

Being, Becoming, and Force: Grounding a Cosmological Ethics in Nietzsche's Will to Power Discipline: Philosophy

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ABSTRACT

This paper develops a first-order normative ethical theory grounded in a metaphysical interpretation of Nietzsche's will to power. I argue that between psychological and metaphysical readings, the latter provides the strongest foundation for ethics. Against critiques from Habermas and others, I defend that view as aiming to avoid familiar worries about nihilism, authoritarian co-option, and relativism. Drawing on Deleuze and Heidegger, I position the will to power as the principle guiding the organization of forces towards becoming. From this basis, I propose an ethical framework, using constitutivism as the basis for normativity, that evaluates actions by whether they express affirmative or negative will to power. The result is a metaphysical ethics that calls us to affirm and become.

PART I: THEORIZING THE WILL TO POWER

Theoretical Foundations

The will to power is one of Nietzsche's foundational concepts, shaping his approach to philosophy. However, Nietzsche's explanations of what it means are vague. As a result, there are secondary interpretations of the will to power both as a cosmological principle and as an explanation of human psychology. As scholars have attempted to theorize a system of normative ethics with a basis in Nietzsche's philosophies, many have their basis in the will to power. Existing ethics projects based on the will to power have assumed the psychological interpretation. This may be due to vagueness and structural issues scholars have identified with cosmological will to power. Thus, this paper will examine how cosmological will to power is distinct from psychological will to power, clarify a definition of cosmological will to power, and use it to develop a system of normative ethics. This exploration is essential to the discussion of Nietzschean ethics, as it is costly to arbitrarily bracket one of the two main interpretations of the will to power, which could yield a system of normative ethics distinct from ones already theorized. Although the first part of this paper offers a case for the textual plausibility of the cosmological reading, the primary aim is to show how *if we assume* the cosmological will to power were a favorable interpretation, we could still build a system of ethics around the will to power, despite the common claim in the literature that such a project is impossible.

This is a non-empirical paper in normative moral philosophy. Methodologically, I begin with textual interpretation of the will to power. Alongside citing Nietzsche's primary works on the will to power, significance is placed on Deleuze's reading of Nietzsche, as he developed the cosmological interpretation of will to power central to the thesis presented here. Other secondary interlocutors are cited to clarify what is at stake in competing readings of will to power. I use conceptual analysis to refine the distinctions that structure the argument and assess objections, and constructive synthesis to assemble clarified concepts into a first-order normative framework. The paper therefore aims to justify a normative proposal through conceptual coherence rather than empirical measurement.

The interpretation of the will to power which I will use is closely connected to force, and force will henceforth be frequently referenced. For Nietzsche, drawing on Robert Boscovich,¹ force is the fundamental unit of reality. It is not a fixed object, rather always in motion and changing in relation to itself. The world, built upon varying concentrations of force, is never static. Variations in force are defined by their order and relation, giving them value extrinsically through how they interact with each other. Force is neither Newtonian nor metaphorical here, but a metaphysical principle of nature. Nietzsche's understanding of force positions metaphysics as a *Heraclitean flux*,² rejecting static being in favor of becoming. Being is constantly changing because objects are composed of multiple evolving

¹ Robin Small, "Boscovich Contra Nietzsche," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 46, no. 3 (March 1986): 419–35, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2107313>.

² Joshua Aaron Ackerman, *Nietzsche's Will to Power as That Which Eternally Recurs* (Master's thesis, Old Dominion University, 2022), https://digitalcommons.odu.edu/humanities_etds/43.

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centers of force rather than fixed substances. The relation of force to the will to power will become more apparent once different interpretations of the will to power are developed here.

In Part I of this paper, I will outline the major positions in what Nietzsche means by the will to power, address an underdeveloped interpretation of the will to power in the context of ethics, and answer objections that would prevent it from being applicable in a normative ethical theory. This discussion is foundational, as any attempt to develop an ethical theory based on the will to power must first establish its precise meaning. Interpretations of the will to power broadly fall into two categories: cosmological and psychological³. Cosmological interpretations view the will to power as a fundamental force shaping all reality, while psychological interpretations understand it as a drive motivating some aspects of individual human behavior. Other interpretations will be excluded here as they do not exhibit potential to be used for an ethical theory.

Cosmological Will to Power

Of the cosmological and psychological interpretations of the will to power, the former is considered broader in the scope of what it can describe. Regarding that interpretation, scholars use the terms “metaphysical” and “cosmological” interchangeably, and from here I will as well. These interpretations view the will to power as a structural element of the world around us, rather than a motivation that drives people to action. It is a holistic and “unifying claim about the nature of reality.”⁴ When Nietzsche makes sweeping metaphysical claims about the world in relation to the will to power, they are accompanied by claims about force. To understand cosmological will to power, I will clarify its relationship with force.

Nietzsche's *The Will To Power* is a strong example of the interdependence of force and the will to power. Nietzsche says, “do you know what the world is to me...a monster of energy...sea of forces flowing and rushing together, eternally changing, eternally flooding back,”⁵ which is consistent with the ontology of force discussed above. After elaborating the role of force in the world, he follows with: “This world is the will to power---and nothing besides! And you yourselves are also this will to power---and nothing besides.”⁶ Positioning the world as both the will to power and force creates three possibilities for how they are related:⁷

- A. The will to power and force are the same thing.
- B. The will to power comes prior to and describes force.
- C. Force comes prior to and describes the will to power.

³ Peter Sedgwick, “Nietzsche, Normativity, and Will to Power,” *Nietzsche-Studien* 36, no. 1 (2007): 214–42, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110192827.1.214>.

⁴ Jeffrey Allen Beery, *Towards an Understanding of Nietzsche's Will to Power* (undergraduate honors thesis, Bridgewater State University, 2020), 23, https://vc.bridgew.edu/honors_proj/316.

⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), 550.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 550.

⁷ I am intentionally avoiding claims similar to “The will to power produces force,” as the way in which they affect each other will be covered later.

Nietzsche's explanation of reality as Heraclitean flux, which lays its foundation upon the will to power, further clarifies this distinction:

If we eliminate these adjuncts, nothing remains over but dynamic quanta, in a relation of tension to all other dynamic quanta: the essence of which resides in their relation to all other quanta, in their "influence" upon the latter. The will to power, not Being, not Becoming, but a pathos---is the elementary fact, from these first results a Becoming, an influencing...⁸

Power quanta is synonymous with force.⁹ Behind superficial layers of experience are not static beings or linear processes, but instead relational interactions of these forces. Forces are considered part of a process of becoming. Nietzsche also says that the will to power is a distinct principle from being or becoming, thus force is not the will to power, because the will to power is the elementary principle that comes prior and governs force. I can eliminate A and C, as the will to power is logically prior to and *influences* force, rather than being an expression of it.

While the legitimacy of Nietzsche's *The Will to Power* is subject to some scrutiny due to being a posthumous compilation, its use is necessary for the purposes of this project. Nietzsche vaguely referenced or alluded to the will to power in some of his works such as *Beyond Good and Evil*, yet, they lack an *explicit* explanation that can be used to rigorously define the will to power. The posthumous compilation provides the most concentrated set of formulations explicitly linking force, becoming, and will to power. Moreover, this paper does not consider *The Will to Power* as a philosophically 'pure' authority. The argument presented here relies equally on scaffolding from major secondary interpretations, such as Heidegger and Deleuze, as a way of reconstructing cosmological will to power with conceptual rigor. Their inclusion helps offset the risks that may come with overemphasizing *The Will to Power*.

Heidegger notably adopted the aforementioned interpretation of the will to power. He understood will to power as a metaphysical doctrine, as indicated through his lectures on Nietzsche which argued the will to power was central to Nietzsche's philosophy. As Heidegger was concerned with the question of what constitutes the nature of being (Das Seiende), he found that the will to power offered an explanation. While the will to power is not being itself, it is the closest "approximation to being".¹⁰ This is because Heidegger believed that to Nietzsche, the essence of all being constitutes a becoming.¹¹ In parallel, the will to power suggests that all being is created through the interaction of forces, and this interaction is constantly dynamic and changing. If Being is Becoming, and the will to power *influences* the process of becoming, then Being and the will to power have a strong correlation.

⁸ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, 603.

⁹ Beery, Towards an Understanding of Nietzsche's Will to Power.

¹⁰ Martin Heidegger, Nietzsche, Volume 1: The Will to Power as Art, trans. David Farrell Krell (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1991), 233.

¹¹ Ibid.

I conclude that cosmological will to power is the elementary principle which *influences* the organization of forces that results in being and becoming. I find Gilles Deleuze's articulation to provide the clearest explanation of what role the will to power plays *influencing* this process. Deleuze similarly believed in an ontology of force where force is constantly becoming and changing in relation to itself:

The being of force is plural, it would be absolutely absurd to think about force in the singular. A force is domination, but also the object on which domination is exercised. A plurality of forces acting and being affected at distance, distance being the differential element included in each force and by which each is related to others.¹²

Deleuze reiterates that Nietzsche's philosophy is concerned with the ways that forces interact. As the fundamental base of reality, force can only interact with other forces. However, even if the world can be described as an interaction of forces, this explanation is unsatisfactory because it fails to describe an internal mechanism that can be articulated beyond the description that force exists.

Therefore, Nietzsche introduces the will to power as the internal drive which completes the function of force. Deleuze clarifies that insofar as the will to power is the inner element of force, it is also the "differential element of force".¹³ As a force acts alone, the will to power is its internal quality. In this way, the will to power is the genealogy of force. It describes the quality of forces, the ways that they previously acted, and the way that they will act. However, as each of these interactions constitute an interaction with other forces, the will to power is also its own complement. Thus, the will to power is the "genealogical element of force, both differential and genetic," and the "principle of the synthesis of forces".¹⁴ The term *principle* should be taken flexibly, as Nietzsche himself opposed static dogmatism. Nietzsche's principle of the will to power changes plastically as the conditions of what it defines change too.

Thus, I will adopt the cosmological interpretation of the will to power through which the will to power is the genealogical and differential element of force, and power is its internal genetic element¹⁵. It is clear that the will to power does not mean a will which desires power. It is rather the basis that ascribes meaning to force and allows us to evaluate it.

¹² Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson (New York: Continuum, 1983), 6.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 50.

¹⁵ I use *genealogical* (and, where relevant, *genetic*) to name the element that accounts for how a phenomenon takes form. I use *differential* to refer to the relations of difference through which forces are distinguished in their interactions. These terms are clarified through the account of force and will to power developed below.

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Psychological Will to Power

Before addressing why the cosmological conception of will to power provides a more desirable basis for ethics than the psychological conception, I will address cosmological will to power's primary criticism. In Peter Sedgwick's explanation of how we might use the will to power for a normative theory, he says that Jurgen Habermas' critique of Nietzsche's philosophy is a reason why we should abandon the metaphysical interpretation of the will to power, making it untenable as the basis for any ethical system. In the following section, I will explain this criticism and provide an answer to it.

According to Sedgwick, Habermas thought that Nietzsche was either a "thinker of power" or "thinker of rationality."¹⁶ A thinker of power would assume a metaphysical interpretation of the will to power, because it would view power as the totalizing principle of reality. A thinker of rationality, in line with a psychological interpretation of the will to power, would support concepts like reason and scientific thought. Habermas believed that those were mutually exclusive because he considered Nietzsche's theorization of power dangerous, similar to nihilism or moral skepticism. I will explain how Sedgwick thought Habermas arrived at this repugnance toward Nietzsche's theory.

First, Habermas claimed that to say that the world is 'will to power' in a metaphysical sense is like saying that reason itself is just a tool of deception used to secure power.¹⁷ At best, this undermines the legitimacy of Enlightenment philosophy; at worst, it makes it entirely worthless. As Sedgwick described Habermas' discontent:

"This is Nietzsche portrayed as the most destructive of thinkers, a figure who sees all truth claims as no more than assertions of will to power and thereby reduces them to mere psycho-aesthetic questions of individual taste...thereby excludes him from the respectable company of Enlightenment scholarship..."¹⁸

Sedgwick says that questioning the motives and basis of rationality and objectivity in the way that the will to power does begins what Habermas thought was an unfortunate path towards postmodernism. Sedgwick and Habermas criticize the will to power as undermining transcendental ideals because such ideals would be portrayed as plays to secure power. Second, Habermas believed that the metaphysical interpretation created a performative contradiction that undermines its own principle: if Nietzsche claimed that all reasoning is designed to secure power, then that assertion in itself must also apply to Nietzsche's own philosophy. Sedgwick concluded that Habermas thought that this made Nietzsche's metaphysics of power circular and untenable.

¹⁶ Sedgwick, "Nietzsche, Normativity, and Will to Power."

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., 207.

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In light of this, many have turned to the psychological interpretation of the will to power, which examines individual actions and motivations and explains them in terms of power.¹⁹ This perspective emphasizes that the will to power is fundamentally about self-mastery and the drive to overcome resistance. Walter Kaufmann notably considers the will to power a “psychological hypothesis,”²⁰ arguing that Nietzsche used it to explain a wide range of human behaviors and societal ideals, all grounded in empirical observation rather than metaphysical laws. Maudemarie Clark followed Kaufmann’s tradition and added that the will to power describes a “second order drive,”²¹ that is, a desire for the ability to satisfy one’s basic desires, secondary to survival. In this account, the will to power acts as an explanation of behavior by outlining an underlying motivation that shapes desire. This is distinct from metaphysical will to power because it is a drive that seeks power as an end, rather than the genetic element that influences force. Since existing ethical theories regarding the will to power are grounded in psychology, I will present one of them as an example before developing one that is distinct.

Andrew Huddleston’s normative theory²² is one example of grounding ethical claims in the psychological interpretation of the will to power. Huddleston accepts the psychological premise that power operates as a pervasive drive in human behavior but rejects its universalization as an inescapable aim of all action. His analysis distinguishes between three manifestations of power: overcoming resistance, developing capacities, and achieving dominance. By framing power as a variable drive that manifests contextually, Huddleston bypasses what others like Habermas have critiqued the cosmological interpretation for. He concludes that when presented with choices, an agent ought not to seek the path of least resistance, as that would foreclose self-overcoming, and that an agent ought to embrace difficulty.

Before I put forth an ethical theory using the cosmological interpretation, I will refute Habermas’ argument that the will to power is incompatible with enlightenment thought. While Habermas has objections to some aspects of the will to power, Sedgwick has applied them in a way that says they disprove the entirety of metaphysical will to power. When Habermas references a metaphysical interpretation of the will to power, he references a doctrine which states that all action is a move towards power. First, this is more threatening to psychological interpretations of the will to power than metaphysical ones, because the theory I presented in the previous section never made the claim that individuals have drives to seek power. Furthermore, secondary interlocutors cited in the previous section, such as Deleuze, have warned against such an interpretation of the will to power. If one understands the will to power as a literal “will which seeks power”, they will reach dissatisfactory conclusions where “Nietzsche will appear a nihilist, or worse, a fascist and at best as an obscure and terrifying prophet.”²³ The will does not want power in the way that a person wants money or success. Power is not the goal or

¹⁹ Simon Moore, *Will to Power: Beyond Psychology and Cosmology*, 12 pp., accessed September 12, 2025, https://www.academia.edu/5990011/Will_to_Power_Beyond_Psychology_and_Cosmology.

²⁰ Walter Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*, 4th ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1974), 204.

²¹ Maudemarie Clark, *Nietzsche on Truth and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), chap. 7.

²² Andrew Huddleston, “Normativity and the Will to Power: Challenges for a Nietzschean Constitutivism,” *Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 47, no. 3 (Autumn 2016): 435–56, <https://doi.org/10.5325/jnietstud.47.3.0435>.

²³ Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, preface.

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object of a desire. Rather, “power is the one that wills in the will.”²⁴ What this means is that power is the one that directs, and is the genetic element of the will to power. Being genetic refers to the way that power is the *determining* component of the will to power which it relies on. What it wills is an ordering or relation of forces through their interaction, which can serve as a basis to describe and evaluate all phenomena. Conflating power with domination or recognition in the way that Habermas does is what Nietzsche believes is the slave’s distortion of power’s essence. The view of the powerless who fantasize about being powerful is the “direct product of the slave and relations between slaves,” which constitutes the most “base interpretation of power.”²⁵ This interpretation rests upon slave morality, based in resentment. An underlying issue with Habermas’ critique is that it does not provide a reason *why* we should interpret the will to power in the way that he has, which is important when the interpretation he has chosen is one especially fallible to critique. Despite his claim that the cosmological interpretation of the will to power is disturbing because it paints rationality as a move towards power, we should not discard this interpretation, because it is unclear why the will to power necessarily describes that.

Additionally, Habermas’s critique operates through labeling Nietzsche as a sinister postmodern thinker and using that to discount the will to power. Bracketing Nietzsche as similar to other relativist thinkers as a way to discount his philosophy is inaccurate. Nietzsche's philosophy uses both reflexivity and duality within his philosophy, which is seen in the way that he plastically applies principles. He preserves structure and some forms of fixed ontologies without making them too totalizing. That actually undermines the dichotomy between absolutism and relativism.²⁶ He does not fall into one category so it does not make sense to critique him on that basis. The “performative contradiction” argument is flawed as well, because even if the will to power applies the claim it makes to itself, that is not self-refutational but a shift in what kind of justification is available. Since the will to power is not a claim that disproves the truth of other metaphysical principles, implicating itself does not *disprove* itself.

While critiques of metaphysical will to power have resulted in the use of psychological will to power for ethical theories, the critique of metaphysical will to power is not durable. Habermas’ rejection of Nietzsche is because of his conflation of the will to power with domination or relativism. Yet, when reframed as the genetic and differential element of force, the will to power is not a threat to rationality but a condition of it. Having defended this interpretation, I now turn to the constructive task of developing a first-order normative ethical theory rooted in cosmological will to power, one capable of evaluating actions by their affirmation or denial of life’s capacity for becoming.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Mark E. Warren, “Nietzsche and the Political,” *The Journal of the Nietzsche Society* 2, no. 1/2 (Fall/Winter 1997).
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PART II: THE WILL TO POWER AS A FIRST-ORDER NORMATIVE THEORY

Introducing Normativity

Building on the interpretation of the will to power posited in Part I, Part II will use that interpretation to develop an ethical theory, explain its normative privilege using constitutivist logic, and apply the resulting ethical framework to test-cases to demonstrate its rigor. This first-order normative theory will establish the desirability of actions and what ought to be done in certain situations; similar to consequentialism, deontology, and virtue ethics. This is distinct from a metaethical theory, which would examine the nature of morality itself, rather than specific moral rules. The theory developed here is unique in the way that it applies the will to power. Previous theories, as presented in Part I, view the will to power as a single psychological drive that agents can align their behavior with. There are behaviors that are in line with the will to power and actions that negate it. These theories argue that acting in accordance with the will to power is ethical in certain ways. Comparatively, the normative theory presented here argues that all behaviors exist within the will to power regardless of what they are. However, the will to power provides a standard of evaluation which makes some actions normatively better than others. Here, the will to power provides a framework which allows us to distinguish what is ethical, rather than being a drive which creates ethical behavior.

Returning to the cosmological interpretation, recall that all actions are constituted by an interaction of forces, wherein the will to power exerts its influence. Deleuze's interpretation of the will to power is a good starting point for creating a standard of evaluation because he isolates the two critical qualities of the will to power: affirmation and negation. As the will to power is the driver of force, affirmative will to power influences *active* force, and negative will to power influences *reactive* force. Qualities (affirmative and negative) of the will to power are distinct from types of force, as they direct their respective forces towards action. In this way, action and reaction are instruments of the will to power.

Active forces are expressions of affirmative will to power that create, transform, and assert difference. These forces command rather than obey, impose form rather than adapt, and operate through appropriation and transformation. Active forces are defined by how they approach the limit of what they can do, expressing an expansive quality. Affirmative will to power can be described as Dionysian affirmation, or the capacity to affirm life despite its quality. Affirmation is therefore not about desire for control, but about active participation in the transformation of life. This draws on Nietzsche's symbolism of Apollo and Dionysus to illustrate two modes through which affirmation operates in cooperation with each other. Apollo represents the principle of order and clarity, while Dionysus represents the creative destruction of boundaries. Nietzsche's ethical "products" such as the noble, the artist, the sovereign individual, and the legislator are various types in whom the affirmative will to power is fully realized. The noble affirms difference and distinction, the artist creates new worlds, the sovereign individual keeps promises and gives law to themselves, and the legislator discovers new ways of life. Affirmative will to power is a specific tone through which the will to power can be expressed that results in certain products which Nietzsche finds better than others.

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Reactive forces express negative will to power, constituting qualities like resistance, limitation, and the negation of difference. Reactive forces avoid expansive activity and function by turning inward. The negative quality of the will to power manifests itself as resentment, bad conscience, or the ascetic ideal. The social types produced by reactive forces include the “slave,” the “ascetic,” and the “herd,” who diminish their power by separating themselves from their capacities and embedding reactive valuations within themselves and society. These types operate through negation, where the will to power is expressed by the accumulation of inhibitions, resulting in constricted modes of existence.

Therefore, if all phenomena are expressions of the will to power, then ethics should evaluate which expressions are desirable forms of that will. An ethical system grounded in the will to power must distinguish between the desirability of active and reactive forces. I propose that ethical actions are those which express affirmative will to power and maximize active forces. An act is of lesser ethical value when it denies difference, constrains becoming, or stems from reactive resentment. This uses affirmative will to power as a central ethical norm while using force as its evaluative mechanism. The premise that active forces are ethical while reactive forces are unethical is not arbitrary, but the result of Nietzsche's metaphysical commitment to Dionysian affirmation. In this framework, ethics are more concerned with enhancing life's capacity to transform itself rather than about adhering to abstracted duties.

There are a few reasons why this works. First, it gives agents a clear standard to guide ethical action. One of Nietzsche's primary concerns with creating ethical systems was that they can fall into nihilism. That is avoided through grounding ethics in affirming life itself, while nihilism, by its nature, is characterized by an inversion of the will to power. Nietzsche was also concerned with systems that create incentives for domination, as domination is the opposite of creativity to Nietzsche, because it results in harbored resentment and inhibits becoming. That trap is avoided here because affirmative will to power is characterized by creation rather than control. Ethical theories using the psychological interpretation of the will to power risk making authoritarianism ethical, as they prioritize “struggle”. This interpretation solves that concern because it delegitimizes control or resentful action. If individuals acted in accordance with affirmative will to power, it would have a few broader implications for society. Workplaces would prioritize innovation and intrinsic motivation over obedience and burnout. Policies would shift from scapegoating toward building forms of collective life. Social interactions would be driven more by curiosity than comparison.

Why Affirmation is Normatively Privileged

While the previous section established how affirmative will to power produces what we may consider “favorable ethical subjects,” it lacks a normative justification for why affirmation ought to be privileged. Constitutivism provides a basis that can explain why affirmation is normatively privileged over negation in discussions of will to power.

I adopt Korsgaard’s account of constitutivism because it provides a rigorous bridge from an account of what agency is to an account of what agents have reason to do. Per Korsgaard’s *The Sources of Normativity*,²⁷ constitutivism holds that ethical normativity is anchored in features inherent (constitutive) to agency. These are standards that apply to us insofar as we are agents who act. Because action involves endorsing some considerations as reasons and organizing one’s motives into an attributable course of conduct, there are conditions that must be met to act at all. These standards generate a basis for normativity without external moral facts. The following section assumes this constitutivist framework is broadly correct in order to explain the normative privilege of affirmative will to power.

If agency is constitutively normative, then the relevant question is what best lets our behavior count as our action rather than something that merely happens through us. Because reflective people have to choose which impulses to follow, an impulse alone cannot justify action. Agency requires acting in a coherent way with *intention* rather than compulsion. Affirmation describes the mode in which drives (forces) are taken up and ordered into a practicable direction, expanding the agent’s grounds for authored action. If it is initially unclear why that is unique to affirmative will to power, it becomes unambiguous once looking at negative will to power. Negative will to power, as a reactive orientation, does not primarily organize forces through reflective reasons, but through negation. As previously established, negation constitutes inhibition, resentment, and opposition, especially instances of those which take shape from external triggers or inherited evaluative structures. That is normatively disvaluable to the constitutivist account, because it threatens the conditions under which conduct can count as one’s action. When motivation is governed by reactive repudiation, the justifications for action risk collapse into post hoc rationalizations rather than genuine command.

Furthermore, the previous section defined affirmative will to power as “active participation in the transformation of life.” That is congruent with features of agency, because agency requires the capacity to act authentically. In the vocabulary already developed, active forces “command rather than obey” and “impose form rather than adapt,” which mirrors the constitutivist thought that action requires a mode of self-organization capable of answering the “why?” question from a stable standpoint. For the same reason, Nietzsche’s aforementioned “ethical products” can be understood as examples of successful agency. Each names a way of sustaining authorship over one’s life, rather than being trapped in reactivity and negation. If constitutivism grounds normativity in the conditions under which agency is possible, then the normative privilege of affirmative will to power follows naturally: only affirmative will to power can reliably secure agential authorship.

²⁷ Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*, Tanner Lectures on Human Values 12: 19-112
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Case Based Analysis

I will demonstrate how this theory can be applied to scenarios to guide ethical actions, beginning with scenarios where affirmative will to power is maximized to result in active forces. In one instance, a worker could resist exploitative labor to create new modes of communal life. Resistance *can* still be reactive if purely negational, but is active in this case because it is oriented toward new form-making, making it an instance of affirmative will to power. The resulting active force poses potential to reconfigure economic relations, shifting away from a field of imposed scarcity. The worker's motive is not merely to end the exploitation, but to replace it with a more life-affirming mode of cooperation. This reveals a connection between *intent* and determining what constitutes ethical action, through determining which quality of will to power an action originates from. A lack of justification for action based in *complacency* is likely in a less morally privileged position as it indicates reactive being, characterised by a lack of agency. Still, this is not to say that intents are sufficient on their own. A project can intend to be sincerely "creative" while still producing reactive conditions.

A second example of affirmative will to power calls into question the legitimacy of violent insurgency. At face value, one might say that this theory forecloses revolutionary action because that would be driven by discontentment, a reactive force. However, taking a closer look reveals that such a project would be ethically desirable under certain conditions. If a political leader were imposing strict values onto a population, that would produce negative value through inhibiting the population's potential for becoming. Revolution would come from positive will to power that aims to channel new possibilities. Yet, the project would need to avoid actions that result in reactive force, such as baseless violence coming from spite that is not productively channeled. Thus, the movement's means must already instantiate the forms of active force it claims to produce.

Now, I'll examine two instances where negative will to power results in reactive force, thus describing unethical actions. In one example, a politician exploits collective resentment to demonize an out-group. The defining gesture is reactive, as identity and political cohesion are established through negation of the other, and the political group tends to cohere their own identity through collective suppression of individual desires. Active forces would be hindered in multiple ways here, making this action unethical. It is important to note that resentment may not *always* be expressive of negative will to power. A parallel example would be one surfacing resentment toward a parent's harmful behaviors, not to remain trapped in bitterness, but to overcome those patterns and build new ways of living. The decisive factor is whether negation is subordinated to the affirmative reconfiguration of forces, or whether it collapses back into inhibiting becoming. Although one may argue that the first example could *also* be the transitional stage of a broadly affirmative project, it is distinct: appeals to transition do not by themselves redeem scapegoating, since enemy-based cohesion tends to become structurally self-reproducing and thereby remains reactive even when paired with talk of future creativity. The decisive issue is not the mere presence of negation, but its role in the organization of forces.

A second example is where a scientific research team suppresses new findings because the results contradict their established theory. Acting to avoid undermining prior work is a negative form of will to power because it is channeled toward protecting the status of an existing paradigm. The force here is reactive because it is invested toward preserving a fixed structure at the cost of becoming. More ethical action would constitute pursuing new information, enabling creative expression and new possibilities.

A likely objection to an ethics based in the will to power is that it can risk using the guise of affirmation to sanction cruelty or hierarchy. One might argue that if active force is equated to domination in the ordinary political sense, then the framework risks greenlighting authoritarianism whenever coercion is rhetorically framed as “creative.” By contrast, I contend that there is actually a discriminating account between when strength is genuinely affirmative and when it is instead reactive force in active costume. In the framework I have proposed, command is positive when it is a form of organization that expands what can be done. That is distinct from forms of command that produce obedience through reactive instruments that instrumentalize agents. Thus, the relevant question is whether form-giving expands or forecloses the space of agency and transformation. To demonstrate how this difference is normatively grounded, rather than an ad hoc restriction introduced to rule out counterexamples, I present the following two cases. They aim to establish why the proposed theory could never result in outcomes such as “charismatic authoritarianism.”

For the first case, consider the example of a political leader who claims that creating a new world order requires imposing strict unity. This leader would censor dissent and demand loyalty as a means of achieving their goal. However, they may argue that the intention of the project has its basis in affirmative will to power. This leader may genuinely wish to innovate in rhetoric or institutional form once founding their new society. This creation would still not be permissible under the normative framework presented here. The leader’s new order stabilizes itself by foreclosing alternatives, which requires inhibiting possible expressions of active force by other agents. While that alone disqualifies the course of action, its reliance on surveillance, scapegoats, and a monopoly of power are all reactive qualities, which hold their basis in negative will to power. A leader would need to incorporate processes that practice contestation, distribute authority, and cultivate individuality in order for this process to be ethical. Thus, affirmative will to power can only result in world-building when it includes conditions under which agency can proliferate beyond the builder. Binding agency of others to the builder would be expressions of negative will to power, and thus impermissible. The “charismatic dictator” is not a possible permissive outcome.

For the second case, consider two practices that both involve pain. In the first, an athlete undertakes training to cultivate physical capacity that did not previously exist. The severity here is a product of active force, as it increases what the agent can do without restricting any other expressions of active force. In the second, a political movement publicly humiliates dissidents as a means of discipline. Even if the movement describes this as forging a new culture, the mechanism is reactive because it secures cohesion by shrinking the expression of active force by other agents, and replacing authorship with obedience. Thus, severity is ethically permissible only when it is ordered toward capacity and authorship. When severity depends on the systematic reduction of others to instruments, it is disqualified, as it limits the capacity of agents to express forms of affirmative will to power. The distinction is whether form-giving

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operates through capacity-building (a form of active force) or through the managed incapacity of others (a form of reactive force).

Taken together, these cases make explicit constraints already implied by the active/reactive distinction and the constitutive norms of agency which favor affirmative will to power. We can derive that a purported extension of affirmative will to power is disqualified when it: expands itself through foreclosing the expression of active force by others, secures cohesion by producing dependency, or acquires identity solely through negation of another.

This theory is competitive with other ethical theories that use the will to power. As discussed, certain psychological accounts of the will to power embrace ideas like “struggle” or “maximizing difficulty when possible” with theories like Huddleston’s. Those endeavors present a slippery slope towards fascism or violence if such a path were to maximize difficulty. A cosmological account of the will to power provides a mechanism which aligns more closely with our moral intuitions, because the justifications for needless violence would be unethical under its framework.

Thus, a normative ethics rooted in the cosmological will to power offers more than a reinterpretation of Nietzsche; it provides a living framework for guiding action. By grounding evaluation in the distinction between active and reactive forces, it preserves Nietzsche’s demand for life-affirmation while supplying the normative clarity that his critics doubted was possible. Where deontology binds and consequentialism calculates, the will to power instead calls us to create, to affirm, and to become.

CONCLUSION

This paper has defined the will to power, distinguishing it from mistaken interpretations, and clarified its two major conceptions as psychological and cosmological. It emphasizes that the cosmological interpretation understands it as the genetic and differential element of force, which structure the basis of metaphysics. I have argued that this interpretation is most suitable as the foundation for an ethical framework, since it avoids pitfalls of domination and nihilism that critics such as Habermas have critiqued.

On this basis, I developed a first-order normative theory that evaluates actions according to whether they express affirmative or negative will to power, resulting in active and reactive forces. The resulting framework addresses Nietzsche's capacity to ground ethics and demonstrates broad applicability across domains, political life to scientific inquiry. It thus positions the will to power as a living resource for moral philosophy. Rather than guiding action by restraint or calculation, it does so by affirming life’s continual becoming.

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