

intersections online

Volume 10, Number 1 (Winter 2009)

Luke Caldwell, "Genesis and Order in the Chaosmos: Will to Power as Creative Cosmology," *intersections* 10, no. 1 (2009): 495-505.

ABSTRACT

I present here an interpretation of Nietzsche's concept of the "will to power" as an immanent and creative force that serves as an organizing principle of reality. This churning, yet systematic chaomological force is first (re)constructed from Nietzsche's posthumously published notes in *The Will to Power* and is then applied to the field of non-equilibrium thermodynamics, showing how order arises from chaos through the internalization and organization of energy in an open system. These conclusions are then applied to various scales of social organization, focusing on the creative capacity of chaos and the problem of rigid organization.

http://depts.washington.edu/chid/intersections_Winter_2009/Luke_Caldwell_Genesis_and_Order_in_the_Chaosmos.pdf

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Genesis and Order in the Chaosmos

Will to Power as Creative Cosmology

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Much of Nietzsche's philosophical project can be seen as an extended effort to expound the conclusions of a wholly immanent philosophy. As critic of transcendental metaphysics, Nietzsche's project endeavors to show how order emerges out of antagonistic power relations. Though many have argued about the centrality of the concept of the will to power to Nietzsche's philosophy, this paper will examine the merits of the will to power as a cosmological principle that allows for the emergence of order from chaos.¹

The place held for the concept of the will to power within Nietzsche's philosophy is a contentious matter in the secondary scholarship.² The concept is only mentioned in 32 aphorisms of Nietzsche's published works and often

¹ Abbreviations for, and sources of Nietzsche texts cited in this essay:

- AC The Antichrist: Friedrich W. Nietzsche & Walter Kaufmann. 1976. *The portable Nietzsche*. New York: Penguin.
- BGE Beyond Good and Evil: Friedrich W. Nietzsche, Rolf-Peter Horstmann, & Judith Norman. 2002. *Beyond good and evil: prelude to a philosophy of the future*. Cambridge texts in the history of philosophy. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- GM On the Genealogy of Morals: Friedrich W. Nietzsche, Walter A. Kaufmann, & R. J. Hollingdale. 1989. *On the genealogy of morals and Ecce Homo*. New York: Vintage Books.
- GS The Gay Science: Friedrich W. Nietzsche & Walter Kaufmann. 1976. *The portable Nietzsche*. New York: Penguin.
- TI Twilight of the Idols: Friedrich W. Nietzsche & Walter Kaufmann. 1976. *The portable Nietzsche*. New York: Penguin.
- WP The Will to Power: Friedrich W. Nietzsche, Walter A. Kaufmann, & R. J. Hollingdale. 1968. *The will to power*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Z Thus Spoke Zarathustra: Friedrich W. Nietzsche & Walter Kaufmann. 1976. *The portable Nietzsche*. New York: Penguin.

² For example see Bernd Magnus & Kathleen M. Higgins, *The Cambridge companion to Nietzsche* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 6-7; 41-42.

remains on the periphery of his thought.³ His unpublished notebooks, however, contain many references to this enigmatic concept. Considering the controversy surrounding this concept, we will not attempt to clarify “what Nietzsche *really* thought” about the will to power—such a pursuit would hardly be *Nietzschean*—but will rather present a perspective, an interpretation, of how the will to power could function as a creative and organizing principle of reality. In this interpretation we will glean what is available from Nietzsche’s published writings, but will primarily rely upon the posthumously gathered selections from his notebooks entitled *The Will to Power*.

Immanence and Cosmology

Nietzsche’s position regarding cosmology is complicated and multifaceted. In many ways, Nietzsche rejected cosmology and metaphysics because they posit a truth about the way the universe is organized that is ahistorical and free from interpretation. In *Twilight of the Idols* he goes so far as to claim that there is neither a true world nor an apparent one⁴ and in the *Genealogy* he claims that all knowledge is perspectival.⁵ While these positions lead to a radical denunciation of the idea of an objective reality of “things” toward which science or religion could guide us, Nietzsche also does not want to claim that there is no world and no meaning at all. This view would merely amount to a *reaction* to cosmology and would fail to break free from the nihilistic and life-denying consequences of such a view.⁶ Rather, he would like to move beyond concepts that reinforce a logocentric *cosmos*: “unity, identity, permanence, substance, cause, thinghood, [and] being” are all concepts that should be avoided.⁷

A good example of a cosmos structured by these totalizing principles is presented in Plato’s *Timaeus*, whereby a divine “Demiurge” imposes form upon a chaotic substance, creating the material world as an imperfect image of a perfect, timeless plan.⁸ Since this divine plan invests the Platonic cosmos with order and meaning—everything that is in conjunction with the plan is both “good” and

³ Linda L. Williams, “Will to power in Nietzsche’s published works and the Nachlass”, *Journal of the History of Ideas* 57, no. 3 (July 1996): 451.

⁴ TI “The History of an Error”, 486.

⁵ GM III: §12: “There is *only* a perspective seeing, *only* a perspective ‘knowing’”. In *The Gay Science* he also claims, “A ‘scientific’ interpretation of the world...might...be one of the *most stupid* of all possible interpretations” (§373).

⁶ WP §1.

⁷ TI “Reason in Philosophy”: 5, 482.

⁸ Plato, John M. Cooper, & D. S. Hutchinson, *Complete works* (Indianapolis, Ind: Hackett Pub., 1997). See *Timaeus*, 28a-29b, 30a.

“beautiful” because the plan is changeless, eternal, and perfect⁹—change and disorder are understood as degenerations of this fundamental order and are imperfections to be rationally ordered and overcome.¹⁰ The *unity* of the perfect plan and the *cause* of the “Demiurge” transmit a *permanent identity* to material *things* and a teleology that rationally structures the organization of *substance*. Nietzsche clearly rejected this mode of thinking, but there are other possibilities for a cosmology that avoids these essentializing concepts.

If we understand *cosmology* as “the study of the origin and structure of the universe”,¹¹ and if we see the *cosmos* as “the whole world...conceived as ordered and law-governed”,¹² we can see that there is space within the definition of cosmology for a principle that structures and generates reality by means of an immanent process that is chaotic and emergent rather than ordered by transcendental principles. Nietzsche presents the immanent process of the will to power as a way to ground a cosmology of this sort, in which the material world is “a sea of forces flowing and rushing together, eternally changing, eternally flooding back, with...the simplest forms striving toward the most complex, out of the stillest, most rigid, coldest forms toward the hottest, most turbulent, most self-contradictory, and then again returning home to the simple out of this abundance”. Concluding dramatically he claims, “*This world is the will to power—and nothing besides!*”¹³ Rather than a Platonic *cosmos*, Nietzsche’s will to power drives an immanent *chaosmos*¹⁴—a world of process, of *becoming* rather than *being*, in which forms are not imposed from a transcendental dimension but rather emerge from a fundamental chaos.

Nietzsche envisions the will to power as a field of force that is constantly shifting in its relations. Power emerges through the differential relationships between forces and therefore requires resistance for emergence.¹⁵ The material world is generated through these articulations and changes as power relations evolve.¹⁶ Since the will to power as a field of force is defined by the specificity of its

⁹ Ibid., 29a.

¹⁰ Ibid., 30a.

¹¹ “Cosmology”, *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*, Simon Blackburn, <http://www.oxfordreference.com> (Accessed December 7, 2008).

¹² “Cosmos”, *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*, Simon Blackburn, <http://www.oxfordreference.com>. (Accessed December 7, 2008).

¹³ WP §1067.

¹⁴ See WP §711: “that the world is not an organism at all, but chaos”.

¹⁵ WP §656. See also Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and philosophy*, European perspectives, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 50.

¹⁶ WP §638.

relations, one might conclude that Nietzsche is advocating a mechanistic cosmology. This, however, is not the case. Nietzsche famously writes:

The victorious concept ‘force,’ by means of which our physicists have created God and the world, still needs to be completed: *an inner will must be ascribed to it*, which I designate as ‘will to power,’ i.e., as an insatiable desire to manifest power; or as the employment and exercise of power, *as a creative drive...*¹⁷

This “inner will”¹⁸ is constantly striving toward greater power through “every center of force”,¹⁹ producing a constant dynamism of power relations.

Despite this dynamism, the will to power can also give rise to order. Nietzsche claims that “the will to power *interprets...* it defines limits, determines degrees, variations of power.”²⁰ Interpretation is a way of organizing and “becoming master” of a multiplicity of forces.²¹ While all forces strive to impose order upon others, not all are successful because there are quantitative differences between forces, allowing some to be more successful at the expense of others.²² When forces are in opposition, this quantitative difference gives rise to a qualitative difference in kind between types of forces.²³ Power relations therefore follow two general modalities: active and passive.²⁴ The active is a force that shapes, appropriates, and assimilates other forces, while the passive is that which is overwhelmed and determined.²⁵ This process of appropriation and subjugation produces the development of bodies and the enduring material structures of reality.²⁶ This structure, however, is always contingent upon its will to power in

¹⁷ WP §619, emphasis mine.

¹⁸ Nietzsche uses this phrase, but it is a little misleading. Seeing this “inner will” as analogous to the will of the subject whereby one believes that willing involves choosing to do or not do something is mistaken. This runs afoul of Nietzsche’s critique of consciousness. Rather, this “inner will” wills only through doing because there is “no ‘being’ behind doing, effecting, becoming; ‘the doer’ is merely a fiction added to the deed—the deed is everything” (GM I: §13). This “inner will” therefore exists solely through the process of striving for more power.

¹⁹ WP §689.

²⁰ WP §643.

²¹ Ibid.

²² WP §629-631, 565.

²³ Deleuze, 42-44.

²⁴ WP §657. Psychologically this schema is developed in GM I: §2, 10.

²⁵ WP §656, 657.

²⁶ WP §636: “every specific body strives to become master over all space and to extend its force...and to thrust back all that resists its extension. But it continually encounters similar efforts on the part of other bodies and ends by coming to an arrangement...thus they then conspire together for power. And the process goes on”.

relation to other external forces. This “*Dionysian* world” is “eternally self-creating” and “eternally self-destroying”.²⁷

The will to power as a concept is an empirical observation derived from the study of organic life,²⁸ but this process of emergence and destruction is similar to both organic and inorganic material. Nietzsche claims that the “entire distinction is a prejudice” and that the “will to power in every combination of forces, defending itself against the stronger, lunging at the weaker, is more correct.”²⁹ Organically, however, the will to power achieves a level of “cunning”³⁰ whereby the active forces “continually *extend* the bounds of their power”.³¹ Life, Nietzsche claims, is a “multiplicity of forces, connected by a common mode of nutrition”³²—a process of overcoming whereby every center of force must reconstitute itself at every moment.³³ Zarathustra speaks of the will to power in this way: “Where I found the living, there I found the will to power...And life itself confided this secret to me: ‘Behold,’ it said, ‘I am *that which must always overcome itself*. Only where there is life is there also will: not will to life but...will to power.’”³⁴

The Will to Power: Thermodynamics, and Life

While Nietzsche was very critical of the field of thermodynamics, there are many parallels between the functioning of the will to power and the recently developing field of non-equilibrium thermodynamics.³⁵ Nietzsche was introduced to thermodynamics through the works of Robert Mayer,³⁶ who argued that all forms of energy—chemical, electrical, thermal, etc.—came from a single cause.³⁷ The work of James Prescott Joule confirmed this principle of

²⁷ WP §1067.

²⁸ Walter A. Kaufmann, *Nietzsche, philosopher, psychologist, antichrist* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1974), 206-207.

²⁹ WP §655. Also §642 and §676.

³⁰ WP §544.

³¹ WP §644, emphasis mine.

³² WP §641. According to this definition, inorganic material would also be considered alive, though probably less capable of expanding its own quanta of force.

³³ WP §634.

³⁴ Z II “On self-overcoming”, 226-227.

³⁵ The field of thermodynamics looks at processes of energy flow and transformation.

³⁶ Keith Ansell-Pearson, *A companion to Nietzsche*, Blackwell companions to philosophy, 33, (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2006), 191

³⁷ Eric D. Schneider & Dorion Sagan, *Into the cool: energy flow, thermodynamics, and life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 40-41.

equivalence, experimentally verifying that energy could change in form.³⁸ This eventually became formulated into the first law of thermodynamics that claims there is always a conservation of energy.

The second law of thermodynamics, which interests us most here, claims that energy in a sealed system moves to a maximum state of entropy (i.e. equilibrium) over time.³⁹ This is easiest to see with thermal energy, where heat produced in one area of a room does not remain isolated to one area but rather spreads equally throughout the room. An early cosmological conclusion of this law was that the universe is moving toward a state of equilibrium in which concentrations of force are nonexistent.⁴⁰ Nietzsche was highly critical of this view because he saw it as a nihilistic and pessimistic science that failed the test of the eternal return.⁴¹

This cosmological conclusion, however, was based upon an assumption that the universe operates as a “closed-system”, much like a big airtight room that would settle into a boring thermal equilibrium if given enough time.⁴² Recent work that has focused on open-system, non-equilibrium thermodynamics has found that when systems are subjected to continuous flows of energy from outside of the system, rather than moving to equilibrium, *structures of organization emerge immanently within the system*, creating and maintaining stable states that are highly energized rather than powerless.⁴³ Systems, such as organic bodies retain their organization because of the energy that is constantly captured and integrated—one could say *interpreted*—into their processes.⁴⁴ If this integration ceases, the organization of the body breaks down and is captured by a different process—the body becomes soil, the soil becomes a nutrient medium for the plant, the plant becomes food. Beyond living systems, processes of self-organization drive and form other natural phenomena such as chemical oscillators, thunderheads, and whirlpools.⁴⁵

This view of the natural world is remarkably close to the way that Nietzsche conceptualizes the will to power. What does the will to power overcome? The

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid., 7.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 5.

⁴¹ WP §1064-7. Also, Ansell-Pearson 191-195, and Richard Schacht, *Nietzsche, The Arguments of the philosophers* (London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1983): 169-170.

⁴² Schneider and Sagan, 5.

⁴³ Ibid., 81.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 15-16.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 6.

will to power overcomes *equilibrium*, and it does this through the integration and subordination of other forces. The will to power must reaffirm itself at every moment,⁴⁶ just as bodily integrity requires the constant transformation of external energy for the maintenance of internal consistency. Nietzsche also claims that when a body gains more power than it can effectively organize, the body must split in two: “The sphere of a subject constantly growing or decreasing, the center of the system constantly shifting; in cases where it cannot organize the appropriate mass, it breaks into two parts.”⁴⁷ An increase in power leads to bifurcations and eventually, with increasing energy, chaotic turbulence and oblivion.⁴⁸

Chaos, Creation, and Value

Nietzsche often writes of the will to power in the context of chaos, creation, and value. Zarathustra famously claims “one must still have chaos in oneself to be able to give birth to a dancing star.”⁴⁹ Creation requires destruction: for Zarathustra to go over he must first go under.⁵⁰ The *Genealogy* follows the same theme. The slave’s “inversion of the value-positing eye” creates only boundaries and blocks the emergence of new forms: “slave morality from the outset says No to what is ‘outside,’ what is ‘different,’ what is ‘not itself’; and *this* No is its creative deed.”⁵¹ Zarathustra, the new noble, is required to move beyond it. Fertility requires the breaking of boundaries—the sperm into the egg, the artist to the canvas, the musician to the silence, the activist to the masses. If organization is too restrictive, we are left to nihilism.⁵²

Nietzsche claims that nihilism is the process of the highest values devaluating themselves.⁵³ This is possible because the will to power *produces* value through the process of overcoming⁵⁴—“Value is the highest quantum of power that a man is able to incorporate”.⁵⁵ The growth of value therefore requires a growth of power and the creation of a new state of affairs. The fortification of boundaries,

⁴⁶ WP §634.

⁴⁷ WP §488.

⁴⁸ Schneider and Sagan, 81.

⁴⁹ Z Prologue §5, 129.

⁵⁰ Z Prologue §4, 127.

⁵¹ GM I: §10.

⁵² Is it any wonder that the priest seeks to moralize and restrict pregnancy (AC §48)? All creation must be repetition, the boundaries are written in the stars...

⁵³ WP §2.

⁵⁴ Z I “On the 1001 Goals”, 170-172. WP §710.

⁵⁵ WP §713.

however, is the expression of a very weak power that is incapable of expanding. Through the triumph of the slave revolt, society has managed to codify a “tablet” of values that are an expression of this weakness.⁵⁶ Judeo-Christian society exists in a very stable form because of its reactive values, but it maintains its existence through the collective subordination of the highest creative potential. This *stable state* of society maintains itself by feeding off of the strong and the noble through the punishment of those that diverge from the prescribed norm.⁵⁷ In this state, the highest values are turned into their opposites—they serve as a nutrient medium for the collectivity that assaults them. This is the triumph of nihilism.

On an individual level, consciousness often works as a similar barrier. Human consciousness develops out of society’s need to “breed an animal *with the right to make promises*”.⁵⁸ Consciousness, as the voice of the boundaries of society, arises as a reactive phenomenon that serves as a check against natural instincts and the will to gain more power.⁵⁹ Rather than being a thing-in-itself, consciousness is an *effect* of one’s will to power, not a cause. The attribution of causal power to consciousness is merely a belated attribution of a doer to a deed.⁶⁰ The human subject as an agent is a fiction. Consciousness as a phenomenon functions in a similar way as the nihilistic morality of society by forming rigid boundaries around the self and making the multiplicity of forces that constitute the human body believe they are a fundamental unity.⁶¹ Instead, if we conceive of the subject as a multiplicity of forces, the conscious barriers that inhibit creative potential are broken down: the “value-positing eye” is freed from the determinism of reaction and growth can once again emerge.

One problem with this picture, however, is that a body—inorganic, organic, or social (i.e. the state)—requires a basic level of organization to maintain growth. Nietzsche often opposes the will to power to the will to self-preservation, the former being an uninhibited creative urge and the latter being a reactive manifestation.⁶² The former creates in a flourish and passes away, while the latter is less powerful but enduring. A moderate level of chaos opens possibilities for becoming, but too much is destructive. *Some* boundaries are necessary to maintain internal consistency. The more complex an organism becomes, the

⁵⁶ GM I: §10. BGE, §46.

⁵⁷ GM II: §1-3, 22. TI “The ‘Improvers’ of Mankind” §2, 502.

⁵⁸ GM II: §1-3.

⁵⁹ GM II: §16.

⁶⁰ GM I: §13. TI “The Four Great Errors” §3, 494.

⁶¹ WP §485.

⁶² Z II “On Self-Overcoming”, 225.

more boundaries are necessary for its efficient functioning. Think of the human body and the multiplicity of bodies within it: cells, proteins, DNA, organs, all working together in a synchronized fashion. This organization is a necessary condition for the maintenance of human life. The boundaries between all of these parts, however, are selectively permeable. Each body integrates nutrients that enable and improve their functioning, but also reject what will destroy them—the immune system, excretion, nausea.⁶³

This view raises the question, “can we conceptualize the social body as a production of the will to power in the same way that the human body is?” If we are to hold to the monism of the will to power, this must be the case. While the concept of the will to power supports a view of nested individuation—bodies within bodies, acting as both parts and wholes—Nietzsche frowns upon the power and values that emerge from collective organization. Nietzsche’s condemnation centers on the fact that the values created by large groups are highly constrained by *ressentiment* and reactivity. This is why the individual human has such a central place in Nietzsche’s view. This, however, does not completely rule out the power of connectivity. Zarathustra’s isolation and loneliness stinks of his own particular *ressentiment* and reactivity. Considering the organization of society today, groups and movements have a creative potential that is able to break from rigid moralism in a way that the individual is not. If we are to avoid falling to the determinism of reaction, we must work within the social circumstances that we are given, rather than absolving ourselves completely of our social context. Nietzsche claims, “one must not be a reactive but a *concluding* and forward-leaning spirit”.⁶⁴ Today, for better or worse, cultivating this “forward-leaning spirit” means acting within the world with a balance of impulse and strategy.

This paper has presented an interpretation of Nietzsche’s concept of the will to power as an organizing principle of reality. We first examined how the will to power as a primordial force drives cycles of chaos and order, emergence and destruction. We then briefly looked at an empirical example of this phenomenon through the field non-equilibrium thermodynamics. Finally, we concluded with a discussion of how the will to power creates value and the process whereby these

⁶³ Zarathustra’s nausea over the thought of the eternal return is a similar phenomenon. The nausea is an indication that his body is unable to assimilate and use the thought in a way that increases his power. His nausea is a way of avoiding the poison of pessimism. Z III “On the Vision and the Riddle” §2, 269-272.

⁶⁴ WP §848.

values are manifested in social organization. While many areas of this interpretation are open to dispute, we have aimed to provide a constructive account of how the will to power could function as an immanent cosmological force. Such a view presents a this-worldly vision of a dynamic and creative universe, overflowing with infinite possibilities. From a social perspective, however, it raises questions about the value of connectivity and the importance of order. Such questions are seeds for further inquiry.

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