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THE WILL TO POWER AS NATURALIST CRITICAL ONTOLOGY

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Introduction

While the debate continues over whether Friedrich Nietzsche's concept of the will to power is intended as ontology, biology, psychology, or some variant of the three, there is a significant consensus on many sides that, if the will to power is intended as an ontology, it is inconsistent with his antimetaphysical stance, implausible from a contemporary scientific perspective, and very poorly supported, based only on wild metaphysical speculation or sloppy, pseudoscientific generalization (see, for example, Kaufmann 1968, 510; Clark 1999, 119–35; Leiter 2002, 185–225; Porter 2009; and Staten 2009).

In this paper, I argue to the contrary that Nietzsche's published works contain a substantial, though implied, argument for the will to power as an ontological theory that is consistent with a naturalist methodology.[1] Indeed, I suggest that Nietzsche believes the will to power ontology follows directly from his rejection of metaphysics and is grounded in a critical form of naturalism. Consequently, even if he is mistaken in this conclusion, we must take the will to power ontology as seriously as we do his critique of metaphysics, for it is intended as its direct consequence.

Once we have recognized Nietzsche's implied argument for a will to power ontology, we can better understand the intended scope and purpose of the theory, as well as reject many of its influential interpretations, including the vitalist (Danto 1965, Schacht 1983), intentionalist (Clark 1990), and teleological (Reginster 2006) readings. In contrast to these interpretations, I argue that the will to power ontology follows directly from Nietzsche's rejection of three metaphysical assumptions: substance, causal agency, and teleology. As a rejection of substance, the will to power describes reality as consisting of general will, not objects,

agents, or discrete wills. As a rejection of causal agency, it describes causality as an indivisible sequence and events as maximal manifestations of power, rather than realized potencies (abilities, motives, or possibilities actualized by efficient causal agencies). Finally, as a rejection of teleology, it is a descriptive principle of events as essentially active engagements of obstacles, rather than as the effects of explanatory final causes, purposes, or aims. Consequently, the will to power is a not a theory of forces, drives, or desires, but rather a basic principle describing not agency but the causal process as a whole and tending not toward the accumulation of power or overcoming of resistance but, rather, toward the activity of resistance as such.

I conclude that the will to power is a critical description of what reality is *not*, rather than a positive theory, intended not to explain but to reveal and reject the common metaphysical presuppositions that underlie many commonsense, philosophical, and scientific explanations of reality, such as freedom of the will, rational and moral motivation, physical atomism, and the concept of natural law.

By recognizing that the will to power is an ontology, we can restore the coherence of Nietzsche's work, particularly the continuity of his critical and positive projects. On one hand, the will to power is, as a positive theory of reality, agency, and action, the foundation of his philosophy of human nature, moral psychology, and moral and cultural projects. At the same time, the will to power serves as a critical limit on philosophical method by defining a minimalist metaphysics—what remains of the description of reality once purged of common metaphysical assumptions—and rejecting any claims that cannot be grounded in such minimalist description.

This limit is the foundation of Nietzsche's critique of traditional philosophy and certain forms of religion, science, and the arts. By restoring the will to power's status as ontology, we not only reveal the broader systematic unity of his work, but we also preserve its consistency. For, if Nietzsche cannot provide an alternative to metaphysical foundations for positive philosophical claims, his critical philosophy must be rejected as inconsistent (depending on unacknowledged metaphysical assumptions), arbitrary (offering no reason to prefer his positive claims to those he rejects), or empty (rejecting philosophical, religious, and scientific claims with no ability to replace them).

Moreover, by restoring the foundation of Nietzsche's positive philosophy and correcting the overemphasis on its critical aspect, we can begin to assess Nietzsche's lasting significance more directly. Is he to remain merely an historical foil, a provocative critic against which claims are tested, or does he have a significant philosophical contri-

bution to make? In the current literature, Nietzsche's positive value is often reduced to the historical anticipation of fashionable contemporary positions, a strategy that flatters Nietzsche at the expense of making him a reflection of, rather than a participant in, contemporary philosophical debates.

While it is beyond the scope of this paper to explore at length Nietzsche's possible positive contributions to contemporary issues, the ontological theory of the will to power points in the direction of one striking possibility. If Nietzsche's ontology is intended as a naturalist foundation for the critique not only of philosophy and religion but of scientific accounts of nature, law, and human agency, then he is attempting a naturalistic critique of naturalism—in which case, his philosophy does not merely anticipate contemporary views but challenges them on their own terms.

1. Nietzsche's Critical Naturalism

In his later works, Nietzsche expresses a commitment to a form of antimetaphysical, descriptive empiricism that is consistent with a naturalist worldview. While his naturalism differs in important ways from contemporary conceptions, it is sufficiently similar to suggest that his claims and methodology are potentially acceptable from a contemporary scientific perspective.

Nietzsche's naturalism is both ontological and methodological: both a conception of reality and a method of justifying knowledge claims. His ontological naturalism follows directly from his rejection of metaphysical dualism. Metaphysical concepts, he claims, are derived from the direct negation of the characteristics of the world as it appears to the senses, making metaphysics nothing more than an inverted image of the natural world disguised as discovered supersensible entities and qualities: "The 'real world' has been constructed out of the contradiction of the actual world" (*Twilight of the Idols* [*TI*], "Reason," 6). This is, it should be noted, a critical claim, rather than a positive assertion about the nature of reality. Nietzsche rejects competing, nonnaturalist conceptions on the ground that they are insubstantial, containing no positive information about a supernnatural realm. For, once we exclude the negation of the sensible world from metaphysics, we are left with nothing.

This leaves open the possibility that, although metaphysics has failed to describe another kind of reality, future metaphysical accounts may avoid the error of merely negative descriptions of metaphysical beings or properties. Nietzsche sometimes simply denies this possibility: "The 'apparent' world is the only one" (*TI*, "Reason in Philosophy," 6). This strong claim is inconsistent with his overall methodology, since it

requires an a priori assertion about the impossibility of a supernatural world. However, he does offer an alternative argument for his view that the natural world exhausts reality: there are no plausible competing views, because "another kind of reality is absolutely indemonstrable" (*TI*, "Reason," 6). A metaphysical world is indemonstrable because the demonstration must either repeat the error of negating the sensible world, rather than demonstrating a nonsensible world, or it must be make use of sensible evidence, in which case it fails to demonstrate another category of reality. Consequently, Nietzsche's naturalism disallows explanation by appeal to substances, qualities, or principles distinct from the natural world, an antimetaphysical stance that is broadly consistent with contemporary scientific naturalism.

Nietzsche's methodological naturalism is, likewise, a direct consequence of his rejection of metaphysics. If there are no demonstrable entities, qualities, or principles distinct from the sensible world, then knowledge must have its foundation and limit in the senses. Nietzsche presents this method as a form of descriptive empiricism, in which a claim is justifiable only if it describes sensible experience without rational inference beyond the sensibly given. "The senses," he tells us, "do not lie at all [*überhaupt nicht*]." Rather, "it is what we make of their evidence that first introduces a lie into it" (*TI*, "Reason," 2).

Once again, Nietzsche equivocates between a stronger and weaker claim: the stronger claim that the senses do not lie at all and the weaker claim that there are no strong reasons for doubting sense evidence. The weaker claim is again more consistent and serves his purpose equally well. For, if errors in judgment can be adequately explained by "what we make of" sense evidence—our false inferences from sense experience—and if there is no alternative source of knowledge, we have good reason to rely on the senses, even given the possibility of error. Consequently, the senses are not the direct source of errors in knowledge and are alone a sufficient basis for knowledge, while interpretation beyond the empirically given can only introduce error. Knowledge demands faithful description of the sensibly given and no more; any departure from the empirical must be counted as metaphysics and, consequently, rejected.

It might be worried that this position is at odds with the more skeptical, "perspectivist" position found in earlier works. However, Nietzsche only limits knowledge to perspective in relation to the whole. Sense experience as "perspectival" is not erroneous but incomplete: "The *only* seeing we have is seeing from a perspective; the *only* knowledge we have is knowledge from a perspective" (*On the Genealogy of Morality* [*GM*], 3:12). This incompleteness—the "partiality" of any sense experience in relation to the object as a whole—far from devaluing sense informa-

tion, increases its value: "*The more* emotions we allow to be expressed in words concerning something, *the more* eyes, different eyes, we know how to train on the same thing, the more complete our 'idea' of this thing, our 'objectivity,' will be" (ibid.). Indeed, the failure to recognize the perspectival nature of knowledge is the principal way that reason "introduces a lie" into sense information. The assumption that a given perspective exhausts the object, the conflation of an aspect with the whole, is precisely an interpretation beyond the testimony of the senses, an error based in "what we make of their evidence."

Perspectivism is, then, compatible with the empiricism that becomes explicit in later works: "We have science these days precisely to the extent that we have decided to accept the testimony of the senses" (*TI*, "Reason," 3). Mirroring his earlier view, Nietzsche adds that this method is one of multiplying, rather than doubting, sensible perspectives, insisting that we have science "to the extent that we have learned to sharpen [the senses], arm them, and think them through to the end" (ibid.).

Moreover, Nietzsche is not simply defending empirical evidence; he is limiting knowledge to it entirely. After equating scientific knowledge with the testimony of the senses, he explicitly rejects every competing form: "Everything else is deformity and pre-science: I mean metaphysics, theology, psychology, epistemology. Or formal science, a system of signs: like logic and that application of logic, mathematics. They do not have anything to do with reality" (*TI*, "Reason," 3).

This is, to be sure, a radical empiricism, and it is only a guiding methodological ideal, one impossible to achieve perfectly in practice. In his critique of the "will to truth," Nietzsche insists that some fictions, including those of metaphysics, may be necessary and even beneficial to human life (*Beyond Good and Evil* [*BGE*], 4). Elsewhere, he claims that metaphysics is grounded in the very structure of language, implying the impossibility of a nonmetaphysical description of reality (*TI*, "Reason," 5). This is, nevertheless, consistent with Nietzsche's critical intention of developing a minimalist metaphysics as a guiding theoretical ideal: the methodological principal of minimizing unnecessary metaphysical assumptions whenever possible. And although contemporary naturalists might reject the limitation of knowledge to description (Leiter 2002, 22–23), it is compatible with contemporary naturalism, since its methodology is consistent with the natural sciences and based in empirical, rather than speculative or a priori, claims. If, as I will argue, the ontological theory of the will to power is based in Nietzsche's methodological naturalism, then the will to power ontology presents the contemporary naturalist with no prima facie reason to exclude it from consideration.

2. Toward a Naturalist Ontology of the Will to Power: Against Substance, Causal Agency, and Potentiality

Nietzsche's naturalist epistemological commitments are best understood through attention to the theme of the natural in his later moral philosophy, particularly in *The Twilight of the Idols*, where he makes clear the deep connection between his commitment to an antimetaphysical epistemology, on one hand, and to a naturalistic form of morality, on the other (*TI*, "Morality as Anti-Nature," 3). In this work, Nietzsche repeatedly equates the actual with the natural, the natural with the antimetaphysical, and the metaphysical with a value-laden, morally motivated form of explanation: metaphysics as *ressentiment* against and the negation of reality (*TI*, "Morality," 5–6; and "Reason," 1, 6). Thus, we come to understand that his naturalism is fundamentally moral and critical in intent: a rejection of specific ways of explaining reality and a redescription intended to dismantle the harmful values that motivate such explanations—the "redemption" (*Erlösung*) of becoming from moralistic interpretation (*TI*, "Errors," 8).

Nietzsche's naturalism is, consequently, a critical position rather than a positive ontological claim about the meaning or extent of the "natural," a rejection of the supernatural, not a theory of nature. The ontological consequences of his naturalism are equally critical: the theory of the will to power consists not of positive assertions but of descriptions that carefully remove the metaphysical presuppositions about reality found in common-sense, philosophical, and scientific theories. This critical ontology is implicitly argued for and elaborated through the explicit rejection of three metaphysical assumptions: substance, agency (or efficient causality), and teleology (or final causality).

The first step in Nietzsche's argument is the rejection of the metaphysical notion of substance, the view that discrete, self-identical unities constitute the basic structure of reality by underlying the changeable properties of sensible objects: "We see ourselves as it were entangled in error, necessitated to error, precisely to the extent that our prejudice in favor of reason [*das Vernunft-Vorurteil*] compels us to posit unity, identity, duration, substance, cause, materiality [*Dinglichkeit*], being" (*TI*, "Reason," 5). This position leads him to reject the apparent ontological independence of objects and to reconceive them as essentially interrelated, equal to their activities and relations as immediately given in experience, rather than inferring from experience an underlying object distinct from those activities and relational properties.

In Nietzsche's view, this is a less presumptuous, more naturalistic view, because it more faithfully describes experience. Unlike the physi-

cist who tells us that a table is not really the solid, unified thing of our experience, but rather countless particles separated by empty space, Nietzsche claims we have never, in fact, experienced unified substances at all; we have inferred them from the more primary experience of disunity and change: "Insofar as the senses show becoming, passing away, change, they do not lie" (*TI*, "Reason," 2). Consequently, we cannot, without returning to metaphysics, assume that an object remains self-identical throughout changes in its properties, nor can we assume that the object is ontologically independent of any other objects to which it is related.

This rejection of substance is the first step in Nietzsche's implicit argument for a naturalist ontology of the will to power. This first move is—as will be all the major claims that ground the will to power ontology—a critical claim rather than an assertion, a claim about what reality is *not*. However, as a critical claim about ontology, it is, nonetheless, a claim about all of reality: there are no demonstrable substances; no object can be demonstrably reduced to substance. If, as I will argue, the will to power ontology follows directly from this initial critical claim, then we must conclude that it is bound up with his principal philosophical commitments and that, consequently, a will to power ontology is integral to Nietzsche's philosophy.

Having identified the first claim in Nietzsche's critical ontology, we are already in a position to reject the once dominant vitalist interpretation—found in Deleuze (1962), Danto (1965), Schacht (1983), and Richardson (1996), among others—of the will to power as a primary force, desire, or drive that is a positive, basic feature of all things. This reading clearly oversteps the boundaries of Nietzsche's naturalism by treating the will to power as a metaphysical substance: a force that is self-identical and underlies all changeable, sensible properties. As we shall see, many influential interpretations of the will to power, including those of Kaufmann, Clark, and Reginster, rest on one of the three principal metaphysical assumptions that Nietzsche's naturalism rejects. Consequently, by elucidating the critical import of the will to power, we will also be able to reject all interpretations that rest on positive claims about reality, life, or human psychology that overstep the limits of his methodological critical naturalism.

Of the three metaphysical targets of Nietzsche's naturalism, his rejection of causal agency is perhaps the most difficult to reconcile with contemporary naturalism. Nevertheless, even if we are unwilling to follow Nietzsche on this point, it is not because he has left naturalist methodology behind but because he applies it more *strictly* than contemporary naturalists do. According to Nietzsche, the concept of

discrete, efficient causes is a projection of our belief in human agency, an error grounded in the "metaphysics of language" that divides events into subject and predicate, "believes in the ego [*Ich*] as being, the ego as substance," and "projects its belief in the ego-substance onto all things—only thus does it create the concept 'thing'" (*TI*, "Reason," 5). The belief in agency is not, then, based in experience but, rather, in a linguistic habit that projects metaphysical assumptions into the interpretation of experience. Our belief in the self as a substance that causes action through the faculty of the will leads us to impute to every object the same power of efficient causality that we have attributed to ourselves.

But the critique of causal agency goes further than a simple non-demonstrability claim. By giving up the metaphysics of substance, Nietzsche directly attacks efficient causality in two ways. He rejects, first, the distinction between cause and effect and, second, the distinction between agent and action: "One should use 'cause' and 'effect' only as pure concepts, that is to say, as conventional fictions for the purpose of designation and communication—not for explanation. In the 'in-itself' there is nothing of 'causal connections'" (*BGE* 21).

Consider, for example, the use of the cause-and-effect distinction in the attribution of moral responsibility. If, as Nietzsche's rejection of the distinction of discrete, substantial causes requires, we recognize a moral agent as an ontologically interrelated element within a larger causal process, the line between cause and effect becomes ambiguous. Motives, desires, thoughts, influences, circumstances, character, past, dispositions, and origins are all causally relevant factors; they are all ways in which we might divide a causal sequence into a series of discrete causal agencies, distinguishing more primary and secondary causes and effects. And in order to assign moral responsibility to one agency, most of these causally relevant factors—a potentially infinite series—must be excluded, a possibility only if we can identify a "true" subject distinct from all other causes. However, Nietzsche insists that a causal agent cannot be extricated from the causal process as a whole: "The fatality of his nature cannot be disentangled from all that which has been and will be" (*TI*, "Errors," 8).

It should be emphasized that this is an ontological, rather than epistemological, problem. The dilemma is not that we cannot know which element is the cause. Rather, the *whole* is the true cause. There is causality but no efficient causality: no discrete, efficient causes that are separable from the causal whole. There is a causal process but no agent or substance that *initiates* a causal sequence rather than *continues* or *participates* in a causal sequence: "One is necessary, one is a piece of fate [*Verhängniss*], one belongs to the whole, one is in the whole . . . there is

nothing besides the whole" (*TI*, "Errors," 8). Consequently, if we accept Nietzsche's rejection of substance, we cannot presuppose the existence of causal agents that are ontologically distinct from each other; every element in a causal process is both cause and effect.

Nietzsche's second criticism of efficient causality follows directly from the first. If we cannot separate cause from effect by positing the existence of causal agencies that are ontologically distinct from one another, then we also cannot assume the existence of causal agencies that are ontologically distinct from *their own actions*. As Nietzsche puts it, "There is no 'being' behind doing, effecting, becoming; 'the doer' is merely a fiction added to the deed—the deed is everything" (*GM*, 1:13).

From this twofold critical position, the inseparability of causal agencies from each other and from their own actions, we can draw the first key conclusion of the will to power ontology: reality consists of "will," a general, holistic form of causality, rather than of discrete causal objects, agents, desires, or drives. For, if there are no discrete efficient causes, Nietzsche can describe events only as processes and objects only as elements within processes. This may be why he preserves the language of "will" despite its misleading connotations of agency and freedom. The word "will" is an appropriate critical description of a reality that lacks efficient causes because its meaning lies on the ambiguous border between agent and action. The will in "will to power" is a negative metaphor for the ontological absence of subjects, agents, and objects, for causality without causes ("will," rather than "a will" or "wills"). So, the first claim in our argument for a will to power ontology is one that Nietzsche draws directly from the naturalist rejection of metaphysics: namely, there are causal processes but no causes; reality is a "will" that is equivalent to the causal process as a whole.

The next step in Nietzsche's naturalist deduction of a will to power ontology is the rejection of ontological indeterminacy in the form of merely potential causal agency. If there is no justifiable distinction between cause and effect, agent and act, we must also reject any ontological distinction between potentiality and actuality. A potentiality is an unexercised ability or capacity belonging to an efficient causal agent that can either act or not act. But such a distinction is possible only if the agent can exist independently of the act. If, on the contrary, as Nietzsche insists, agent and act are one, then there can be no unactualized possibility, no substantial agent capable of *not* acting whenever, and to the fullest extent, that it has the power to act.

This is, in short, a rejection of ontological indeterminacy of every kind, whether based in freedom of the will, chance, or probability. This link between Nietzsche's rejections of causality and indeterminacy is most

explicit in his suggestion that the natural world has "a 'necessary' and 'calculable' course, *not* because laws obtain in it [*in ihr herrschen*], but because they are absolutely *lacking*, and every power draws its ultimate consequences at every moment" (*BGE*, 22).[2] Admittedly, he declares this view to be "only interpretation," so we might be tempted to accept Maudemarie Clark's argument that Nietzsche is merely promoting the *value* of power rather than making an ontological claim about reality (Clark 1990, 221–23).

However, we can reject Clark's interpretation using her own methodology: accepting only interpretations compatible with Nietzsche's rejection of metaphysics. When Nietzsche tells us power never exists potentially, but maximally manifests itself at every moment, he is simply rejecting the metaphysical belief in causal agencies that are capable of delaying, limiting, or preventing their power's maximal manifestation. Therefore, this striking, seemingly strong claim is, nevertheless, a critical one, consistent with his naturalism.

And it is not merely consistent; it is necessitated by his rejection of efficient causality. Nietzsche tells us that strength must "express itself as strength" because agent and act are one: "A quantum of force is equivalent to a quantum of drive, will, effect—more, it is nothing other than precisely this driving, willing, effecting" (*GM*, 1:13). This claim is not a positive assertion of causal determinism but a rejection of the metaphysical assumption upon which antideterminism implicitly rests: the existence of "an indifferent substratum [*indifferentes Substrat*] that is free to express strength—or not to" (ibid.), able to either actualize or prevent the actualization of a poetentiality. Consequently, Nietzsche's rejection of indeterminacy follows from his rejection of substance: to claim that a causal sequence is indeterminate is to presuppose the existence of a neutral agency that can either freely or arbitrarily determine the outcome of that causal sequence (for example, a free will that has not yet chosen to act)—an uncaused cause of some kind that leaves the outcome of the causal sequence open. We can, then, reject Clark's antiontological interpretation of the passage on her own terms: her reading must be mistaken because it would force us to attribute to Nietzsche the implausible, inconsistent view that there is a neutral substratum of action capable of preventing the maximal manifestation of power.

3. Against the Intentionalist and Teleological Readings

We can now more fully develop our original ontological definition of the will to power. Given the absence of demonstrable causal agencies to explain merely potential, delayed, or restrained manifestations of

power, we may draw a second key ontological claim: all things tend toward the immediate, maximal manifestation of their power. The will to power [*Wille zur Macht*] is "toward" [*zur*] power in the sense that it is essentially, fundamentally active—it is the realization or actualization of power, rather than a lack of power or a desire, instinct, or drive for its realization.

This definition captures Nietzsche's most frequent way of characterizing the will to power: as tyrannical, cruel, exploitive, and impulsive, neither possessing nor respecting freedom. Power is tyrannical not because it imposes law but because there is no metaphysical law or agency to prevent it. It cannot be limited, delayed, or prevented except by a stronger power; it is ontologically, rationally, and morally lawless. Yet it remains a negative form of tyranny, based in the absence of any causal agency that could limit its impact. Because power has no agency, no capacity for self-mastery, only power relations can restrain it.

Our more developed definition of the will to power also allows us to reject intentionalist interpretations, such as those of Clark (1990, 210–12) and Kaufmann (1968, 209–83), according to which the will to power is the expression of a subject as intentional causal agent. On the intentionalist reading, the will to power is merely a desire, drive, or motive on which a subject may choose to act or not, a view that contradicts Nietzsche's naturalism by presupposing the ontological distinction of causal agency and action. Interpreted as a motive, the will to power is ontologically distinct from its activity since one may choose not to act on it; therefore, the desire can exist as potential action in the absence of any effect, whereas Nietzsche insists that power exists in its manifestation, not as potency.

The intentionalist approach also contradicts Nietzsche's naturalism in a second way: by treating the will to power as merely one desire among others, not as a fundamental principle applying to every drive and action. This view implicitly depends on the metaphysical presumption of ontological indeterminacy: the existence of other nontyrannical desires or drives, powers that do *not* seek maximal manifestation, and in relation to which the subject is capable of self-restraint, limitation, or inaction. For we must assume that either all desires seek immediate maximal manifestation—in which case the will to power becomes, against the intentionalist view, the fundamental form of every desire, not one among others—or that some desires do not, in which case we must presuppose a neutral agent capable of choosing to act or refrain from acting on such motives.

The final consequence of Nietzsche's critical naturalism is the rejection of final causality or teleology, of purposes as causes of events and

actions: "We invented the concept 'purpose'; in reality purpose is lacking" (*TI*, "Errors," 8). Once again, Nietzsche simply draws the stark conclusion of his radical methodological naturalism. Teleology must be rejected as a violation of descriptive empiricism.[3] Because final causes or purposes can be sensibly experienced only in the form of causal outcomes, teleological explanations depend on an unacceptable metaphysical inference beyond given experience.

For example, suppose the common misconception that the will to power is a teleological desire to accumulate power were true. How would we go about establishing this? We might try to draw this conclusion from the empirical fact that successful actions always have as their consequence an increase of some form of power. However, we can experience this consequence of increased power only as effect, never as cause. In other words, teleological interpretations suggest that a merely potential outcome (the purpose) is, nevertheless, causally effective prior to the action (its own actuality), causing the actual outcome. But this is a metaphysical claim: the purpose is a supersensible substance that underlies the action and is discovered in experience only after the fact. Consequently, this view is incompatible with Nietzsche's naturalist methodology. Nietzschean naturalism can identify and describe regular consequences of action, such as growth, the increase of power, pleasure, and so forth, but it cannot identify these consequences as the cause of action.

Nietzsche never makes this argument explicitly but implies it in a number of passages. For example, he rejects the physicist's conception of natural law (in the specific sense of empirical conformity to a distinct, governing metaphysical principle) on the ground that the "text" (the empirically given) presents only regularity in events, not evidence of a law causing that regularity (*BGE*, 22). This argument shares the same basic structure: regularity may be the result of natural processes, but we cannot assert that it is (in the form of a "law") their cause.

Similarly, when Nietzsche takes biologists to task for asserting an instinct for self-preservation, his suggestion that a living thing "seeks [*will*] above all to discharge its strength" is not an alternative teleology but an argument from the denial of teleology (*BGE*,13). Clark rightly points out that, if living things seek to discharge strength, then Nietzsche is merely replacing one "superfluous teleological principle" with another. She compares the claim to a joke, a "deliberate and self-conscious illustration" of the form of explanation he is critiquing (Clark 2000, 123).

While Clark is correct that the resemblance to teleology is intentional, it is not mere parody. Nietzsche uses the contrast of the two explanations to present a seriously intended, antiteleological, critical description of reality. His suggestion that living things seek to discharge or "let go

of" (*auslassen*) their strength is meant to emphasize the pointlessness, the lack of accomplishment, implied by such a paradoxical goal. To discharge strength is to make a goal of goallessness. Nietzsche sometimes even describes the will to power as a tendency to sacrifice rather than accumulate power. It characterizes a world "without goal, unless the joy of the circle is itself a goal" (*Will to Power* [*WP*], 1067) where, in the "perishing and a falling of leaves . . . life sacrifices itself—for power" (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra* [*Z*], "On Self-Overcoming," 2:12). Just as the antiteleological principle of natural selection produces the appearance of an accomplished goal—design, purposiveness, adaptedness for survival—so the will to power has the accidental consequence of survival, dominance, or an increase in strength.

Carefully interpreted in a way consistent with Nietzsche's naturalist commitments, this supposed telos is not a distinct goal at all: it is conceptually true that every action is a discharge (an exercise and expenditure) of strength. It is not an explanation of activity since it is not a goal that any act can fail to achieve. It is not meant to be explanatory but corrective: a description that does not integrate false causes. Consequently, the claim that a living thing seeks in its actions to vent its strength means that it seeks in its actions to act, in its exercises of power, to exercise its power. The point is ontological: it is characteristic of reality that actions do not "seek" at all; they are for their own sake and fundamentally purposeless.

If Nietzsche is committed to rejecting teleology as metaphysical, then we have good reason to doubt all interpretations that treat the will to power as a purpose or goal that causes actions. There are many forms of the teleological reading; however, I will focus on Bernard Reginster's interpretation (2006), the most sophisticated, original, and convincing version in the recent literature. Reginster's interpretation is superior to many because it attempts to solve a serious problem posed by the teleological reading: how can the teleological reading account for Nietzsche's frequent suggestion that the will to power includes pleasure in struggle and resistance, in obstacles to the apparent teleological aim of power, as well as in the overcoming of obstacles and achievement of power?

Reginster resolves this tension by arguing that the will to power is not simply a desire for growth or creation but a tendency toward the specific activity of overcoming a resistance (Reginster 2006, 126–27). Consequently, the will to power includes a desire to engage resistances as a means to that end. Because it is a tendency toward the activity of overcoming—rather than toward the achieved state of having overcome—an obstacle, the will to power seeks a source of resistance, even when none is present. This interpretation has the added benefit

of explaining the progressive nature of the will to power toward ever greater levels of achievement; once an obstacle is overcome, the need for the activity of overcoming motivates the search for additional and greater resistances (ibid., 136–38).

However, there are two substantial problems with this view. First, Reginster's interpretation simply asserts the tendency toward both resistance and overcoming without explaining their compatibility as a part of a single principle or motive. If the will to power is a desire to overcome obstacles (for the state of having overcome, not the activity of overcoming), then it can desire resistance only as a *means* to that end; the value of resistance is contingent on its utility for that end. It cannot, therefore, include a desire for resistance as an opportunity for overcoming new, and ever greater, obstacles. For this would be to desire resistance as an end in itself, not as a means to overcoming. It would be a desire for the *prevention* of overcoming, not for the activity of overcoming.

If, on the contrary, the will to power seeks resistance as merely more than a means to overcoming (a desire for overcoming as activity, not as a state of having overcome), then it cannot desire overcoming, growth, or creation since this would be a contradictory desire to both preserve resistance and overcome it, to both continue and cease the activity. In the end, Reginster's interpretation is a dualistic one: there are two foundational desires, one for resistance and one for the overcoming of resistance. And, although this dualistic theory solves the tension of overcoming and resistance in Nietzsche's account, it does so at the cost of doubling its metaphysical presuppositions—adding a second teleological aim and making it doubly incompatible with Nietzsche's naturalist methodology.

Despite these difficulties, Reginster's interpretation is superior to many in its emphasis on both activity and resistance, and it may offer the beginnings of a solution to the problems of the teleological readings. In fact, we can avoid the difficulties in Reginster's interpretation with only a slight modification to his view. Rather than treating the will to power as a tendency toward the activity of *overcoming*, I propose that it is a tendency toward the activity of *resistance*.[4]

How does this avoid teleology? Unlike the activity of overcoming, the activity of resisting is not a distinct aim but an integral part of every action. It is not a goal since a goal is an accomplishment that the act may or may not achieve. The activity of resisting, in contrast, is a "goal" that is always achieved. For every action is an interaction, an action in relation to another object that, in its relative independence, serves as a resistance to the act.

If the will to power describes activity as such, rather than a distinct goal that causes actions, it shares the characteristics of universality and necessity that any ontological theory must exhibit. But it is not a universal aim, nor is it a desire or drive. Much like Nietzsche's misleadingly "teleological" description of the will to power as seeking to "discharge [*auslassen*] its strength," the tendency toward the activity of resistance merely describes the necessary *form* of all activity; it is not an explanation of its cause or aim. It is a descriptive rather than regulatory principle of action, a necessity intrinsic to the act, rather than a metaphysical agency that is distinct from and imposed on it. Thus, it is a necessary and universal characterization of reality, an ontology, that avoids each of the three forms of metaphysical explanation that Nietzsche's naturalism rejects: substance, efficient causality, and final causality.

4. The Practical Purpose of the Will to Power: Critical Description, Not Explanation

We can now explicate the ontological theory of the will to power in its fullest form: the will to power is a description of the causal process as a whole, according to which every event tends toward the maximal manifestation of power in the form of the activity of resisting, of action against obstacles. It might be objected that I have defined the will to power as a tautology, as the claim that actions tend toward activity. This is in some sense true, but also misleading. In keeping with his naturalist critical methodology, Nietzsche's ontology is indeed a tautological description of experience; it does not add positive information to sensible experience.

It might be further objected that, on this view, the will to power becomes an altogether uninformative and trivial theory—that I have naturalized it at the expense of destroying its explanatory power (cf. Clark 1990, 210). However, this objection is based on the common, but questionable, assumption that the will to power is intended as an explanatory concept. On the contrary, the will to power is meant to have not explanatory but critical power. Its power consists in its careful identification of what *does not* cause or regulate events—in its lack of metaphysical explanations, rather than in counterexplanation. It is not a trivial theory because it gives us a reason to reject false explanations of natural events and human behavior and, with them, false conclusions about the possibilities and limitations of nature and human nature.[5] If, as I have argued, the will to power is the direct consequence of a stringently critical form of naturalism, it should come as no surprise that its principal purpose and value is as a critical tool.

In fact, if we examine Nietzsche's actual application of the concept, it is clear that he intended the will to power as a critical, rather than

explanatory, theory. In the overwhelming majority of cases, Nietzsche uses the will to power to reject common explanations of human action as the product of the free determination of the will according to moral or rational criteria. For example, it appears in his claims that philosophers' views are not the product of objective reason or an authentic "will to truth" (*BGE*, 9 and 211); that purpose and utility are signs, not causes (*GM*, 2:12); that the moral aversion to exploitation is not causally capable of eliminating it (*BGE*, 259); that the asceticism of the saint is not caused by moral motivation (*GM*, 3:11); and that motives are never purely altruistic (*BGE*, 51, 23, and 186).

Whenever Nietzsche's use of the will to power is not aimed at the rejection of the metaphysics of free will and rational or moral motivation, it is usually directed at scientific concepts that Nietzsche accuses of being based on metaphysical causal principles in disguise. For example, the will to power appears in his rejection of the drive for self-preservation (*BGE*, 13; *Gay Science* [*GS*], 349); in his rejections of natural law (*BGE*, 22) and materialistic atomism (*BGE*, 12); and in his rejection of evolutionary theory's emphasis on passive adaptation as conformity to a metaphysical, external law (*GM*, 2:12). In each of these cases, he uses the will to power critically, offering no substantial, positive alternative explanation.

For this reason, we must be wary of interpretations that commit Nietzsche to a primarily explanatory method and aim. Brian Leiter, for example, describes Nietzsche as a methodological naturalist who offers theories, such as the "doctrine of type facts," that "explain various important human phenomena" in ways continuous with and modeled on the empirical sciences Leiter 2000, 8). However, the use of such type-facts is not an explanatory end for Nietzsche but instead a critical means: "That the mode of being may not be traced back to a primary cause . . . that alone is the great liberation" (*TI*, "Errors," 8).

Rather than serving to explain beliefs, choices, and actions by identifying their "true" causes (whether reason, free will, drive, character, environment, or ancestry), Nietzsche's type-facts serve the critical purpose of rejecting false explanations, reintegrating agency into a larger causal sequence: "What alone can be our doctrine? That no one gives a man his qualities—neither God, nor society, nor his parents and ancestors, nor he himself" (*TI*, "Errors," 8). The identification of type-facts subordinates both individuals and type to the whole of natural causality—for "there is nothing apart from the whole" (ibid.).

Overall, the evidence in the published writings demonstrates that the philosophical purpose of the will to power is critical: to reject false explanations of natural events, life, and human action that depend on suppressed metaphysical assumptions. The purpose of the will to power is, in

short, to insist again and again on the negative claim that human action is—like reality itself—essentially unfree, amoral, irrational, purposeless, and lawless. This conclusion, in turn, answers another likely objection to my strictly critical reading of Nietzsche's ontology: namely, that it is far too weak to be what Nietzsche intended. However, the will to power as I have defined it successfully serves the practical purpose Nietzsche puts it to in the published works, so it cannot be rejected on that score.

More importantly, my interpretation of the will to power as critical ontology is better suited to Nietzche's purposes than stronger ontological, biological, or psychological interpretations are. For any interpretation of the will to power as a positive explanatory principle must implausibly conclude that Nietzsche, in each use of the will to power, is simply opposing one explanatory principle to another without justification. In fact, we have seen that stronger interpretations of the will to power as a positive explanatory principle rest on implicit metaphysical assumptions and so are incompatible with Nietzsche's naturalism. Consequently, the stronger positive interpretations implausibly suggest that Nietzsche devotes himself to exposing the metaphysical underpinnings of opposing explanations of human activity, only to suggest alternatives that are clearly vulnerable to the very same criticisms he levies against his opponents.

I conclude that this is the less likely interpretation and that we can only consistently interpret the will to power as a positive explanatory theory of substance, efficient causality, or final causality (as force, drive, or desire) at the expense of undermining the critical strength and consistency of Nietzsche's critique of the metaphysical foundations of free will, rationalism, morality, and traditional scientific ontology. Consequently, not only is the interpretation of the will to power as a critical ontology consistent with Nietzsche's use of the concept, but the alternatives interpretations must, because they rely on assertion of forces, drives, or causes incompatible with Nietzsche's naturalism, be rejected as inconsistent with Nietzsche's actual use of the concept.

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NOTES

1. On Nietzsche's naturalism, see Clark (1990), Leiter (2002), Anderson (2005), Hussain (2004), and Gemes and Janaway (2005).

2. In the original German, the suggestion of a metaphysical distinction is clearer: laws "reign" or "prevail" over [*herrschen*] nature. Thus, a law is a causal

agent distinct from and acting on natural objects; it is the cause of which the regularity of nature is an effect.

3. For a contrasting view, cf. Hales and Welshon (2000, 96).

4. I offer a more extensive argument for this view in "The Equivocal Use of Power in Nietzsche's Failed Anti-Egalitarianism" (forthcoming in *Journal of Moral Philosophy*, DOI: 10.1163/17455243–4681016).

5. For an opposing view, cf. Nehamas, *Nietzsche* (1985, 79).

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