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Nietzsche on Leadership: The Power of the Will

*"I do not wish to be mixed up and confused with these preachers of equality.
Men are not equal. Nor shall they become equal!"*

—Friedrich Nietzsche

In stark contrast to leadership theories based on democratic egalitarianism, undercurrents of nihilism were beginning to emerge in Germany as history evolved toward the millennium of the twentieth century. All previously accepted ideas were being challenged. *Idealism. Realism. Rationalism. Romanticism.* Nothing remained sacred. No previous attempt to understand the nature of the universe escaped attack by those philosophers who had rejected the validity of objective truth.

Among the nihilists who would significantly alter our understanding of leadership in the twentieth century was Friedrich Nietzsche. Abandoning all philosophies that acknowledged the existence of transcendent principles as a means to explain man's position in the universe, Nietzsche insisted that man was alone. There were no unifying principles. There was no metaphysics. And whereas Marx had removed the concept of the divine from the dialectic of history, Nietzsche eliminated God from the equation of existence. *God is dead*, he would proclaim, and upon that premise he would construct much of his philosophy.

Without question, Nietzsche's denial of universal principles has altered our understanding of the leadership dyad, for, if man stands alone, if there are no unifying principles, then our current under-

standing of *rights*, *equality*, *justice*, and *liberty* loses its meaning. Before considering the implications of Nietzsche's thought, however, we must first examine the foundations from which his ideas regarding leadership emerged. We must review briefly his philosophy regarding the nature of man.

Unlike those Western philosophers who perceived man as a part of a whole, whether that whole be defined as *Form*, the *Ideal*, the *General Will*, the *Absolute*, or the *Species-Being*, Nietzsche thought otherwise. For Nietzsche there is no unity, nothing gives meaning to one's life. There is no good. There is no evil. There is only nature, and nature is cruel. It is not concerned with the needs and desires of humans. It cares nothing about man's values and dreams. It is totally impersonal as its floods, tornadoes, fires, earthquakes, and other disasters wreak havoc on man's struggle to survive. And no matter how much man may resist its forces, his ultimate destiny is death. There are no rewards. There is nothing to console him. Man's struggle to live is the totality of his existence. As Nietzsche explains in his work, *Twilight of the Idols*, man is not the effect of some special purpose, of some special end. Man is not the crown of creation. Instead, he lives in a non-caring universe without values. He is alone:

What alone can be *our* doctrine? That no one *gives* man his qualities—neither God, nor society, nor his parents and ancestors, nor he himself. . . . No one is responsible for man's being there at all, for his being such-and-such, or for his being in these circumstances or in this environment. The fatality of his essence is not to be disentangled from the fatality of all that has been and will be. Man is not the effect of some special purpose, of a will, and end; nor is he the object of an attempt to attain an 'ideal of humanity' or an 'ideal of happiness' or an 'ideal of morality.' It is absurd to wish to devolve one's essence on some end or other. We have invented the concept of 'end': in reality, there is no end.¹

Just as Nietzsche held that the will of the universe is indifferent to the desires of man, he proposed that the wills of individual men must also be free of compassion regarding the frailties of humanity. As Darwin had demonstrated in the biological sciences, only the strong survive. The same is true among men. Yet, in Nietzsche's judgment, mankind had moved toward *weakness* rather than *strength*. For more than two thousand years the natural evolution of man had been reversed. Coddled by religion and philosophies founded on universal principles, the pitiful common man with his fear and resentment toward the strong had been allowed to define *weakness* as *good* and *strength* as *evil*. With the support of Judaism and Chris-

tianity, the masses had managed to contradict the natural instincts of mankind. In his work, *The Antichrist*, Nietzsche explains,

Christianity should not be beautified and embellished: it has waged deadly war against this higher type of man; it has placed all the basic instincts of this type under the ban; and out of these instincts it has distilled evil and the Evil One: the strong man as the typically reprehensible man, the 'reprobate.' Christianity has sided with all that is weak and base, with all failures; it has made an ideal of whatever *contradicts* the instinct of the strong life to preserve itself; it has corrupted the reason even of those strongest in spirit by teaching men to consider the supreme values of the spirit as something sinful, as something that leads into error—as temptations.²

Nietzsche, thus, sought to change the intellectual paradigm of Western culture. He sought to return to the philosophies of the pre-Socratic Greeks before those teachings had become contaminated by religion and concepts of an Ideal. He sought to return to those days more than two thousand years ago when strength was admired, when weakness was scorned, not so much to imitate them, but to stand at their summit before entering once more into the valley of philosophical inquiry. Having freed himself from the sentimentalities of Western culture, he sought to build a philosophy based upon the superiority of the strong and the inferiority of the weak.

At the core of his philosophy is what he considered to be the fundamental principle of the universe: *The Will to Power*. The will to be strong. The will to gain ascendance. The will to dominate and control. Nietzsche summarizes the concept in his work, *Beyond Good and Evil*:

Here one must think profoundly to the very basis and resist all sentimental weakness: life itself is *essentially* appropriation, injury, conquest of the strange and weak, suppression, severity, obtrusion of peculiar forms, incorporation, and at the least, putting it mildest, exploitation;—but why should one for ever use precisely these words on which for ages a disparaging purpose has been stamped? Even the organisation within which, as was previously supposed, the individuals treat each other as equal—it takes place in every healthy aristocracy—must itself, if it be a living and not a dying organisation, do all that towards other bodies, which the individuals within it refrain from doing to each other: it will have to be the incarnated Will to Power, it will endeavour to grow, to gain ground, attract to itself and acquire ascendancy—not owing to any morality or immorality, but because it *lives*, and because life *is* precisely Will to Power.³

Deeply embedded within Nietzsche's thought regarding the Will to Power is the nature of *inequality*. As Nietzsche had observed, all within the universe strives toward inequality, not equality. The strong survive; the weak perish. The same is true, he believed, for mankind. Those with a strong Will to Power must curtail the fear and

resentment of the weak who cry out for equality. "I do not wish to be mixed up and confused with these preachers of equality," Nietzsche writes in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. "'Men are not equal.' Nor shall they become equal! What would my love of the overman be if I spoke otherwise?"⁴

The *overman* for Nietzsche is the *superman* of human existence. He is the man with a strong Will to Power who will rise above the poverty and filth of the massive herd. He is the man who recognizes the virtue of inequality. He seeks to reverse a culture that has advocated compassion and pity for the weak. Nietzsche explains further:

I teach you the overman. Man is something that shall be overcome. What have you done to overcome him?

All beings so far have created something beyond themselves; and do you want to be the ebb of this great flood and even go back to the beasts rather than overcome man? What is the ape to man? A laughing stock or a painful embarrassment. And man shall be just that for the overman: a laughingstock or a painful embarrassment. You have made your way from worm to man, and much in you is still worm. Once you were apes, and even now, too, man is more ape than any ape.

Behold, I teach you the overman. The overman is the meaning of the earth. Let your will say: the overman *shall be* the meaning of the earth! I beseech you, my brothers, *remain faithful to the earth*, and do not believe those who speak to you of otherworldly hopes! Poison-mixers are they, whether they know it or not. Despisers of life are they, decaying and poisoned themselves, of whom the earth is weary: so let them go.⁵

Drawing upon his knowledge of the biological sciences, Nietzsche fully understood the importance of eugenics in the evolution of the overman. The strong breed the strong. Accordingly, he held genetic selection to be critical for human reproduction among the overmen. The strong must not yield to the passions and temptations of the weak.

At the same time, he recognized the importance of educational discipline in the proper development of this superior race. As Will Durant explains, Nietzsche believed that perfection without praise must be exacted among their youth. There must be few comforts; the body must be taught to suffer in silence; the will must be taught to obey and to command. "No libertarian nonsense!—no weakening of the physical and moral spine by independence and 'freedom!'" Durant continues,

A man so born and bred would be beyond good and evil; he would not hesitate to be *böse* if his purpose should require it; he would be fearless rather than good. 'What is good? . . . To be brave is good.' 'What is good? All that increases the feeling of power, the will to power, power itself, in man. What is bad? All that comes from weakness.' Perhaps the dominant mark of the superman will be love of danger and strife, provided they have a purpose; he will not seek safety first; he will leave happiness to the greatest number. . . .

Energy, intellect, and pride,—these make the superman. But they must be harmonized: the passions will become powers only when they are selected and unified by some great purpose which moulds a chaos of desires into the power of a personality. 'Woe to the thinker who is not the gardener but the soil of his plants!' Who is it that follows his impulses? The weakling: he lacks the power to inhibit; he is not strong enough to say No; he is a discord, a decadent. To discipline one's self—that is the highest thing. 'The man who does not wish to be merely one of the mass only needs to cease to be easy on himself.' To have a purpose for which one can be hard upon others, but above all upon one's self; to have a purpose for which one will do almost anything *except betray a friend*,—that is the final patent of nobility, the last formula of the superman.⁶

"You that are lonely today," writes Nietzsche, "you that are withdrawing, you shall one day be the people: out of you, who have chosen yourselves, there shall grow a chosen people—and out of them, the overman."⁷

Given this understanding of the overman, one has little difficulty surmising Nietzsche's view toward the leadership dyad. The weak must be subservient to the strong. The mere concept of *equality among men* is unnatural. It is ludicrous. In his work, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, Nietzsche explains this progression of natural dominance as follows:

I pursued the living; I walked the widest and the narrowest paths that I might know its nature. With a hundredfold mirror I still caught its glance when its mouth was closed, so that its eyes might speak to me. And its eyes spoke to me.

But wherever I found the living, there I heard also the speech on obedience. What-ever lives, obeys.

And this is the second point: he who cannot obey himself is commanded. That is the nature of the living.

This, however, is the third point that I heard: that commanding is harder than obeying; and not only because he who commands must carry the burden of all who obey, and because this burden may easily crush him. . . .

Hear, then, my word, you who are wisest. Test in all seriousness whether I have crawled into the very heart of life and into the very roots of its heart.

Where I found the living, there I found will to power; and even in the will of those who serve I found the will to be master.

That the weaker should serve the stronger, to that it is persuaded by its own will, which would be master over what is weaker still: this is the one pleasure it does not want to renounce. And as the smaller yields to the greater that it may have pleasure and power over the smallest, thus even the greatest still yields, and for the sake of power risks life. That is the yielding of the greatest: it is hazard and danger and casting dice for death.⁸

At the lowest level of Nietzsche's natural hierarchy of inequality are women. "What is womanish, what derives from the servile, and especially the mob hodgepodge," he writes in *Zarathustra*. "O my brothers—these small people, *they* are the overman's greatest danger,"⁹ he states. "A real man wants two things: danger and play. Therefore he wants woman as the most dangerous plaything. Man should be educated for war, and woman for the recreation of the warrior; all else is folly."¹⁰

Nietzsche's most blatant indictment of women, however, is noted in his work *Beyond Good and Evil* as he declares that woman is man's greatest shame, especially as she makes demands for equality with men:

Woman wishes to be independent, and therefore she begins to enlighten men about 'women as she is'—*this* is one of the worst developments of the general *uglifying* of Europe. For what must these clumsy attempts of feminine scientificity and self-exposure bring to light! Woman has so much cause for shame; in women there is so much pedantry, superficiality, schoolmasterliness, petty presumption, unbridledness, and indiscretion concealed . . .

To be mistaken in the fundamental problem of 'man and woman,' to deny here the profoundest antagonism and the necessity for an eternally hostile tension, to dream here perhaps of equal rights, equal training, equal claims and obligations: that is a *typical* sign of shallow-mindedness; . . . On the other hand, a man who has depth of spirit as well as of desires, and has also the depth of benevolence which is capable of severity and harshness, and easily confounded with them, can only think of woman as *Oriental*s do: he must conceive of her as a possession, as confinable property, as a being predestined for service and accomplishing her mission therein—he must take his stand in this matter upon the immense rationality of Asia, upon the superiority of the instinct of Asia, as the Greeks did formerly; those best heirs and scholars of Asia—who, as is well known, with their *increasing* culture and amplitude of power, from Homer to the time of Pericles, became gradually *stricter* towards woman, in short, more oriental. *How* necessary, *how* logical, even *how* humanely desirable this was, let us consider for ourselves!

The weaker sex has in no previous age been treated with so much respect by men as at present—this belongs to the tendency and fundamental taste of democracy. . . She is unlearning to *fear* man: but the woman who 'unlearns to fear' sacrifices her most womanly instincts. . . While she thus appropriates new rights, aspires to be 'master,' and inscribes 'progress' of woman on her flags and banners, the very opposite realises itself with terrible obviousness: *woman retrogrades*.¹¹

At the top of Nietzsche's hierarchy of inequality are the overmen, the supermen, those with a strong will to power. In his discussion of freedom as noted in *Twilight of the Idols*, he explains the ultimate greatness of man as follows:

For what is freedom? That one has the will to assume responsibility for oneself. That one maintains the distance which separates us. That one becomes more indifferent to difficulties, hardships, privation, even to life itself. That one is prepared to sacrifice human beings for one's cause, not excluding oneself. Freedom means that the manly instincts which delight in war and victory dominate over other instincts, for example, over those of 'pleasure.' The human being who has *become free*—and how much more the *spirit* who has become free—spits on the contemptible type of well-being dreamed of by shopkeepers, Christians, cows, females, Englishmen, and other democrats. The free man is a *warrior*.¹²

Indeed, in Nietzsche's world, only the strong are free, and in accordance with his hierarchy of inequality, it is the strong who should lead. Leadership is not a right assigned by others. It has nothing to do with social contracts as had been proposed by Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau: "they designate themselves," Nietzsche notes in his work, *Genealogy of Morals*, "or by the most clearly visible signs of this superiority, for example, as the 'rich,' the 'possessors.'"¹³ Throughout the history of evolution, the superior have dominated and exploited the inferior, and through fear and violence, they have shaped the world to their own advantage.

In his discussion of the origin of the first state, for example, he explains that it appeared as "a fearful tyranny, as an oppressive and remorseless machine, and went on working until this raw material of people and semi-animals was at last not only thoroughly kneaded and pliant but also *formed*." Nietzsche continues,

I employed the word 'state:' it is obvious what is meant—some pack of blond beasts of prey, a conqueror and master race which, organized for war and with the ability to organize, unhesitatingly lays its terrible claws upon a populace perhaps tremendously superior in numbers but still formless and nomad. That is after all how the 'state' began on earth: I think that sentimentalism which would have it begin with a 'contract' has been disposed of. He who can command, he who is by nature 'master,' he who is violent in act and bearing—what has he to do with contracts! One does not reckon with such natures; they come like fate, without reason, consideration, or pretext; they appear as lightning appears, too terrible, too sudden, too convincing, too 'different' even to be hated.¹⁴

With leadership based on one's Will to Power, it is understandable that Nietzsche would have little regard for democracy. Rule by the consent of the governed could only lead to mediocrity. The *have-nots* would constantly seek to take from those who *have*. The inferior would demand equality with the superior. Eventually, society would deteriorate into oblivion.

Instead, Nietzsche proposed an *order of castes* within society that would allow individual rights in accordance with individual abilities, for, as he notes in *The Antichrist*, "In every healthy society there are three types which condition each other and gravitate differently physiologically; each has its own hygiene, its own field of work, its own sense of perfection and mastery."¹⁵

Nietzsche's highest level within the *order of castes* would be those elite few who find their happiness where others find destruction:

in the labyrinth, in hardness against themselves and others, in experiments; their joy is self-conquest; asceticism becomes in them nature, need, and instinct. Difficult tasks are a privilege to them; to play with burdens which crush others, a recreation. Knowledge—a form of asceticism. They are the most venerable kind of man; that does not preclude their being the most cheerful and the kindest. They rule not because they want to but because they *are*; they are not free to be second.¹⁶

The second level of his *order of castes* would consist of those who are preeminently strong in muscle and temperament. He explains,

they are the guardians of the law, those who see to order and security, the noble warriors, and above all the king as the highest formula of warrior, judge, and upholder of the law. The second are the executive arm of the most spiritual, that which is closest to them and belongs to them, that which does everything gross in the work of ruling for them—their retinue, their right hand, their best pupils.¹⁷

The third level would include those who excel neither in spirit or physical strength, the workers, the drones of society, those, he explains, who find happiness in mediocrity:

A high culture is a pyramid: it can stand only on a broad base; its first presupposition is a strong and soundly consolidated mediocrity. Handicraft, trade, agriculture, *science*, the greatest part of art, the whole quintessence of *professional* activity, to sum it up, is compatible only with a mediocre amount of ability and ambition; that sort of thing would be out of place among exceptions; the instinct here required would contradict both aristocratism and anarchism. To be a public utility, a wheel, a function, for that one must be destined by nature: it is *not* society, it is the only kind of *happiness* of which the great majority are capable that makes intelligent machines of them. For the mediocre, to be mediocre is their happiness; mastery of one thing, specialization—a natural instinct.¹⁸

As we review this framework, it is important to understand that to Nietzsche, there was nothing unfair about this *order of castes*. To him it was "merely the sanction of a *natural order*, a natural lawfulness of the first rank, over which no arbitrariness, no 'modern idea' has any power." He explains further,

In all this, to repeat, there is nothing arbitrary, nothing contrived; whatever is *different* is contrived—contrived for the ruin of nature. The order of castes, the *order of rank*, merely formulates the highest law of life; the separation of the three types is necessary for the preservation of society, to make possible the higher and the highest types. The *inequality* of rights is the first condition for the existence of any rights at all.

Whom do I hate most among the rabble of today? The socialist rabble, the chandala apostles, who undermine the instinct, the pleasure, the worker's sense of satisfaction with his small existence—who make him envious, who teach him revenge. The source of wrong is never unequal rights but the claim of 'equal' rights.

What is *bad*? But I have said this already: all that is born of weakness, of envy, of *revenge*. The anarchist and the Christian have the same origin.¹⁹

It becomes apparent, then, that in Nietzsche's philosophy those with a strong Will to Power should rule over the masses, the herd. The elite should lead, the aristocratic few who possess the genius necessary to exact obedience from others. And, as Nietzsche explains, they do not lead because they choose to or because they want to. They lead because they *are*. They lead because they were *born* to lead. Leadership exists within their souls.

Certainly, Nietzsche is not the first to align himself with the Great Man Theory. His *great men*, however, differ from those of Plato, or Hobbes, or Hegel, for in no manner are his leaders connected to external superior forces. Their emergence is unrelated to an Ideal, or Divine Right, or the march of God in the world, or economic determinism. As he explains in *Twilight of the Idols*, such milieu theories are the theories of lunatics. For Nietzsche, great men are the end result of historical and physiological conditioning. Their leadership roles are unrelated to the age in which they live:

Great men are necessary, the age in which they appear is accidental; that they almost always become masters over their age is only because they are stronger, because they are older, because for a longer time much was gathered for them. The relationship between a genius and his age is like that between the strong and the weak, or between the old and the young: the age is relatively always much younger, thinner, more immature, less assured, more childish.

That in France today they think quite differently on this subject . . . that the milieu theory, which is truly a neurotic's theory, has become sacrosanct and almost scientific and has found adherents even among physiologists—that 'smells bad' and arouses sad reflections.²⁰

As we review Nietzsche's philosophy regarding the concept of leadership it becomes readily discernible that many of his ideas rep-

resent a dramatic departure from those of the philosophers we have previously discussed. He is the first, for example, to isolate men from one another. He is the first to abandon universal principles that unify man's existence. He is the first to define *liberty* and *justice* exclusively in terms of *power* and *dominance* rather than *right* and *responsibility*. For Nietzsche, the terms *power* and *right* are synonymous.

He is not the first, however, to acknowledge an inequality among men. He is not the first to relegate the role of women to one of subservience. Although the premise from which he constructs his philosophy is markedly different from those of his predecessors, many of his conclusions bear a strong resemblance to those philosophies he sought to decry.

Consequently, leaders who contend that they were *born to lead* can identify with the writings of Nietzsche. Likewise, those who believe that women are, by nature, inferior to men can find support for their beliefs in his teachings. Both ideas have their origin in his perceptions of inequality within the nature of man.

Nietzsche's belief in genetic evolution, however, distinguishes him from Plato and Aristotle, from Augustine and Aquinas, from Hobbes and Hegel in their attempts to delineate the concept of inequality among humans. Whereas they sought to buttress their arguments within a context of metaphysical principles, Nietzsche supported his proposals within a context of eugenics. He had read his Darwin. *Survival of the fittest*. Men are unequal because of "all that time had gathered for them."

It is understandable, then, that many of his critics find the undercurrents of Nazism to be linked directly to the teachings of Nietzsche. Certainly, there is a legitimate basis for their argument. *Master race*. *Triumph of the Will*. *Superman*. All evoke similarities between the teachings of Nietzsche and the rise of the Third Reich. Further similarities can be readily found within the political movements of the late twentieth century. *Racial superiority*. *Ethnic cleansing*. Nevertheless, other, more sympathetic critics effectively argue that there is little in Nietzsche's writings that would indicate support for such concepts.

Such ideas, however, are not peculiar to the realm of politics. Although more obscure, similar influences may be found in the corporate world. Thus, it is not unusual to find that those who have been

well-bred are frequently assigned to leadership positions in Western culture. As Jeffrey Pfeffer explains in his article, "The Ambiguity of Leadership," leadership positions are often filled on the basis of heredity. Consequently, in many corporate boardrooms, being of *good stock* serves as the measurement of one's ability. Glass ceilings and invisible caste structures often inhibit upward mobility. *What one can do* is often determined by *who one is*. *Race horses are not bred by mules*.

Certainly, there are other examples of the influence of Nietzsche within our organizations. Leaders who view the humanistic practices of modern management to be futile attempts to coddle the weak can also find support in the works of Nietzsche. *It's a dog eat dog world*, they exclaim. Concern and compassion have no place in the arena of competition. The weak are a burden to the strong; they have no claim to the trappings of the superior few. Indeed, unbridled capitalism has been constructed on this foundation. The strong should survive; the weak should perish. These are the teachings of Nietzsche. Likewise, these are the beliefs of many who lead within the corporate world of Western culture.

The same is true for leaders who define their superiority in terms of the strength of their wills. The Will to Power. The will to control and dominate. The will to gain ascendancy within their organizations. Self-reliant and self-contained, such leaders pay no heed to the contributions of others. They refuse to acknowledge a system in which they are simply a part. Highly disciplined, they are the self-made men of our society, responsible *to* no one, responsible *for* no one. They are free of compassion; they are free of concern.

Notes

1. Friedrich Nietzsche, "Twilight of the Idols," in Walter Kaufmann, ed. and trans., *The Portable Nietzsche* (New York: Penguin Books, 1976), 500.
2. Friedrich Nietzsche, "The Antichrist," in Walter Kaufmann, ed. and trans., *The Portable Nietzsche* (New York: Penguin Books, 1976), 571-572.
3. Friedrich Nietzsche, "Beyond Good and Evil," S. E. Frost, ed., *Masterworks of Philosophy* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1946), 689.
4. Friedrich Nietzsche, "Thus Spoke Zarathustra," in Walter Kaufmann, ed. and trans., *The Portable Nietzsche* (New York: Penguin Books, 1976), 213.
5. *Ibid.*, 124-125.
6. Will Durant, *The Story of Philosophy* (New York: Time Inc. Books Division, 1962), 396-397.
7. Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 189.
8. *Ibid.*, 226-227.

9. Ibid., 399.
10. Ibid., 178.
11. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 684-686.
12. Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, 542.
13. Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 29.
14. Ibid., 86.
15. Nietzsche, *The Antichrist*, 645.
16. Ibid., 645-646.
17. Ibid., 646.
18. Ibid., 646-647.
19. Ibid., 645-647.
20. Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, 547-548.