On the Doctrine of the Feeling of Power
By Friedrich Nietzsche
1882

Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) was a German philosopher, cultural critic, poet, composer, and scholar, whose work has greatly influenced Western modern philosophy. The following passage was taken from The Gay Science (or in German: Die fröhliche Wissenschaft) and discusses the feeling of power. The “will to power” (German: der Wille zur Macht) is a prominent concept in the philosophy of Nietzsche, who believed that the desire for power is the main driving force in humans – namely, achievement, ambition, and the striving to reach the highest possible position in life. As you read, take notes on the central ideas of Nietzsche's philosophy of power.

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Benefiting and hurting others are ways of exercising one's power over them—that is all one wants in such cases! We hurt those to whom we need to make our power perceptible, for pain is a much more sensitive means to that end than pleasure: pain always asks for the cause, while pleasure is inclined to stop with itself and not look back. We benefit and show benevolence toward those who already depend on us in some way (that is, who are used to thinking of us as their causes); we want to increase their power because we thus increase our own, or we want to show them the advantage of being in our power—that way, they will be more satisfied with their situation and more hostile towards and willing to fight against the enemies of our power. Whether in benefiting or hurting others we make sacrifices does not affect the ultimate value of our actions; even if we stake our lives, as martyrs\(^1\) do for their church, it is a sacrifice made for our desire for power or for the preservation of our feeling of power. He who feels 'I am in possession of the truth'—how many possessions does he not renounce in order to save this feeling! What would he not throw overboard in order to stay 'on top'—that is, above the others who lack 'the truth'? The state in which we hurt others is certainly seldom as agreeable, in an unadulterated\(^2\) way, as that in which we benefit others; it is a sign that we are still lacking power, or it betrays a frustration in the face of this poverty; it brings new dangers and uncertainties to the power we do possess and clouds our horizon with the prospect of revenge, scorn, punishment, failure. Only to the most irritable and covetous\(^3\) adherents of the feeling of power—to those for whom the sight of those who are already subjected (the objects of benevolence) is a burden and boredom—might it be more pleasurable to imprint the seal of power on the reluctant. It depends on how one is accustomed to spice one's life; it is a matter of taste whether one prefers the slow or the sudden, the safe or the dangerous and daring increase in power—one always this or that spice according to one's temperament. An easy prey is something contemptible for proud natures; they take delight only at the sight of unbroken persons who could become their enemies and at the sight of all possessions that are hard to come by; they are often hard towards someone who is suffering, for he is not worthy of their contention\(^4\) and pride—but they are the more obliging toward their equals, against whom it would be honourable to fight and struggle if the occasion should arise. Spurred by the good feeling of this perspective, the members of the knightly caste\(^5\) became accustomed to treating each other with exquisite courtesy. Compassion is the most agreeable feeling for those who have little pride and no prospect of great conquests; for them, easy prey—and that is what those who suffer are—is something enchanting. Compassion is praised as the virtue of prostitutes.

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1. **Martyr (noun):** a person who sacrifices something of great value, often their own lives
2. **Unadulterated (adjective):** pure or complete
3. **Covetous (adjective):** greatly desirous of wealth, possessions, and/or other people's possessions
4. **Contention (noun):** rivalry or competition, or efforts in a competition/debate
5. **Caste (noun):** a system of rigid social division or stratification; any class or group of people who possess exclusive privileges or are perceived as socially distinct – Nietzsche is probably referring to European knights and their chivalric code, in which courtesy, even in the process of fighting/duty, was heavily emphasized.
Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. **PART A:** Which of the following best describes a central idea of the text?  
   A. Corruption from power is inevitable.  
   B. Humans with an abundance of power are more susceptible to cruelty.  
   C. Attaining and wielding power are basic human desires, with everyday practices that depend on circumstance.  
   D. Power is a process, one that everyone utilizes, established through reaffirming influence and/or attaining more.

2. **PART B:** Cite evidence from the text to support the answer of Part A.

3. In the first line, Nietzsche claims there are two basic ways of exercising power: benefiting or hurting others. Why does the author introduce the passage with this claim? How does this statement frame or contribute to the structure of the text?
4. Which of the following statements best answers the question: what conclusions does Nietzsche draw from the comparison between pain and pleasure?
   A. In the end, they serve the same purpose in the attainment of power.
   B. Pain is reserved for asserting authority, pleasure for reaffirming it.
   C. Pain is far more immediate and more clearly understood than pleasure.
   D. Pleasure works as a form of bribery to those in one’s power, while pain stands as the punishment.

5. What does the term “poverty” most likely mean as used in the passage?
   A. The state of having little money
   B. The state of having few material possessions
   C. Lacking something
   D. The condition which prevents one from fulfilled living

6. Explain Nietzsche’s concept of compassion, paying particular attention to the last line of the text. What impact does this conclusion have the author’s purpose in the text?
Discussion Questions

Directions: Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.

1. How do we conceive of power and what it means to obtain it? Do you agree with Nietzsche’s ideas on power? Explain your answers; cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.

2. Does power corrupt? Or perhaps, more specifically, how does power corrupt? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.