So, too, the scientist doesn't want to take on some difficult problem and find herself unable to solve it; rather, she wants to resolve the problem.

In sum, Nietzsche seems to identify willing power with the activity of perpetually seeking and overcoming resistance to one's ends. I therefore conclude that, as Bernard Reginster has forcefully argued, "will to power, in the last analysis, is a will to *the very activity of overcoming resistance*."¹¹ In other words, to will power is perpetually to seek to encounter and overcome resistance in the pursuit of some end.¹²

Will to Power as a Claim about the Essence of Willing

Now we know what it is to will power: an agent wills power by seeking to encounter and overcome resistances. However, there is another important component to Nietzsche's claims about will to power: he presents his will to power thesis as an elucidation of the essential nature of willing. Nietzsche makes this point in a number of passages, repeatedly claiming that will to power is the "essence" (*Wesen*, *Essenz*) of willing. To choose just two passages, he writes, "All 'purposes,' 'aims,' 'meaning' are only modes of expression and metamorphoses of one will that is inherent in all events: the will to power. To have purposes, aims, intentions, *willing* in general, is the same thing as willing to be stronger, willing to grow—and, in addition, willing the means to this" (*KSA* 13:11[96]). And, "Everything that happens out of intentions can be reduced to the *intention of increasing power*" (*KSA* 12:2[88]).¹³

How are we to interpret the claim that will to power is the essence of willing? I believe a passage from Heidegger is extremely helpful on this point. Heidegger writes,

The expression "will to power" does not mean that, in accord with the usual view, will is a kind of desiring that has power as its goal rather than happiness or pleasure. True, in many passages Nietzsche speaks in that fashion, in order to make himself provisionally understood. But when he makes will's goal power instead of happiness, pleasure, or the unhinging of the will, he changes not only

the goal of will but the essential definition of will itself. In the strict sense of the Nietzschean conception of will, power can never be pre-established as will's goal, as though power were something that could first be posited outside the will. . . . The expression "to power" therefore never means some sort of appendage to will. Rather, it comprises an elucidation of the essence of will itself.¹⁴

In this passage, Heidegger notes that the will to power thesis is a description of the essential nature of willing. Yet Heidegger warns us not to interpret Nietzsche in the same way that we interpret philosophers such as Bentham and Mill, who held that happiness or pleasure are the final ends of action. This point will be worth dwelling on, for a moment.

It would be natural to assume that when Nietzsche claims that will to power is the essence of life or of willing, he means that the final end of each goal-directed act is power. That is, there is an instrumental relation between power and all other ends. Consider, by analogy, the form of psychological hedonism endorsed by Bentham and Mill. Psychological hedonists claim that pleasure is the final end of each goal-directed act. Thus, if we consider any act—the pursuit of knowledge, the pursuit of friendship, the pursuit of a dish of ice cream—the psychological hedonist will claim that these goals are pursued simply as means to the attainment of pleasure. Analogously, it would be natural to read Nietzsche as claiming that all goals are pursued for the sake of power. On this reading, Nietzsche is simply making a substitution into Mill's theory, replacing every occurrence of "happiness" or "pleasure" with "power." So, whereas Mill argues that we pursue friendship as a means to pleasure, Nietzsche would be arguing that we pursue friendship as a means to power.

However, Heidegger points out that this reading is mistaken; Nietzsche is making a subtler and more interesting point. For notice that power is not something that, strictly speaking, would be intelligible apart from willing. Happiness or pleasure can be conceived independently of willing: we can understand what it is to be happy or pleased without presupposing the concept of willing. We cannot, however, understand what it is to encounter and overcome resistance apart from the concept of willing. The very concept of resistance is unintelligible except in relation to a determinate end: resistance is always resistance to the achievement of some end. Accordingly, an agent who does not have any ends—an agent who is not engaged in willing—cannot face any resistance. It follows that will to power can manifest itself only in the pursuit of some determinate end: in order to seek resistance at all, we must also seek something other than power.

Once we keep this point in mind, it becomes difficult to see what the instrumentalist conception of power could even mean. The will to power is the will to encounter and overcome resistance. But this will cannot manifest itself as the blank aim of seeking resistance, for resistance is intelligible only in connection to some other, more determinate end. As John Richardson puts it, "Power, as something willed by every drive, 'lacks content,' requiring a contingent filling

out from some given case.”¹⁵ In order to pursue resistance at all, I must already be engaged in the pursuit of some other, more determinate end. For example, I might will to encounter and overcome resistance in the pursuit of knowledge; or I might will to encounter and overcome resistance in athletic endeavors. It would be distorting, at best, to describe this relationship by saying that I pursue knowledge as a *means* to encountering and overcoming resistances, for the relevant forms of resistance are not intelligible apart from the determinate, first-order end of knowledge. So, while the instrumentalist conception suggests that I decide to pursue knowledge because I want power and see knowledge as a means to power, this seems inaccurate. Rather, I find myself already pursuing knowledge, already under the influence of motives that incline me toward that end. In willing power, I pursue that end in a certain manner: I will the end, and also will to encounter and overcome resistance in the course of pursuing the end.

Thus, to say that a person wills power is not to describe an instrumental relation; it is not to say that we select various goals as *means* to power. Rather, the will to power thesis describes a *formal* or *structural* relation between two ends. Richardson highlights this point, noting that the claim that we will power is not a claim about *what* we will; it is a claim about *how* we will.¹⁶ Whenever a person wills an end, this episode of willing has a certain structure. It consists not only in the aim of achieving some end, but also in the aim of encountering and overcoming resistance in the pursuit of that end. This is why, as Heidegger notes, claims about will to power are not claims about “some sort of appendage to will”; they are “an elucidation of the essence of will itself.”

Given that the will to power is a formal relation, which describes the structure of willing, it becomes easier to see what Nietzsche means when he claims that the essence of willing is will to power. He means that power is a formal aim present in each instance of willing. Whenever an agent wills an end, the agent aims not only at attaining that end, but also at encountering and overcoming resistance in the pursuit of that end. This is why Nietzsche says that “all ‘purposes,’ ‘aims,’ ‘meaning’ are only *modes of expression* [Ausdrucksweisen] and metamorphoses of one will that is inherent in all events: the will to power” (*KSA* 13:11[96], emphasis added). He is not claiming that every goal is a *means* to power; rather, he is claiming that whenever we will any goal at all, we *express* will to power by also willing resistance to that goal. Thus, Nietzsche’s will to power thesis amounts to the following claim: whenever we will any end at all, we also will to encounter and overcome resistance in the pursuit of that end. Of course, this claim is highly paradoxical; it appears to be a wholesale departure from our ordinary conception of willing.

We are inclined to think that the essential function of willing is to *bring something about*. On this interpretation, the paradigmatic case of willing has the following form: I desire some end *x*; I see that I could get *x* by doing *y*; so I will to do *y*. Willing aims merely at effecting a change in the world, so that the world

conforms to my desires. Mill endorsed this conception of willing. As he put it, “All action is for the sake of some end, and rules of action, it seems natural to suppose, must take their whole color and character from the end to which they are subservient.”¹⁷ So, the point of action is to bring about some desired end; the rules of action, the standards of success for action, pertain solely to how well the action brings about this goal.

This is certainly a commonsensical conception of willing, and it makes Nietzsche’s claims about will to power seem patently absurd. First, Nietzsche’s will to power thesis doesn’t focus on *bringing anything about* at all. It focuses simply on seeking and surmounting obstacles or resistances. This is highly counterintuitive. Don’t we simply seek to achieve goals, and view overcoming resistance as a necessary yet regrettable condition of achieving these ends? Wouldn’t we prefer to *avoid* resistance if we could?

Moreover, if the point of willing is to bring something about, then why would we seek *resistance* to our own willing? After all, an action is successful to the extent that it brings about its end. But will to power makes it *less* likely that we will achieve our goals, by making these goals *more difficult* to achieve. For this reason, will to power, so far from being the essence of willing, seems to be a perversion of willing: it is self-conflicted, self-defeating, defective willing. So, at any rate, it appears. If Nietzsche’s will to power thesis is going to be at all plausible, he will need to offer some argument for it.

The Nature of Drives

In this section, I argue that Nietzsche’s *drive psychology* supports the will to power thesis. Given certain facts about the nature of drives, it turns out that all drive-motivated actions do seek the overcoming of resistance. So, I argue, the will to power thesis is a description of what it is for an action to be drive-motivated. To begin, we need to see what drives are. Elsewhere, I have argued that drives have two central features. First, they are dispositions that induce affective orientations. Second, they do not dispose the agent to bring about any determinate end, but instead dispose the agent to engage in particular forms of activity. While I do not have space to offer a full defense of this reading here, I reconstruct the key points.¹⁸

First, Nietzschean drives are dispositions that induce affective orientations in agents. Nietzsche often describes drives in agential language:

Anyone who considers the basic drives of man to see to what extent they may have been at play [. . .] will find that all of them have done philosophy at some time—and that every single one of them would like only too well to represent just *itself* as the ultimate purpose of existence and the legitimate *master* of all the

other drives. For every drive wants to be master—and it attempts to philosophize in *that spirit*. (BGE 6)

Elsewhere, he says, “It is our needs that interpret the world; our drives and their For and Against. Every drive is a kind of lust to rule; each one has its perspective that it would like to compel all the other drives to accept as a norm” (KSA 12:7[60]). These passages suggest, to some readers, that drives are homunculi.¹⁹ For example, Clark and Dudrick argue that drives “exhibit agency of a sort,” and are “homunculi” or “proto-persons.”²⁰ Similarly, Thiele attributes a robust form of agency to drives, including even the idea that drives have “political relations” with one another.²¹ He claims that each drive “has its will to dominate and exploit its competitors. In turn, the ruling drive(s) provides its own agenda and worldview.” Persons are just “a battleground of competing drives, each with its own perspective.”²²

These readings can be quite tempting. After all, Nietzsche seems to attribute to drives the capacity for reasoning, adopting perspectives, and so on, all of which would require that drives are independent agents. However, I have elsewhere argued that it is a mistake to think that drives are independent agents. Drives are always embodied in agents. When Nietzsche claims that drives adopt perspectives, philosophize, and so on, he is referring to the way in which a drive, operating through an agent, can affect *the agent’s* perspective.

To see this, it helps to consider Schopenhauer’s discussion of drives.²³ In a wonderful discussion of the human reproductive drive, Schopenhauer writes that this drive leads us to pursue sexual partners, not by blindly impelling us to this end, but by fostering a *distorted orientation* toward the world. The reproductive drive “creates illusions [Illusionen schafft]” (WWR II:566) or generates a “delusion [Wahn]” (WWR II:541).²⁴ As Schopenhauer explains,

Here then, as in the case of all instinct, truth assumes the form of delusion, in order to act on the will. [Also nimmt hier, wie bei allem Instinkt, die Wahrheit die Gestalt des Wahnes an, um auf den Willen zu wirken.] It is a voluptuous delusion which leads a man to believe that he will find greater pleasure in the arms of a woman whose beauty appeals to him than in those of any other, or which, exclusively directed to a *particular* individual, firmly convinces him that her possession will afford him boundless happiness. [. . .] The character of instinct is here so completely present, namely an action as though in accordance with the conception of an end and yet entirely without such a conception, that whoever is urged by that delusion often abhors it and would like to prevent the end, procreation, which alone guides it [. . .]. (WWR II:540)

Schopenhauer claims that although the human reproductive drive aims at reproduction, when we are in the grip of this drive, we typically do not believe that we are pursuing reproduction. We believe we are pursuing happiness, or pleasure, or possession of a particular individual. Schopenhauer claims that this belief—or, as he puts it, this *delusion*—is produced by the drive itself. In other words, the reproductive drive manifests itself by leading us to conceive

of our potential sexual partners as supremely alluring, capable of providing us with great happiness and pleasure. The reproductive drive moves us not by generating a blind urge or disposition to copulate, but by producing desires and other emotions, by influencing the way in which we perceive potential partners, and so on.

Thus, Schopenhauer writes, “in all sexual love, instinct holds the reins, and creates illusions [bei aller Geschlechtsliebe der Instinkt die Zügel führt und Illusionen schafft]” (*WWR* II:566). But the phenomenon is not restricted to the sexual: Schopenhauer believes that all instincts work in this fashion. Accordingly, he claims that animals acting on instinct “are urged not so much by an objective, correct apprehension, as by subjective representations which stimulate the desire [. . .] and that accordingly they are urged by a certain *delusion*” (*WWR* II:541). So the drive manifests itself by inducing, in the agent, a distorted perspective, a delusion. Nietzschean drives operate in just the same way; thus, Nietzsche will speak of affects and drives as “coloring,” “gilding,” “lighting,” and “staining” the world. These terms suggest that affects and drives highlight or even alter aspects of an experience (see, for example, *GS* 7, 139, 152, 301). Thus, drives produce selective orientations toward the world—orientations that, in some cases, are distorting enough to qualify as illusions. This is what Nietzsche means when he claims that drives adopt perspectives: drives influence the perspectives through which the agent experiences the world.

In sum, drives can be understood as dispositions that generate affectively charged orientations, or perspectives. This brings us to the second feature of drives: Nietzsche emphasizes that drives continuously seek expression. He speaks of the “ebb and flood” of our drives, their “play and counterplay among one another,” their “growth and nourishment” (*D* 119; *BGE* 6). Drives are almost inevitably associated with active forces, impulses, and pressures seeking discharge.

When Nietzsche writes of drives in this way, he has the following point in mind: drives arise independently of external stimuli, and, once they have become active, they will seek discharge. The fact that drives are active and do not arise in response to external stimuli creates a problem. In many cases, a drive will be active in conditions that do not provide the agent with appropriate objects with which to satisfy the drive. Just as we can be hungry when there are no opportunities to eat, we can be angry when there are no occasions for anger. For example, suppose the aggressive drive is active in a situation in which the individual has not been threatened or provoked. Nietzsche tells us that the drive will *seek* outlets, seek objects on which to vent itself.

Schopenhauer’s discussion of the sexual drive illustrates this phenomenon: when the drive is active, it leads individuals to conceive of their potential partners as supremely alluring, regardless of whether they would see these people in the same way in a cool moment. Just so, the aggressive drive will lead individuals to

perceive their surroundings as warranting aggression: thus, the driver who cuts in front of one is perceived as deliberately provoking, or the inattentive cashier is seen as personally vindictive. In these ways, the drive leads the agent to see the situation as warranting the drive's characteristic form of activity.

In order to express this point, it is helpful to draw on some terminology from Freud. Freud distinguishes between the *aim* and the *object* of a drive.²⁵ While Nietzsche doesn't employ this terminology, the idea is present in his work.²⁶ The aim is the relatively constant end of the drive, in terms of which it is distinguished from other drives. Drives *aim* at their characteristic forms of activity: the aggressive drive aims at manifesting aggressive activity, the sexual drive aims at manifesting sexual activity, and so on. In order to express this activity, the drive needs to find some *object*: the aggressive drive might vent itself on another driver, or a cashier, or a participant in an athletic game. In other words, we can distinguish between what the drive seeks—manifestation of some characteristic form of activity—and how the drive expresses this aim—by finding some object upon which to vent its form of activity.

Drive-Motivated Actions Aim at Power

Thus, drives are motivational states that aim at their own expression, and take various objects merely as chance occasions for expression. The aggressive drive does not seek any particular object; it merely motivates the agent to engage in aggressive activity. Of course, in order to engage in aggressive activity, one needs to find someone or something to be aggressive toward. But the object upon which the drive is vented is comparatively unimportant: what the drive seeks is simply expression. In other words, what the drive motivates one to seek is not aggression toward some particular person or object, but rather the expression of aggressive activity. (Indeed, as we saw above, Nietzsche maintains that drives will manifest themselves by distorting the agent's view of the environment, so that the agent perceives the situation as an appropriate venue for expressing the drive's aim.)

As a result, an activity that is motivated by a drive does not aim to attain some object that would put an end to the activity. Many *desire*-motivated actions do aim solely at bringing about some end. When I am motivated by a desire to end a headache, I seek an end—*aspirin*—that brings the course of action to a stop. When I am motivated by a desire to get to my office, I perform an action that is designed to accomplish this goal. However, *drive*-motivated activities are quite different. The agent who is being motivated by the aggressive drive isn't seeking to achieve any particular end, but is seeking merely to express aggressive activity. Activity motivated by a drive aims not at the achievement of a determinate end, but at the performance of the activity itself.

So drives aim at expression, in the sense that they are not satisfied by the attainment of any one determinate object; rather, they want continuous attainment of objects. We can mark this feature of drives by saying that drives induce the agent to engage in process-directed actions, rather than goal-directed actions. A goal-directed act is an act that aims at the attainment of some definite goal; thus, the act would cease once its object is achieved. A process-directed act is an act that aims at a process; thus, there is no object the attainment of which would bring the process to an end.

It will be easiest to illustrate this point with an example.²⁷ Take the activity of running a marathon. Marathon running has two important features. First, the goal seems unimportant if divorced from the process: there is nothing particularly valuable about being in the state of having traveled twenty-six miles. But, second, the goal acquires importance when it is considered as part of the process. Running a marathon requires strenuous exertion, the overcoming of great resistance, and the experience of sometimes-intense pain. But marathon runners typically do not view these aspects of running as objectionable; on the contrary, part of the point of running a marathon is that one encounters these resistances and obstacles. In the usual case it is not that the runner values the state of having run twenty-six miles, and views the pain as a necessary, but regrettable, aspect of running. Rather, the runner values the whole activity of encountering obstacles and holding herself to a course of action despite the pain involved in doing so. This is why the runner chooses to run twenty-six miles, instead of twenty-six feet; the latter would be too easy, would not be challenging. The runner views the marathon running as valuable partly because it requires encountering and overcoming resistances and obstacles. Thus, in the normal case, it would be distorting to view a marathon runner as aiming solely *to have run twenty-six miles*. That goal is valued only as a part of the whole process of running.

With this in mind, consider again Nietzsche's will to power thesis. The will to power thesis claims that whenever we act, we aim not only to achieve some determinate end, but also to encounter and overcome resistances. For a goal-directed act, this claim would be absurd: if I am seeking merely to bring about some end, then it would be perverse to will resistance to that end. But for a process-directed act, things are crucially different. Process-directed acts typically do involve goals that need to be achieved, but these goals would be unimportant if divorced from the process. What matters is the process, and engaging in the process requires finding objects upon which to direct the process. In this sense, manifesting the process requires perpetually *seeking* new obstacles, resistances, or challenges, upon which the process can be directed. Thus, drive-motivated actions do in fact aim at encountering and overcoming resistance.²⁸

The link between the will to power thesis and the drive psychology should now be clear. Will to power is not an independent drive, but *a description of the form that all drive-motivated actions take*. This is why Heidegger was entirely

correct to write that “power can never be pre-established as will’s goal, as though power were something that could first be posited outside the will. . . . The expression ‘to power’ therefore never means some sort of appendage to will. Rather, it comprises an elucidation of the essence of will itself.”²⁹ To say that we will power is to say that we are motivated by drives. In sum, the will to power thesis describes the structure of drive-motivated actions. If an action is drive-motivated, it aims at power. If, as Nietzsche seems to maintain, *all* actions are drive-motivated, then *all* actions aim at power.³⁰

An Ethical Theory Grounded in Philosophical Psychology

Suppose this is right; suppose Nietzsche’s will to power thesis is a description of the essential nature of drive-motivated actions. This fact would enable us to make sense of Nietzsche’s ethical theory. The problem, recall, is that Nietzsche claims both that power has a privileged normative status and that there are no objective facts about what is valuable. These claims seem inconsistent. With our account of drive psychology at hand, though, it is possible to eliminate the appearance of inconsistency. The drive psychology entails that one of our aims, will to power, has a privileged status. Will to power isn’t simply one more aim on par with all of our other aims, motives, and goals; the will to power isn’t a description of some aim that we might or might not have. Rather, will to power is an essential feature of willing as such. Whenever we are motivated by a drive, we pursue power.

Accordingly, power has a privileged normative status—not in the sense that it is objectively valuable, but in the sense that it is an ineluctable, inescapable feature of agency. For any particular aim other than power, we can ask why we should pursue it. If I have an aim of being compassionate, or promoting egalitarianism, or achieving artistic greatness, I can ask for reasons for pursuing it. When I ask what my reasons are for pursuing these aims, I presuppose that I have the option of *not* pursuing the aim: I could do something else. However, with will to power, this kind of questioning is moot. If someone asked, “why should I will power?,” Nietzsche would not answer by trying to show that power is valuable, or that power serves some further goal; power is not a means to anything beyond itself. Rather, Nietzsche would respond by showing that we cannot do anything *but* will power. Power’s privileged status isn’t grounded in any facts about objective values; it is simply the one aim that we cannot let go.

To illustrate this point, consider what would happen if one were to discover a conflict between will to power and some other value. To pick one of Nietzsche’s favorite examples, suppose we discover a conflict between egalitarianism and power. Initially, it seems that we could resolve this conflict in two ways: we could cease to value egalitarianism, or we could cease to value power. But, if my

interpretation is correct, there is really only one option here: we *cannot* cease to value power. Insofar as we will any ends at all, we will power. Thus, the only way of resolving the conflict is by ceasing to value egalitarianism. That is the sense in which Nietzsche treats power as having a privileged status.³¹

So, Nietzsche grounds his account of normative authority in an incapacity. Nietzsche is not claiming that we *should* will power, or that willing power is objectively valuable, or that willing power furthers our other values or goals. Rather, Nietzsche is claiming that we just *do* will power, and cannot cease to do so. Will to power is, as Nietzsche puts it, our “innermost essence” (*KSA* 13:14[80]). Or, to invoke Heidegger once more: “will to power is will to will.”³² With this in mind, we can see why Nietzsche claims that psychology is the path to the fundamental problems. One of the fundamental problems, which occupies Nietzsche throughout his works, is the problem of normative authority: what, if anything, justifies the authority that our norms and values purport to have? Nietzsche’s will to power thesis is designed to answer that question. By investigating the nature of human motivation, and uncovering the deep structure of drives, Nietzsche shows that we are inescapably committed to valuing power. Power thus serves as a principle of revaluation for all other values.

No doubt there are many questions that we can ask about this view. In closing, I mention just one of them. Nietzsche clearly indicates that the will to power, though present in every case of action, is present to *different degrees*. Will to power can be manifest in a distorted, conflicted, or halfhearted way. Indeed, Nietzsche suggests that embracing certain values and ways of life threatens will to power, by distorting or undermining it. A fuller treatment of Nietzsche’s ethical theory, which I cannot attempt here, would have to address this aspect of the view. For now, though, I have simply endeavored to sketch the general outlines of Nietzsche’s ethical theory. In particular, I have tried to show that Nietzsche’s ethical conclusions are a direct result of his philosophical psychology. If Nietzsche is right, then the basis of ethics lies in facts about the nature of human motivation. Psychology is, indeed, “the path to the fundamental problems” (*BGE* 23).

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NOTES

I thank the audience at the 2009 Pacific APA NANS session for their helpful comments. Paul Loeb and Mark Migotti raised many insightful points during the discussion. I owe special thanks to Scott Jenkins, whose astute and probing commentary on this article was enlightening. (Many of Scott’s comments broached issues that are too complex to treat adequately here; I address them, however, in Katsafanas, *Agency and the Foundations of Ethics*.) Thanks also to Bernard Reginster, John Richardson, Lanier Anderson, Richard Moran, Christine Korsgaard, Jacob Beck, Danielle

Slevens, and Jessica Berry for helpful conversations concerning some of the ideas contained in this article.

1. When quoting Nietzsche's works, I use the translations by Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale. In some cases, I have made minor modifications to the translations.

2. This does not entail that human beings must recognize that they value power. Nietzsche frequently attributes values to agents who are ignorant of having them. For a classic example, see his discussion of the ascetic ideal in *GM III*.

3. I presented this paper at the April 2009 Pacific Division NANS session. Since then, I have treated these topics at greater length in Paul Katsafanas, "Deriving Ethics from Action: A Nietzschean Version of Constitutivism," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 83 (2011): 620–60, and *Agency and the Foundations of Ethics: Nietzschean Constitutivism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). This essay sketches the arguments that are fully developed in the aforementioned works, and some of the material in this essay is reproduced in them.

4. For an argument against this claim, see Paul Loeb, "Is There a Genetic Fallacy in Nietzsche's Genealogy of Morals?," *International Studies in Philosophy* 27 (1995): 125–41. Loeb raises two very interesting points. First, he claims that Nietzsche's genealogies do bear on the status of values: in particular, the genealogies show that our values have a "plebian ancestry," and this "proves their disvalue from an aristocratic standpoint" (127). Second, Loeb claims that the "genetic fallacy" charge—that is, the idea that the origins of a value *do not* bear on its justificatory status—is itself an evaluative judgment, bound up with a particular moral system. In particular, Loeb claims that the aristocratic value system would reject the genetic fallacy charge. While Loeb's reading is intriguing, I find it ultimately unconvincing. First, it is not clear why *we* should be moved by the fact that the aristocratic standpoint would regard our values as plebian. Nietzsche makes it quite clear, after all, that the aristocratic evaluative system is not *our* evaluative system. Second, I submit that there is a quite general distinction, not bound up with any particular evaluative system, between the question *whether to continue believing that x* and the question *how my belief in x came about*. The genetic fallacy charge simply applies this general distinction to the case of values.

5. I argue below that one of these options—rejecting power—is not open to Nietzsche. Facts about the nature of human agency preclude this option.

6. In speaking of how Nietzsche wants "us" to conduct revaluations, I am ignoring a complication: he repeatedly emphasizes that reevaluation is a task for the select few. He seems to believe that most individuals lack the intellectual capacities and character traits requisite for reevaluation. Thanks to Jessica Berry for pressing me on this point.

7. In *Agency and the Foundations of Ethics*, I argue that Nietzsche's claims about flourishing, health, and ascending and descending life are defined in terms of power. Thus, when Nietzsche claims that a value imperils flourishing, health, life, and so on, he is assessing the connection between the value and will to power. Once we recognize this point, we can see that the reliance on will to power is absolutely pervasive in Nietzsche's late works.

8. One way of solving this problem would be to attenuate Nietzsche's claims about the value of power. For example, if Nietzsche were simply expressing his personal preference about values, then no difficulties would arise: power, like all other values, would simply be subjectively valuable. However, this interpretation seems to sell Nietzsche short. It reduces his powerful critiques of morality to nothing more than rhetorical devices designed to sway us, through nonrational means, to adopt his preferred set of values. I argue against this reading in *Agency and the Foundations of Ethics*.

9. *GM II*:18; *GS* 349; *BGE* 259; *Z II* "Self-Overcoming"; *KSA* 13:11[75].

10. Alexander Nehamas emphasizes the fact that will to power involves perpetual striving. As he puts it, "Willing as an activity does not have an aim that is distinct from it; if it can be said to aim at anything at all, that can only be its own continuation. Willing is an activity that tends

to perpetuate itself, and this tendency to the perpetuation of activity . . . is what Nietzsche tries to describe by the obscure and often misleading term ‘will to power’” (*Nietzsche: Life as Literature* [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005], 79). Heidegger concurs: “Will to power is will to will” (1:37); *Nietzsche*, 4 vols., trans. David F. Krell (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), cited by volume and page number. Although my own interpretation of will to power differs from those of Nehamas and Heidegger, I think they are quite right to draw attention to the fact that will to power involves perpetual striving.

11. Bernard Reginster, *The Affirmation of Life: Nietzsche on Overcoming Nihilism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006), 127. Reginster defends the above characterization of will to power at length in this work. My analysis of will to power is based on his work.

12. One might object to this analysis on the grounds that Nietzsche often treats will to power as a *capacity* rather than an *activity* (thanks to Scott Jenkins for raising this point). In response, I doubt Nietzsche would countenance any strict distinction between activities and capacities: as *GM I*:13 suggests, having a capacity for *x* is analyzed in terms of actually *x*-ing. In particular, if willing power is aiming to encounter and overcome resistance, then it certainly makes sense to talk of individuals’ differing capacities for willing power, but this talk of capacities will be spelled out in terms of the resistances that the individuals *actually do* encounter and overcome.

13. A few more examples: “What man wants, what every smallest part of a living organism wants, is an increase in power” (*KSA* 13:14[174]). “All driving force is will to power” (*KSA* 13:14[121]). “Striving is nothing other than striving after power” (*KSA* 13:14[81]).

14. Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, 1:42.

15. John Richardson, *Nietzsche’s System* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 24.

16. Richardson, *Nietzsche’s System*, 21.

17. John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism* (Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett, 2002), 2.

18. For a full explanation and defense of these claims, see Paul Katsafanas, “Nietzsche’s Philosophical Psychology,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Nietzsche*, ed. John Richardson and Ken Gemes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

19. For interpretations of this sort, see Maudemarie Clark and David Dudrick, *The Soul of Nietzsche’s Beyond Good and Evil* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), Peter Poellner, *Nietzsche and Metaphysics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), and Leslie Paul Thiele, *Friedrich Nietzsche and the Politics of the Soul* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).

20. Maudemarie Clark and David Dudrick, “Nietzsche on the Will: An Analysis of BGE 19,” in *Nietzsche on Freedom and Autonomy*, ed. Ken Gemes and Simon May (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 264–65.

21. Thiele, *Friedrich Nietzsche and the Politics of the Soul*, 57.

22. Thiele, *Friedrich Nietzsche and the Politics of the Soul*, 57–58.

23. The material in the following three paragraphs is drawn from Katsafanas, “Nietzsche’s Philosophical Psychology.”

24. Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, trans. E. F. J. Payne (New York: Dover, 1969) (hereafter *WWR*, cited by volume followed by page number).

25. See “Instincts and Their Vicissitudes,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. J. Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1957).

26. I defend this claim in Katsafanas, “Nietzsche’s Philosophical Psychology.”

27. This example is drawn from Katsafanas, “Deriving Ethics from Action.”

28. There is a potential difficulty here. We could accept the claim that drive-motivated activities aim at *some degree* of resistance, but deny the claim that drive-motivated activities aim at *maximal* resistance. Nietzsche’s will to power thesis is clearly based upon the latter, stronger claim. I lack the space to address this point here, but I discuss it in Katsafanas, *Agency and the Foundations of Ethics*.

29. Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, 1:42.

30. Of course, the claim that all of our actions are drive-motivated (or, by implication, that all of our actions aim at overcoming resistance) is highly counterintuitive. It is open to a number of apparent counterexamples: are we really being motivated by a drive, are we really seeking to encounter and overcome resistance, when we wake up in the morning and, half asleep, wander into the kitchen to make coffee? I think Nietzsche has three ways of responding to these objections and apparent counterexamples. First, Nietzsche can argue that we sometimes forgo maximal pursuit of power in certain actions in order more effectively to pursue it in other actions. Second, Nietzsche often focuses upon certain central cases of human action that appear to have nothing to do with drives (such as the quest for knowledge), and shows that these actions are, upon closer examination, drive-motivated. These exercises might amount to an inductive proof that all actions are drive-motivated. Third, and most important, Nietzsche has a sophisticated argument that moves from certain empirically plausible facts about the nature of happiness to the conclusion that all actions are drive-motivated. These points and arguments are quite complex, and I lack the space to present them here; I examine them at length in *Agency and the Foundations of Ethics*.

31. Showing exactly how the will to power rules out particular valuations is no easy task, for the conflicts between will to power and other values typically are not obvious. For example, Nietzsche claims that valuing compassion conflicts with valuing power, but this is not clear from the surface content of the value. In this case, to discover the conflict, one must engage in philosophical psychology, unveiling latent psychic tensions. See Reginster, *Affirmation of Life*, for an explanation of how the conflict arises.

32. Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, 1:37. One might wonder why the fact that will to power is inescapable renders will to power normative for us. In other words, couldn't we accept the idea that we inescapably aim at power but deny the claim that we *should* will power, or that we *have reason* to fulfill this aim? I think the answer is *no*: if we grant Nietzsche the almost universally accepted claim that aims induce *pro tanto* reasons, and we accept the idea that will to power is an inescapable aim, then it follows that all agents have *pro tanto* reasons to fulfill will to power. Making this argument, though, involves some subtle distinctions that I lack the space to discuss here. See Katsafanas, *Agency and the Foundations of Ethics* for the full argument.