Friedrich Nietzsche, born 1844
Nietzsche’s Replacement for Morality: Will to Power

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Since the dawn of civilization, humanity has evaluated behavior according to basic rules and standards known as “morality.” For most of known history, ethical philosophers, religious visionaries, and even lawmakers struggled with the puzzle of determining what those moral standards will be. The question asked more recently, however, is whether such a standard should exist at all. During the late 19th century, naturalism and materialism were becoming increasingly popular in Europe, and with this growing popularity came questions about the validity of abstract, metaphysical concepts such as morality. Friedrich Nietzsche, a prolific writer and thinker of the day, took materialism to its logical ethical conclusion. Writing from a purely naturalistic perspective, Nietzsche considered the concept of right and wrong based on Judeo-Christian values a mere social construct, ultimately harmful to humanity since it caters to weakness, and suggested instead that human behavior should have no guiding principle except obtaining and wielding power.

Nietzsche’s belief that the physical, material universe constitutes the full extent of reality formed the foundation of his philosophy. This rejection of the sacred defined much of Nietzsche’s belief system. Instead, as Wilson explains, “Nietzsche is a
Darwinian. He believes that the history of humanity is part of natural history and that there is no sacred.\textsuperscript{1} Due to this fact, humanity cannot appeal to an outside authority in its search for an absolute standard of morality. In both \textit{Thus Spoke Zarathustra} and \textit{The Gay Science}, Nietzsche made the famous claim that, “God is dead!”\textsuperscript{2} He went on to say that, “We have killed him –you and I. All of us are his murderers … whither are we moving? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there still any up or down? Are we not straying through an infinite nothing?”\textsuperscript{3} In writing this, he did not mean that there was an actual supernatural being who has died; instead, Nietzsche believed that mankind had been freed from the bondage of drawing absolute morality from an outside source, such as the Christian God.

Without some form of outside authority, the traditional foundation of ethics disappears. “Morality” as a concept deals with the issue of right and wrong, yet the idea of “right and wrong” has no meaning without some source of rightness and wrongness. What is it that makes one thing good and another evil? When God is removed from the picture, an absolute standard of morality is no longer reasonable. Wilson explains Nietzsche’s views on this issue: “Real Darwinism, Nietzsche thinks, can have no truck with the morality system, or with Christian values; the principle of selection is the opposite of Christian morality.”\textsuperscript{4} In order to be a logically consistent Darwinist,

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  \item \textsuperscript{1} Catherine Wilson, "Darwin And Nietzsche: Selection, Evolution, And Morality," \textit{Journal Of Nietzsche Studies} 44, no. 2 (2013): 366.
  \item \textsuperscript{4} Wilson, 365.
\end{itemize}
Nietzsche argued, one must recognize that naturalism and materialism do not allow for an absolute standard of morality derived from an outside source. Morality evolved merely as a framework for societal norms.5

Nietzsche traced the origins of morality back to the formation of societies and the need of said societies for guiding principles of behavior. “According to Nietzsche in the Human series, actions were originally dubbed ‘good’ or ‘evil’ depending on whether or not they violated custom or tradition. A ‘good’ action was simply one that accorded with custom whereas an ‘evil’ action did not.”6 In other words, in order to lend legitimacy to its laws, a society would tie these laws to a concept of “good and evil.” Appealing to a greater authority, the laws gained both standing in the eyes of its citizenry and greater obedience, through the promise of (often) eternal reward or punishment. However, since each society evolved independently and had different basic customs, many different forms of morality developed as a result.

Nietzsche pointed out the relative nature of morality by identifying the different forms of morality in different cultures. If his belief that morality is merely a social construct, not a metaphysical, abstract truth, were correct, different forms of ethical systems would appear in different societies. In Thus Spoke Zarathustra, he argued that this is actually the case:

Zarathustra saw many lands and many peoples: thus he discovered the good and evil of many peoples . . . . Much that was good to one people was scorn and

6 Ibid.
infamy to another: thus I found it. Much I found called evil here, and decked out
with purple honors there.”

By pointing out the inconsistency of morality in different cultures, Nietzsche defended and strengthened his position that morality is a concept created by humans for human purposes.

As a result of Nietzsche’s fundamental beliefs about the nature of the universe, he completely rejected the concept of morality, especially Christian morality. He made no secret of what he believed and what kind of person he considered himself to be, saying that, “I am, for example, by no means a bogey, or a moralistic monster – I am actually the very opposite of the type of man who so far has been revered as virtuous. Between ourselves, it seems to me that precisely this is part of my pride.”

Clearly, Nietzsche felt nothing but disgust for those who force their morality on others, or even those who are considered virtuous. His intent in writing about ethics is explicitly stated in Daybreak: “I descended into the depths, I tunneled into the foundations … I commenced to undermine our faith in morality.”

When Nietzsche stated that he wished to undermine the concept of morality in society, he was referring to the ideas of “right and wrong” and “good and evil.” Nietzsche still believed that certain actions were more worthwhile than others, but for reasons that had more to do with the physical or material well-being of an individual rather than the intrinsic moral value of the actions. Once this distinction was clear,

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7 Nietzsche, Thus Spoke Zarathustra, 84.
Nietzsche’s arguments held considerably more meaning. By using a system of “good and bad” to replace a system of “good and evil,” Nietzsche could identify the supposedly harmful effects of morality on society while still remaining logically consistent. Nietzsche hoped to accomplish this one particular task: “A revaluation of all values.”

Nietzsche depicted morality as a dragon, attempting to control the spirit of humanity. “What is the great dragon which the spirit no longer wants to call lord and God? The great dragon is called ‘Thou shalt’. But the spirit of the lion says ‘I will!’” Just as the lion rejected the words of the dragon, Nietzsche urged humanity to cast off its chains of morality, especially morality tied to the Judeo-Christian tradition. He explicitly identified and condemned Christian values, such as love for one’s neighbor. “You crowd together with your neighbors and have beautiful words for it. But I tell you: Your love of your neighbors is your bad love of yourselves.” According to Nietzsche, morality served only to destroy society, and should have been completely rejected, for only then could the human spirit be truly free. “Nietzsche’s message is written clearly and there is no mistaking it: ‘When the spirit is rich and independent it most resists any preoccupations with morality.’” Society needed to be freed from the restrictive forces of faith and morality.

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11 Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 55.
12 Ibid., 86.
13 Wilson, 368.
Morality revealed itself as corruptive for many different reasons, one of the most significant being that it did not allow itself to be criticized or analyzed; it demanded absolute and unquestioning obedience! As long as the world has existed no authority has yet been willing to let itself become the object of criticism, and to criticize morality itself, to regard morality as a problem, as problematic: what? Has that not been – is that not – immoral? A system that derives legitimacy from an outside, unquestionable source of authority is not conducive to new perspectives and interpretations on its standards, much less questioning of the system itself.

Nietzsche reserved some of his strongest words for the effect of morality on society. “This modernity made us ill – this indolent peace, this cowardly compromise, the whole virtuous filth of the modern yes and no. Better to live on the ice than among modern virtues and other south winds!” According to Nietzsche, morality strangled critical questioning and thinking and ultimately hamstrung the healthy development of society. The survival of only the strongest individuals led to a healthy society, but values such as compassion and selflessness catered to the needs of the weak. Without “virtuous” individuals who supported and protected those weaker than themselves, the weak would soon be eliminated and society would be healed of its flaws. He said in *The Anti-Christ* that, “I see the most corruption precisely where people have made the most concerted

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14 Nietzsche, *Daybreak*, 2.
In Nietzsche’s view, morality was unnecessary, irrational, and ultimately harmful to humanity. Nietzsche identified faith-based morality as corruptive to humanity, and Christian values in particular as the most corrosive.

Could spiritual subtlety imagine any more dangerous bait than this? Anything to equal the enticing, intoxicating, overwhelming, and undermining power of that symbol of the ‘holy cross,’ that ghastly paradox of a ‘God on the cross,’ that mystery of an unimaginable ultimate cruelty and self-crucifixion of God for the salvation of man? Nietzsche insinuated that most moral systems depended on “a conglomerate of Platonic and Christian ideas”, and that mankind must be freed from this conglomerate. In the Christian tradition, selflessness, brotherly love, and caring for the poor and weak were all seen as valuable and virtuous traits. Nietzsche chose to cast these particular values in a new light.

Permitting the weak to survive strangles the potential of society. Wilson explains Nietzsche’s views on the issue: “[Nietzsche] laments the ruination of the race through the Christian practices of care for the sick, the lame, and the misbegotten.” Nietzsche was not concerned with the well being of the individual, or even with the overall health of the majority. Instead, he valued the ability of the human race to develop and improve itself. If the human race was to reach its full potential and bring forth the Superman, or

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16 Ibid., 6.
19 Wilson, 358.
Ubermensch\textsuperscript{20}, the weak needed to be eliminated. Only when this happened could Darwinian processes produce the Superman. If one accepts this idea, Nietzsche’s claim of: “What is more harmful than any vice? –Active pity for all failures and weakness – Christianity”\textsuperscript{21} seems perfectly understandable. Humanity’s ability to evolve and ultimately bring forth the superman, leading to a new and higher form of humans, must be considered in determining what is harmful and what is beneficial. When humanity is ready to strive for greatness, it will overcome the bondage of morality, compassion, and selflessness, and find freedom. Nietzsche wrote: “I know that, when the German gets into the state in which he is capable of great things, he always raises himself above morality!”\textsuperscript{22} Morality is an empty, baseless social construct that serves to prevent humanity from achieving its true potential. Through his writing, Nietzsche identified the flaws within the system of morality and pointed out how it hinders society, but he also proposed an alternative guiding principle for human behavior. According to Nietzsche, if humanity implemented this particular principle, then, and only then, could it reach its full potential.

Nietzsche suggested that no rules or laws should govern human behavior, except for the principle of “will to power.” Lacewing provides a viable explanation for the concept of will to power:

The will to power is the basic character of our drives or instincts. The essence of a drive is to assert itself. To do so successfully, to achieve expression, is for it to have power. Power is not a separate aim of the drives. In asserting itself, each

\textsuperscript{20} Nietzsche, \textit{Thus Spoke Zarathustra}, 41.
\textsuperscript{21} Nietzsche, \textit{The Anti-Christ}, 4.
\textsuperscript{22} Nietzsche, \textit{Daybreak}, 129.
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...drive comes into competition with others, and with the drives of other individuals. And so drives are always in relations of power to each other.\textsuperscript{23}

In other words, if someone has the desire to do something and the ability to do it, nothing should stop them from carrying out their intentions. The desire for power constitutes a basic component of human nature, and as a result, humans came into conflict with the desires of other individuals. Drawing from naturalistic ideas, Nietzsche first established that all animals operate according to will to power. “Every animal … instinctively strives for an optimum of favorable conditions under which it can expend all its strength and achieve its maximal feeling of power.”\textsuperscript{24} Having established this idea, Nietzsche could then link human nature to a desire for power since humans are basically highly evolved animals.

According to Darwin, Nietzsche ventures, “man is indeed a creature of nature, […] and his ascent to his present stage of development has been conditioned by […] the very fact that he was continually forgetting that others were constituted like him and shared the same rights with him; by the very fact that he regarded himself as the stronger, and thus brought about the gradual suppression of the weaker types.”\textsuperscript{25}

In other words, the only reason man is now in the highly evolved state he inhabits today is because he was not afraid to exercise his greater strength and suppress those weaker than himself. One expressed will to power by valuing and pursuing the fulfillment of personal desires even if it meant ignoring and preventing the fulfillment of the desires of another.


\textsuperscript{24} Nietzsche, \textit{On the Genealogy of Moral}, 107.

\textsuperscript{25} Wilson, 360.
Nietzsche went so far as to say that life in its very essence is will to power. In *The Anti-Christ*, Nietzsche wrote: “I consider life itself to be an instinct for growth, for endurance, for the accumulation of force, for power: when there is no will to power, there is decline.”[26] Lacewing explains how Nietzsche made the same claim in *Beyond Good and Evil*: “The will to power is perhaps the key concept in Nietzsche’s philosophy. It is strongly connected to his concept of ‘life’. So in Beyond Good and Evil §13, Nietzsche says ‘A living being wants above all else to release its strength; life itself is the will to power.’”[27] All of life was a struggle for power, for the ability to overcome, grow, and endure. In Nietzsche’s opinion, a refusal to accept and exercise one’s will to power comprised the greatest hindrance to life. If power is equivalent to life, in weakness there is only death. “What is good? – Everything that enhances people’s feelings of power, will to power, power itself. What is bad? Everything stemming from weakness.”[28] Despite his use of the words “good” and “bad,” Nietzsche was not making a value judgment in this passage. As was already established, Nietzsche completely rejected the concept of morality. He instead argued that the advancement of mankind was found in power, and decline was found in weakness. Now Nietzsche’s rejection of religion, and Christianity in particular, is fully explained. “My claim is that none of humanity’s highest values have had this will, -that nihilistic values, values of decline, have taken control under the aegis of the holiest names.”[29] Christianity completely rejected will to power, and instead

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[27] Lacewing, 1.
[29] Ibid., 6.
embraced self-sacrifice. Therefore, Christianity was nothing but weakness, and if Christian principles were permitted to exist, such ideas could lead to the death of society.

The idea of society, in addition to the individual, operating under the principle of will of power emerged in several of Nietzsche’s writings. Wilson quotes Nietzsche, saying that,

In [Nietzsche’s] view, “to refrain from mutual injury, mutual violence, mutual exploitation, to equate one’s will with that of another,” is nihilistic. It is a “denial of life.” … He writes that every social body “… will have to be the will to power incarnate, it will want to grow, expand, draw to itself, gain ascendancy—not out of any morality or immorality, but because it lives, and because life is will to power.\textsuperscript{30}

Nietzsche claimed that “every social body” would want to grow and expand, because it is alive, and life is will to power. Obviously, the category of “every social body” would include economic structures, the state, and even religious institutions. In Nietzsche’s new philosophy, all of history was a story of will to power being realized in different societies and structures.\textsuperscript{31} All motivations flowed from a desire for power and the exercise thereof.

Nietzsche, drawing from his Darwinian roots, completely rejected the concept of morality, condemning Judeo-Christian values and the society they produce. He identified Christianity as a massive source of weakness in humanity. Arguing that a society based upon selflessness and compassion will ultimately lead to ruin, he pointed to will to power as the only way for humanity to thrive. His writings forced humanity to grapple with the questions of where one derives morality, whether morality is a viable foundation for societal norms, and how to define acceptable human behavior. Nietzsche’s answers to

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\footnote{Wilson, 366.}
\footnote{Lacewing, 1.}
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these questions seem barbaric to many, and some scholars suggest that his ideas led to many of the atrocities of the twentieth century. Nietzsche’s ideas in regards to morality are difficult for any reader in any time. If the fullness of reality is nothing but material, does morality truly have a viable basis? If humanity chose to reject morality, what implications would such a decision have for society? Does the expression of power lead to the healthiest society? Nietzsche’s answers to these questions are clear. According to Nietzsche’s principle of will to power, the strong have the ability to do whatever they wish. Society, rather than respecting some idea of individual rights, caters to the strong and eliminates the weak. Morality is a baseless philosophical idea with no real weight in society. This is the world Nietzsche presented to his reader. When considering Nietzsche’s philosophy and arguments, the reader evaluates both the reasoning behind Nietzsche’s arguments and the logical conclusions they provide. Nietzsche’s ideal world is radically different than the society envisioned by the Judeo-Christian tradition, and before making a judgment on Nietzsche’s writings, one must consider what such a world would be like.