

# Nietzsche on power

[Religion](#), [God](#)



The rise of science placed a strain on religion's ability to retain its credence. Science had demonstrated an unprecedented ability to explain concepts that were once mysteries. This ability began to efface the dominion and power of the Christian God, and this led to the existentialist idea that man lives alone in the world and must rely only on himself. According to Nietzsche, this occurrence places power squarely in the hands of man, and the possession of this power leaves him with the ability to exert it over himself as well as others. One of the main ideas behind Nietzsche's works is that the human individual constantly intends and strives toward wielding this power over others.

Even actions that appear altruistic are really sparked by a rooted desire to control the person for whom the act is performed. Nietzsche advocates the fundamental egoism of all persons, declaring the focus of all human conceptions to be centered on the desire of that particular individual to dominate in a given situation. Even the evolutionary aspects of man's position within the environment manifests the individual's need to wield power: growth from youth to adulthood involves an increase of power and a decrease in subordination; the desire for upward social mobility represents this as well. According to Nietzsche, the need for power is an instinctive drive that is the end for which all pleasure-seeking actions strive. Yet Nietzsche also identified a need that humans have to control themselves—and this he conceived as the desire for internal power. Here is where Nietzsche's truest interest in power lay. These themes can be demonstrated in his use of aphorisms and elaborations of these throughout his works *Daybreak*, *the Gay Science*, *Beyond Good and Evil*, and *the Will to Power*.

The Judeo-Christian antagonism (indeed the antagonism of all religions) represents one example on earth of the power relations (struggle) of which Nietzsche writes. In *Daybreak*, he writes: “the ship of Christianity threw overboard a good deal of its Jewish ballast” (40). Ironically, the idea represented in the aphorism “God is dead” describes the modern scientific supplanting of the Judeo-Christian view that God is ultimately responsible for the molding of the individual (Zupancic, 6). The scientific explanations of the universe—the Copernican revolution which challenged and toppled the geocentric view—weakened the idea that the anthropomorphic God was any longer (or ever was) in charge of the destiny of the universe.

Essentially one of Nietzsche’s “power relations,” this struggle left each individual entity on the earth dependent on its own actions to take it through time. This has become one of the catalytic ideas that gave birth to the notion of internal power that drives man. This power has been expressed by Nietzsche in the form of self mastery, which develops in a complicated cycle, both as a result of and in accordance with the instinct. Though this important instinct arises out of the inward self-creation of the man, Nietzsche also acknowledges another type of instinct that drives men toward a different kind of power: domination.

In the work *The Will to Power* Nietzsche points out the symbolism that can be found in the way states and societies have been constituted. The drive for power, he writes, undergirds the hierarchical nature of the organizations within each state. Societal classes demonstrate ways in which people have succeeded in gaining power over others. This again identifies another concrete example of power relations within the human world. The members

of higher classes (which have acquired wealth) dominate in a situation where the other members of society look to them for their wages. Money represents buying power, without which people cannot live. By this reasoning, individuals who acquire their wages from these powerful members of the upper class look toward these moguls for their very sustenance. This is the manifestation of the power that, according to Nietzsche, all men instinctively seek.

Yet even in this example where people appear to seek mastery over others, one can detect an example of the desire for internal power. Persons who must do the bidding of the rich in order to gain hold of the buying power that facilitates their continued existence—these persons recognize that others exert power over them. Their desire for upward mobility represents a desire to have that control returned to them, and this appears to be possible only simultaneously with having the power to control others. This can thus be seen as a dual drive toward dominance and independence.

In Nietzsche's opinion it is this self-mastery that represents the truest power. The picture of the ascetic monk who denies himself physical and aesthetic pleasures for the purpose of subduing his desires and mastering himself demonstrates more power than the warriors who plunder other tribes and nations. On a deeper level, Nietzsche describes the inner workings of the human mind as a conflict of several wills that compete for power within the individual.

He writes the following: " Suppose nothing else were ' given' as real except our world of desires and passions, and we could not get down, or up, to any other ' reality' besides the reality of our drives--for thinking is merely a

relation of these drives to each other” (Beyond, 36). People’s wills (or desires) often conflict with each other, and thoughts, Nietzsche explains, are the vehicles of the desires; it is via thought that desires identify themselves, and the mind is their battlefield. The ability to master oneself is essentially the ability of one thought to rise up and become the dominant will, mastering all the others.

Nietzsche expresses this idea also in his book *Beyond Good and Evil*, the title of which is essentially a description of the heights attained by those who have achieved the highest level of self mastery. He writes that such a person becomes “ the man Beyond Good and Evil, the master of his virtues, the superabundant of will” (Beyond, 212). His will to create himself overflows, and he finds his own way toward morality and virtue through his own journey of self discovery.

This journey involves a complex interplay of consciousness, subconsciousness, and instinct. Instinct comes about through a process in which consciousness of the outside world gathers knowledge that is taken in and absorbed into the mind in a kind of internalization process. The depth at which these internalized principles rest within the individual causes them to rank higher than the prevailing principles of the day. And the fact that the individual creates them him/herself places him or her in the powerful position of self-master.

The hierarchical nature of the instincts themselves determines a way in which Nietzsche classes men according to their degree of control over themselves. The person who has attained an existence beyond good and evil is said to be supramoral, and this is the one who has fortified his internal

power. It is in comparison to this person that Nietzsche is driven to classify lesser men. Such men are those who might be seen as stuck in the routines of life.

They are bound by a herding instinct that is inherited rather than created. This hereditary instinct comes into the possession of not one but a plethora of individuals whose behaviors begin to demonstrate that they can no longer accurately be called individuals. They possess no mastery over themselves that allows them to create their own being with its own virtues and morals to dictate or inform their actions. Instead, their actions and motives are carbon copies of a million others who have, like themselves, passively accepted the norms of their society.

Nietzsche's idea of self-mastery and individualism is again made visible in his declaration that societies have caused passions to be laid to rest, whereas individuals who have distinguished themselves by developing internal power have contributed to the progress of the human race. He expresses this idea in the passage,

Nowadays there is a profoundly erroneous moral doctrine that is celebrated especially in England: this holds that judgements of 'good' and 'evil' sum up experiences of what is 'expedient' and 'inexpedient.' One holds that what is called good preserves the species, while what is called evil harms the species. In truth, however, the evil instincts are expedient, species-preserving, and indispensable to as high a degree as the good ones; their function is merely different (The Gay Science, 74).

Even evil persons, Nietzsche explains, have done more good for humanity than society itself with all its conformity and low-tiered hierarchical power. He argues that even powerful (though evil) individuals have given others something worthwhile: they have provided the means of comparing and contrasting between extremes in ways that perform dialectically to take knowledge and morals to higher heights. These persons who have instinctively created their own morals through a systematic mastery of themselves give more power to humanity than those who conform and expend no energy in the pursuit of more powerful selves. The empowered individuals have done this through adding to the variety of knowledge (of good and evil) and creating new avenues and alternatives for self-mastering persons.

Nietzsche's regard for what he considered the power of the self-mastering individual eclipsed that of what he viewed as the general power struggle that often ensued from power relations. The self-made individual demonstrates an industry through which he is able to create his own morals and fabricate the instinct that will lead him toward those morals. Such a man Nietzsche considers to have transcended good and evil by entering into a morality created at first through consciousness, but later sublimely through the subconscious. This man, in Nietzsche's opinion, has truly achieved power of a type that goes beyond the mere control of others, as it has attained the much more difficult goal of self-control.

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