

Power: the two-way concept

The central question to all of us, addressing us in our very humanity, is: what can I do, what is in my power?

”What is in my power?” is a question that engages will, responsibility and action, but also lack of capacity, impotence and restraint. We all know the feeling of wanting but not being able to, of wanting and being able to but not having the right to; we all know the meaning of having our capacity and will being harmed and restricted by another will, and so on. And some of us are, terribly, more aware of this than others.

I would like, very briefly, to address a few questions concerning these two concepts that are central in this context: the two meanings of the word power. What is power, in each of the senses, and how do these two senses relate to each other? In Swedish, as in Latin, there are two different words: *potentia* and *potestas*. Speaking about power, we can determine a first, obvious sense: the government’s power, or who has the power of making decisions and of applying them, we can talk about police-power, juridical power, but also about the people’s power as in democracy, tyrannic power, and so forth. But ”power” can also be understood in a wider, more diffuse sense: power as ability to put something in movement, power as energy, strength, capacity, a force generating other things and forces. How can we understand this double-sense? In a very immediate way, we see how the two meanings interconnect in any kind of ethical questioning. How does my own power relate to the different forms of power that surround me, influence me and that I myself, perhaps without knowing it, participate in, is part of? To what structures of power does my own relate, which are the ones that I constitute myself?

We often pose the two senses of the word as being in opposition one with another. This is by no means strange, regarding different historical and political situations. Indeed, it often seems that power is something other than ourselves, something exterior, often menacing, always restricting, something that keeps us from exercising our own power. There are, and have always been, different political and religious powers that are in conflict with our own forces, with what we wish to be in our own power. This way of understanding things is hardly surprising, only natural and legitimate, as any knowledge of the world will tell us.

Still, I have the strongest conviction that it would be of interest to us to interrogate this seemingly obvious subordination of our power, as in ”strength”, ”force” or *potentia*, to the exterior power, as in *potestas*: I think that an analysis of how the two senses of the word ”power” relate to each other could result in an important augmentation of our own force and power.

This has been the task of a certain number of philosophers, namely those who we usually call ”political philosophers”. One of them was Spinoza, living in 17th century Holland. One of his central thoughts is defining man as a complex network of powers, forces – physical and mental – that function together in a certain way. The definition applies both to the way an individual is constituted, and to how different individuals function together. All individuals, according to Spinoza, can be defined as a certain amount of power connected in a specific way. It is then these specific connections that determine the different situations that arise when individuals meet and interact. When different powers, as in forces, meet, what we call ”structures of power” occur: a structure of power is thus nothing but a meeting of different types of forces. What does this mean? What we call ”power” is a certain, often very complex situation composed by different forces where certain of these subordinate to others. We can speak of this in physical terms: a physically weaker force, for instance, can be subordinated to another, physically stronger: that is an example of structure of power. But often, things are more complicated than that:

our physical forces may be great, however we may still be subordinated because of other reasons. If we are afraid, or lacking in self-confidence, or have been convinced that what is happening is "natural" or in "in the order of things", "unavoidable", for instance, a physically equal or even weaker force can make us submit, and so forth. Defining power in this way already gives us a possibility of reflecting upon how we relate to different structures of power: we might be able to analyze how our own power interacts with others, and why we subordinate ourselves to certain things; in short, we can start thinking that what happens is by no means evident and unavoidable, but structures itself from many premises and factors where we are, ourselves, always already involved.

Yet there is also something else in this thought that seems to me of great importance. From the definition of power as an encounter between different forces, we can understand that what we call power is never an autonomous, self-standing power, but always dependent on this very interaction. The encounter with a structure of power, of whatever kind it may be, is always about myself in relation to something else. Power always needs what it has power on, or applies itself on, in order to be said to exist. A king is no king without his subjects, the master couldn't be a master without his slave, an enforcement can't be unless something is enforced. In other words, we are never completely without power, never impotent, since we always, consciously or unconsciously, in one way or another, participate in what is called structures of power. Power is thus never something external or foreign, even when we have this impression: we are, all of us, always already comprehended in the play or the interaction where the very situation of power occurs.

What I am saying here might seem upsetting. Naturally, this does not mean that the oppressed collaborates with his or her oppressor, or legitimates his power. In all those disastrous and horrible structures of power that surround us, close by or from a distance, there are very obviously situations of real and palpable abuse, oppression, violation of the most basic individual and collective human rights. Many of us have an extremely personal and painful experience of this.

However there is, I believe, a strong point to be made in analyzing the structures of power, in both senses, in this way. In the first place, we can realize that what we call power always needs our own power in order to establish itself, in other words, that nothing that occurs is "natural" or "unavoidable", completely out of reach. In analyzing what different types of structures of power that we participate in and that we confront in different ways, we can also come closer to an understanding of where our own power is situated, and this understanding can help us liberating it, can help us to refuse its compromising and collaborating in defining an oppressing power, can help us to use it in order to build another system based upon a richer, more adequate context. What we do, then, does not consist simply in a critique of the legitimacy of the structures of power, but also in an analysis of how these structures function, of what governs them, and how they are applied. What fears, what weaknesses, what recognitions and inabilities, which can all be transformed into courage, strength, will and ability. This is a task not only for philosophers, but, by all means, for all of us, in public and in privacy, and it's here that the question "what can I do?" has yet to rise to its strongest meaning.

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