The Will to Power

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Abstract

The following essay offers a new interpretation of the Will to Power, especially as the Will to Power is conflated with the Will to Truth. The Will to Power measures life and encompasses the Will to Truth that measures theory. This essay is derived from my readings of the primary and secondary sources.

Key Words: Will to Power, Will to Truth, Genealogy

Friedrich Nietzsche's concept of genealogy has become a focal point for a number of recent scholarly studies and the origin of several philosophical debates.[i] However welcome, these studies and debates have generated a new set of questions about the definition and purpose of genealogy. Several scholars and philosophers identify genealogy as Nietzsche's ethical theory and generally read the text *The Genealogy of Morals* accordingly.[ii] Others emphasize that genealogy constitutes a critique of truth, presenting a thoroughgoing criticism of all attempts to derive a universal and necessary theory of truth. They also inquire into the diverse consequences – philosophical and ethical -- of this critique; and yet too often these scholars and philosophers confuse their own theories of truth with that of Nietzsche. In fact, they employ a notion of truth that genealogy is devised extensively to criticize and explicitly to deny.[iii]

For Nietzsche the modern definition of truth is defined in terms of correspondence and the representational theory of truth. This concept must posit the existence of a value-free and power-neutral field (scientifically labeled "objectivity") in which all objects (including the "objects" of moral values and power relations) can be determined in their truth. For this concept of truth to function, it must assume that it stands outside all facts, events, and processes (including life) in order to capture them in their truth. This standing-outside assumes that all truth must be theoretical. What is considered to be true is defined theoretically, which is then validated by pointing to a referent of this theory. Modernity as a whole understands itself only against the background of theory.

Genealogy displaces the currently dominant discourses of modernity. Nietzsche radically undermines all philosophical and scientific claims to attain universal and objective truth. More significantly, he converts the dominant scientific discourses of truth into an analysis of power. The question of truth is thus turned into the problem of the relationship of truth to power. This problem in turn becomes defined historically, in the sense that it finds its starting point, not in some theoretical space, but in the field of historical change.

From a critique of the currently dominant theory of truth, genealogy proposes an alternative understanding of moral values. In the current debates the question arises as to whether Nietzsche endorsed a universal or an individualist, an externalist or an internist, ethic. Most often these debates are framed in terms of the standpoint of the individual moral agent. Nietzschean genealogy supposedly poses the question of how an individual ought to assume a moral stance in the world.

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What is too often conflated in recent discussion, however, is that Nietzsche makes a clear distinction in *The Genealogy of Morals* and elsewhere between *Moral* and *Sitte*. *Moral* in German indicates a theory of morals, an ethics, often expressed in universal terms; *Sitte* are customs or, more accurately, the ways in which in practice moral values are actualized within a given cultural context. Nietzsche further contends that in "healthy cultures" moral values are always founded upon moral values (*Sitte*).

Nietzschean genealogy, I argue, is neither a universal method, applicable to each and every set of moral values (*Sitte*) and positing a confused theory of truth (as for instance construed by analytic philosophers) nor is it radical critique, undermining all moral systems and all claims to truth (as understood by continental philosophers).[iv] And against all current interpretations, I further contend, genealogy cannot be understood either as an ethical project or as a critique of truth without understanding the relationship between genealogy and the Will to Power.[v]

As developed in the two major genealogical texts, *Beyond Good and Evil* and *The Genealogy of Morals*, the "logic" of genealogy proceeds from a critique of the modern concept of truth, which Nietzsche labels the "Will to Truth," to a more inclusive cultural critique of modern culture based upon a new understanding of moral values. Through a series of reversals and inversions of current definitions of truth and ethics (*Moral*), genealogy finally moves beyond these reversals and inversions in a new definition of truth and an alternative understanding of moral values. In fact, inversion and also reversal are not ends in themselves; they are necessary introductions to the displacement to the new language of the Will to Power. Genealogy thus sets the dominant form of the will (the Will to Truth) against another interpretation of the will (the Will to Power). This relationship has too often been overlooked, or the Will to Power has been confused with the Will to Truth.

In *Beyond Good and Evil* and *The Genealogy of Morals*, genealogy finds its starting point in a critique of the dominant theory of truth. Concepts of truth both limited in its understanding of truth and blind to its position within modernity. As a result the task of modern culture, with its claims to know nature directly (unmediated by either language or culture), produces an inverted and confused mode of understanding itself. The Will to Truth determines the form of false consciousness of modernity, which defines the "reality" of modernity as "modernity." Nietzsche further argues that the Will to Truth results in the loss of meaning and the confusion of moral values in modernity.

Genealogy uncovers the "cause" of modernity in the ways in which ancient metaphysics and in particular the metaphysical theories of truth continue to dominate modernity. Universal claims to truth are inherently metaphysical for Nietzsche, demanding that reality conform to theory, based upon a number of abstractions derived from the grammatical structures of the Indo-European languages. Modernity also continues to maintain the metaphysical distinction that morals have to be subordinated to nature. In other words, metaphysics defines nature in order to construct a theory of ethics. To interpret the world in terms of true and false and of good and evil the Will to Truth (as with metaphysics as a whole) has to cut, Nietzsche contends, a deep incision into the unity of life.

Modernity, the reality of modernity, Nietzsche argues, is founded on a contradiction. It at once exhibits symptoms of active, creative life; and yet, it generates the reactive, life-denying moral values of metaphysics. Modernity is thus understandable not according to its own definition of truth but in the tension ("the tension of the bow") between the active, expansive life given to us and the ways in which this ascending life finds meaning through ascetic moral values. Modernity thus exhibits the strange condition of life turning against life. This "will turning *against* life" ultimately results in a will to nothingness, nihilism (GM 19).

Th situation of modernity with its confusion of truth and moral values calls for a particular kind of criticism and a particular kind of response founded upon this criticism. Because modernity presents a very confused and inverted understanding of life and theory, the strategy of genealogy deploys the tactics of reversal and inversion. In modernity what is called truth (objectivity) is actually an expression of subjectivity. It also inverts the evaluation of *Sitte* in terms of the metaphysical projection of nature.

Genealogy develops these tactics within a larger strategy. Without either a claim that reality is unknowable or that truth is unattainable (or attainable only in a highly restricted sense as Jacques Derrida contends), genealogy reverses and inverts these foundational dichotomies in order to enunciate a new language based upon a new understanding of the relationship of language to realty. Genealogy reverses the relationship of subject and object, of the individual to the world, and then inverts the metaphysical relationship of theory to practice as of nature to culture.

Or more accurately, it collapses into themselves the metaphysical oppositions of subject and object as well as of theory and practice and reabsorbs them within a new unity of the will. This new unity of the will Nietzsche refers to as "life."[vi] Initially, the "theory" of the Will to Power functions critically, undermining all claims to know life (or reality) objectively as in the empirical sciences. Nietzsche draws an inference: life is only knowable as an interpretation of affects, which only through interpretation become conscious and indeed consciousness. There is, other words, no direct access to life, no biologism, as there is not immediate grasp of life as a thing-in-itself. The Will to Power does not claim to know what life is, to define it scientifically. It is in fact a denial of all such claims. The Will to Power is an interpretation of life. It is not Nietzsche's own interpretation of life; rather Will to Power uncovers the interpretation of life established by a culture. The Will to Power thus indicates life but is not life itself. The epistemological status of the "theory" of the Will to Power is that of an interpretation, and in this sense the Will to Power limits all universal claims to speak of life (and reality) fully and directly.   In this sense the Will to Power is the interpretation of the interpretations that a culture gives to life.

Nietzsche further contends that this process of interpretation functions not on the level of the individual but in terms of the cultural whole.[vii] Cultures do not necessarily exhibit an internal consistency or even a clear articulation of a hierarchy of meanings. Instead of positing a totalizing unity, he most often understands culture as battlegrounds of competing truths and conflicting meanings.[viii] As a result a culture genealogy constitutes an open site of investigation of how its various life forms (including meanings in the narrow sense) do or do not re-enforce each other, compete or harmonize with each another. Life for Nietzsche is not just nature as defined in terms of the sciences and biology and life is not what stands in opposition to culture. A culture, he contends, can only be understood in terms of an interpretation of its distinctive forms of life (*Lebensformen*), a very broad concept, ranging from forms of the state and social organization to modes of the plastic arts and genres of literature, to the types of self-conception and the definitions of truth. Nietzsche understands these various life forms as so many interpretations of life as they find expression culturally and historically.

A culture's life forms provide the means through which the culture not only interprets life but lives its life. Moral values function culturally; and they function practically, not theoretically, that is they function as life forms. In this sense, meanings define, sustain, and legitimate these practices by interpreting life. Like all other claims to truth, Nietzsche interprets modern philosophy and science as practices, as so many life forms. Culture is thus always a part of life in similar ways that *Sitte* are interpretations of life that, even in spite of their interpretive status, always remain part of life as the collective and cultural interpretation of life. *Sitte* are the moral values of a culture, the ethos of a culture. Nietzschean genealogy is in fact constituted as the cultural interpretation of moral values as they play themselves out culturally and historically.[ix]

Genealogically interpreted, life is neither nature nor culture. It is in fact, a dialectical transformation of nature and culture. Thus against the modern dichotomy of nature and culture, genealogy transforms life as a single domain of nature-culture. This single domain calls for a new language. The major concern of both *Beyond Good and Evil* and *The Genealogy of Morals* is that modernity lacks an appropriate language. "Hence a philosopher," Nietzsche declares in *Beyond Good and Evil,* "should claim the right to include willing as such within the sphere of morals – morals being understood as the doctrine of the relations of supremacy under which the phenomenon of 'life' comes to be" (BGE 27). Nietzsche of course is the philosopher who rethinks the will as life. Life, he states, is the striving "to grow, spread, seize, predominate -- not from any morality or immorality but because it is *living* and because life simply *is* Will to Power" (GM. 203).

Nietzsche's criticism of the currently dominant concepts of truth is well-known, less so is his reformulation of the question of truth. What is Nietzsche's understanding of truth? As the source and arbiter of "truth," consciousness is also supposedly the maker and user of language. The problem with "truth" and by extension of modernity is not with language itself but with consciousness and the positing of truth upon the "ground" of consciousness. The Will to Truth thus asserts that it is in possession of all truth (GS 335). The result is that the Will to Truth denies perspective and dogmatically limits the conflict among interpretations. In this willfulness, Nietzsche concludes, the "truth" of science oversteps the limits of interpretations in order to monopolize speaking of an unknowable reality, external to life and the will (BGE 1). At best as a theory of the will, the Will to Truth is a poor or simply inappropriate interpretation of the will, especially as the will expresses itself in modernity.

Genealogy does not conclude by uncovering the overdetermined status of scientific truth. Through the "theory" of the Will to Power, Nietzsche uncovers the source of truth. Truth is not just the power over competing meanings; it constitutes a measure. It evaluates. Like the Will to Truth, the Will to Power sets up its own measure; unlike the Will to Truth, this criterion is not based upon the capacity of a subject to represent reality accurately and with certainty. Genealogy does not claim to stand off from the world, its various states of affairs, or its life forms in order to capture them in their truth. Instead of positing truth in terms of the bodies of knowledge defined by science, the Will to Power points to participation in life. Nietzsche understands the need for a measure for these diverse life forms of a culture. This measure is life, life as so many cultural interpretations of life. If culture with its life forms constitutes so many interpretations of life, Nietzsche can thus set up a "universal" criterion to evaluate each and every form and entire cultural formations.

With the "theory" of the Will to Power, genealogy becomes a means of cultural evaluation. In *Beyond Good and Evil* Nietzsche makes this process of evaluation explicit: the Will to Power indicates "to what extent it is life-promoting, life-preserving, species-preserving, perhaps even species-cultivating" (BGE 11). Even as life-promoting, life-preserving, species-preserving, species-cultivating, the Will to Power is not simply a measure of expansion, domination, of increasing force, as it is generally understood. Although unknowable in itself, life can be diagnosed as expansive, ever-growing, aggressive; but it can also be diagnosed as restrictive, ever-decreasing, defensive. The Will to Power expresses its power as both expansive and contractive. Life can be "what in certain animals is [called] *hibernation*, in many tropical plants *aestivation*, the minimum metabolism at which life will still subsist without really entering consciousness" (GM 131). Nietzsche expands on this insight. What might look like a diminution, a loss of vitality, could actually be signs of strength, and conversely, signs of strength could be signs of weakness and even death (GM. 78). This is why Nietzsche often speaks of genealogical interpretation as an art of medical diagnosis. The Will to Power is a measure of both ascending and descending life. In its creative move, genealogy begins with a culture's own estimation of life through it interpretation of *Affekte*. It interprets the basic way in which a culture "feels" life. The origins of moral values lie in the primitive response to being alive, in affects as either positive or negative. As interpreted by a culture, life can be felt as either affirmative or not. Its *Sitte* are either expansive or contractive, in Nietzsche's language as "life-affirming" or "life-denying." Whether ascending or descending, life is the good, the good is life (nature-culture), and not, as with the Will to Truth, the good as the theory of the good.

In a second, critical maneuver, genealogy moves beyond a culture's own interpretation of life to a genealogical evaluation of this interpretation. A culture interprets life as either life-enhancing or life-denying, but this interpretation might be inappropriate. It can misapprehend its own conditions of life, and even misinterpret its own *Affekte*. The Will to Power allows for the evaluation of the appropriateness of a culture's interpretation of life against its symptoms of life. Genealogically considered, cultures either appropriately interpret the conditions of life in its historical epoch or they do not. When life is ascending, the appropriate moral values are expansive and life-affirming. Such a culture rejoices in life. When, however, life is on the decline the appropriate response is a set of life-denying values and a culture of withdrawal, of ascetic moral values. According to the Will to Power, a culture in other words is either life-promoting as in classical antiquity or life-denying as in early medieval Christianity (GM 135). Through the 'theory' of the Will to Power, genealogy first measures the moral values that constitute a culture or cultural epoch as either life-affirming or life-denying and then measures these cultures and cultural epochs as either appropriate or inappropriate depending upon whether life is ascending or descending.

The Will to Power is thus a moral measure. Whereas the Will to Truth produces an ethics, a theoretical approach to morals, the Will to Power is a measure of *Sitte* as a measure of life as actually lived. As an extension of the metaphysical heritage of the West, the Will to Truth must create a theoretical realm to justify its moral values. The Will to Truth (science) is a measure of theory, assuming a metaphysical domain of theory) while the Will to Power is an evaluation of life. Through the "theory" of the Will to Power, Nietzsche does not develop a general theory of culture or oppose, as modernity does, a definition of culture to a scientific conception of nature.

In Nietzsche's hands, cultural interpretation posits that moral values shape institutions, create life forms, define a culture as a whole, and indeed give it its understanding of reality. Nietzsche calls the reality brought forth by the life forms of a culture, not universal and an ahistorical reality, but a world.[x] The juxtaposition in *The Genealogy of Morals* of the Greek opposition of "good" and "bad" for example and the Christian opposition of "good" and "evil" not only defined very different definition of the "good" or different worldviews.

They opened up radically different worlds (BGE 117). The Will to Power arises out of the present conditions of life and criticizes all poor interpretations of life deployed by the Will to Truth. The Will to Power emerges from and ultimately speaks to these particular conditions. It is this positioned in this contradiction of modern culture, in ascending life, and evaluates all forms of life, from abstract statements to modes of existence, in terms of ascending life. Compared to the Will to Power, the Will to Truth is non-situated and understands life only as an object. Nihilism is therefore a crisis of meaning but it is also a crisis of moral values and a crisis of the culture. The Will to Power overcomes the contradiction of modernity as it prepares the appropriate life forms appropriate to ascending life. Genealogical reversal and inversion allows Nietzsche to displace nihilism with its sense of death by a culture based on life.

The Will to Truth is not, however, symmetrical to the Will to Power. In fact, the Will to Truth is not opposed to the Will to Power. The Will to Truth does not compete with the Will to Power on its own level, by offering another concept of life or another theory of truth. Freed from the representational theory of truth, the Will to Power is a more inclusive understanding of the will and truth. It engulfs the Will to Truth within a general "theory" of the will. The Will to Truth is itself an expression of the Will to Power.   The Will to Power emerges from and ultimately speaks to these particular conditions of modernity. The Will to Power is positioned in the present, in ascending life, and evaluates all forms of life, from abstract statements to modes of existence, in terms of ascending life. In fact, the "theory" of the Will to Power arises only from the situation of modernity, from ascending life. Truth is no longer defined against a universal theory of truth but against the background of an appropriate interpretation of life. It explicitly measures life and all life forms of a culture (including the Will to Truth) as expressions of life. In this way genealogical evaluations raise questions, not of the dichotomous logic of true and false (a metaphysical opposition), but of appropriate and inappropriate interpretations of an unknowable life.

The Will to Power is thus a genealogical "theory," called forth by the genealogical displacement of questions of scientific truth for the problem of the life forms of cultures. From the diagnosis of the symptoms of life in modernity, genealogy evokes the theory of the Will to Power; but, paradoxically, the symptoms of life are only knowable through the "theory" of the Will to Power. The relationship between genealogy as a critique of truth, genealogy as measure of life, and truth as the Will to Power are thus circular and mutually reinforcing. Genealogy generates the "theory" of the Will to Power; and circularly, the Will to Power "grounds" genealogy in the interpretation of life in modernity. The Will to Power is the starting point for the interpretation of life in modernity. As such, the "theory" of the Will to Power opens up the possibility of redefining reality in terms of the interpretation of cultural meanings and life forms (as well as the background of a culture as a whole) against the further back background of life (GM 20). The Will to Power cannot, therefore, provide a basis for a definition of truth that stands outside of life and claims to represent life objectively; it recovers the various morals and meanings modern culture attributes to life.

As a measure of life and not of theory, the Will to Power constitutes Nietzsche's "theory" of truth. The Will to Power is not a theory of the truth as with the Will to Truth, rather, the Will to Power is truth in that it indicates life as either ascending or descending. Thus through genealogy Nietzsche moves the question of truth from its confines within a theory of representation to the problem of life or what can be known of life, as an experience of life. There is, however, no simple opposition between two competing theories of truth. And yet, the Will to Power, like the Will to truth, makes distinctive ontological claims. They posit two different realities, one claiming to capture actions, practices, and processes in theoretical terms and another that understands the will as a question of the meanings and moral values in terms of the participation in an actual culture. What is often difficult to understand is that the Will to Power is neither a metaphysical category nor a fundamental ontology. Against most recent readings (including those of Martin Heidegger), Nietzsche thinks through the "theory" of the Will to Power in terms of reality as so many cultural interpretations of life. The Will to Power in fact constitutes the principle upon which genealogy is deployed.

What recent debates over genealogy, including the interpretation of Michel Foucault, overlook is that the Will to Power is the principle of genealogy. The subject matter of genealogy for Nietzsche is moral values and life forms, not discourses and institutions.

Works Cited

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[i] In an overview of the recent scholarship, Steven D. Hales writes that in the past twenty years genealogy has been the subject of "considerable attentions by the academy" [Steven D. Hales, "Recent Work on Nietzsche" *American Philosophical Quarterly*, vol.37, No. 4 (Oct., 2000), pp. 313-333, (p. 313)]. For another overview see Daniel W. Conway *Nietzsche's* On the Genealogy of Morals: *A Reader's Guide* (London: Continuum, 2007). See also Elijah Millgram, "Who Was Nietzsche's Genealogist?" *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. 75. No. 1 (Jul. 2007) pp. 92-110; David Owen, "Nietzsche's Genealogy Revisited"; and Reid D. Blackman, "Nietzsche's 'Interpretation' in the *Genealogy*," British Journal for the History of Philosophy 18 (4), 2010, pp. 693-711. For a collection of essays on genealogy, see Christa Davis Acampora, ed., *Nietzsche's* On the Genealogy of Morals: *Critical Essays*, (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishing, 2006).

[ii] See for instance Werner Stegmaier, *Nietzsches "Genealogie der Moral*, (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1994) and Lawrence J. Hatab, *Nietzsche's* On the Genealogy of Morality (2005).

[iii] Nietzsche, Richard Schacht claims, "has been taken to repudiate the very idea of truth, the very possibility of knowledge, and the very enterprise of philosophy itself conceived as a cognitive affair." Although Nietzsche can without contradiction do both and affirm truth while denying "the enterprise of philosophy" as it is currently understood. Richard Schacht, ed., *Nietzsche's Postmoralism,* pp. 4-5. Maudemarie Clark argues that Nietzsche rejected a correspondence theory of truth and moved to perspectival understanding of truth (Maudemarie Clark, *Nietzsche on Truth and Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 46-47, 95-103, 40, 50, 60-61, 103-124). For her Nietzsche developed an anti-logic: all statements falsify reality (Clark, 1990, chap. 4). See also Maudemarie Clark, "The Development of Nietzsche's Later Position on Truth" in *Nietzsche*. John Richardson and Brian Leiter, eds., (Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 59-84). For Ken Gemes the problem of truth is not to analyze Nietzsche's claims about truth but to diagnose the psychological and social reasons for holding various attitudes towards truth, while Nietzsche himself takes no stance on these attitudes. Ken Gemes, "Nietzsche's Critique of Truth," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research,* 52 (1992), pp. 47-65.

[4] See Hales and Welshon, p. 316.

[v] As the analytic philosopher Steven D. Hales points out there are definite limits to the analytic reading of Nietzsche (Steven D. Hales, "Recent Work on Nietzsche," p. 333). Analytic impose their own terminology and questions onto Nietzsche. Conundrum of Will to Power to perspectivism. Misread Nietzsche's ethical theory. I would also add, that in the name of undermining metaphysics, philosophical analysis unknowingly falls back into such metaphysical dichotomies as language versus reality and such metaphysical hierarchies as theory over practice.

[vi] Often employing Schopenhauer's phrase "the will to life," Nietzsche breaks from Schopenhauer by thinking life in terms of "the life of a people" (UM II:123). This unified will is less individual than collective. It is cultural and one can understand culture as expressions or better yet interpretations of the will. Nietzsche does not resign before the determinant will as Schopenhauer claims to do. Instead Nietzsche traces the interpretations of the will that is a culture (PT 123).

[vii] When Nietzsche thinks about culture, he does not refer immediately to German national culture or any other national culture but to a more generic form of culture. Nietzsche continually speaks of national cultures but overwhelmingly in negative terms. They are variations upon a common modern (and indeed) Western form of culture.

[8] This cultural level of Nietzschean interpretation has generally been overlooked in recent criticism. Randall Havas has recently addressed this issue but limits his discussion of "culture" to "self-conscious truth" [Randall Havas, *Nietzsche's Genealogy: Nihilism and the Will to Knowledge* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), pp. xi-xii]. At best the analytic tradition understands culture in Nietzsche as a social context that though it might determine interests and truth as interests is not a condition of possibility or determinate of truth. Gemes for instance contends that Nietzsche presents no new theory of truth but merely "the role that concept and rhetoric of truth has played within various cultures" [Gemes, "Nietzsche's Critique of Truth," in *Nietzsche*, p. 41].

[9] In addition to "The Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life," see Nietzsche 1974: 280. Although Nietzsche adopted Burckhardt's concept of culture in his essays of the 1870s, Nietzsche continued to employ this concept in his mature texts of the 1880s. In fact Nietzsche's best known example of the use of notion of a cultural horizon in his texts of the 1880s comes in Book Three of *The Gay Science*. "The madman" announces the death of God and more devastatingly that all of us have murdered him. How has God been murdered? "How could we drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon?" (Nietzsche 1974: 181). The loss of God is comparable for Nietzsche to the destruction of the horizon of a culture and the resultant loss of meaning. The death of God is not so much a theological as a cultural condition. God is a horizon.

[x] Stegmaier arguess that the apparent contradictions and ambiguities in Nietzsche "teachings" as a whole are resolved once it is understood that these teachings do not refer to reality but only to other signs. I argue that signs define language of moral values and that moral values establish a culture. A culture is reality as a world. Signs therefore constitute a world.