CHAPTER I

The anatomy of power

Power and ethics must at first sight seem strange bedfellows even in a book title. Power corrupts; ethics is designed to improve. Power constrains, enforces, overcomes; ethics liberates, at least in so far as it requires, and as it would therefore promote, the freedom of all those it attracts to its high ground. A book on power and ethics would be expected, then, to cover the wars between these opposing parties, and to plot if possible the victory of the latter over the former.

Not quite so.

The most obvious impression made by the first sight of these terms in tandem can yield, on a little further reflection, to prospects of more positive relationships. It is not altogether unusual to come upon the expressions in literature, or the experience in oneself, of images of desirable goodness for which the power to realise them seems somehow lacking. Then talk of a power for good becomes entirely natural, and, since goodness is that which ethics describes and, indeed, prescribes, power and ethics look more like allies when before this they had looked like natural enemies.

The nature of ethics is a later concern, the nature of power more immediate; and it must already be obvious from the few preceding remarks that the broadest possible understanding must be sought, resisting the temptation to confine attention to stereotypes and to common impressions, however widespread these may appear to be, even in the higher literature on the subject.

Introducing a book which is most frequently recommended these days to those who inquire after the nature of power,
Steven Lukes advises against the determination to define it. The book itself is a collection of representative and authoritative views on the nature of power, and Lukes’ introduction a preliminary survey and assessment which finds shortcomings at every new advance. ‘Each does say something true and relevant’, Lukes admits, and he summarises the accumulating truth as follows:

The effects of power seem clearly to bear some relation to intention and will: someone whose actions regularly subvert his intentions and wants can scarcely be called powerful. The outcome of resistance is certainly relevant where comparisons of power are at issue. Affecting behaviour is certainly a centrally important form of power . . . The cooperative and communicative aspects of empowerment certainly require attention, as do the ways in which power maintains social systems and advances conflicting collective interests within them.

‘Perhaps’, he then adds, ‘a generally satisfying definition can be devised by fitting these various insights together into a single picture?’ This generally satisfying definition might be construed as follows: ‘Power is that which achieves the realisation of one’s intentions and will, affecting to that end one’s own behaviour and that of others, and overcoming resistance in both cases. It is frequently a function of social systems by which it is communicated and propagated to the advancement of collective interests.’ But Lukes doubts that such cumulative definitions can ever be successful. Instead he himself sets out in pursuit of more descriptive accounts of what he calls the outcomes of power and the locus of power. The former he describes as that which serves the interests of the powerful, and there follows a lengthy analysis of interests; the latter, the locus of power, is not often easily located in single responsible individuals and may have to be found by seeking groups who benefit from collective practices or systems, or those who change the course of events. Yet, after all of this Lukes remains sceptical of definition. To the question, what is power? or its equivalents, he would wish to say only this: ‘in our ordinary unreflective judgments and comparisons of power, we normally know what we mean and have little difficulty in understanding one another, yet every attempt at a
single general answer to the question has failed and seems likely to fail.\(^4\)

That, however, will not do. There is something unpalatable about concluding that we normally know what we mean by power, yet seem likely to fail in any general answer to the question of its nature. There is even something untoward about such a negative conclusion when it follows such a fine summary analysis of so many of the aspects and manifestations of power.

The word ‘power’ looks in so many ways like the word ‘myth’. Its first impressions are vague and diffuse, but decidedly pejorative. It is something that is probably bad, and for that very reason, it is tempting. Yet, like myth, it seems to name something that will not go away, something endemic in the human condition; and on a little reflection it begins to appear that we have little option but to rehabilitate in our philosophies the thing so named, and to work towards a more neutral and comprehensive meaning of the term than those which are normally current in unreflecting discourse. Lukes may well be right if what he means to suggest is that we cannot produce at the outset a generally satisfying single definition of power, since power is clearly not a simple thing, no more than myth is a simple thing. That may be why myth is often used to describe power in practice, as in myths of kingship, or of social contracts. But initial definitions need not be designed to tell all about their objects, and write \textit{finis} to the subject in that sense. They may be designed simply to help identify the object through all its manifold transformations until it disappears into the depths of the sources of present existence or into the unpredictable future. And that minimum we may require in the case of power in any book about it: something sufficient to establish the basic family resemblance wherever the phenomenon appears, whenever the word is used.

Lukes was concerned mainly, as were the others in the volume he edited, and most writers on the subject, with the social, or at least the interpersonal, manifestations of power. But power, as many of its myths suggest, may come from the trans-human sphere, and, as many an anguished confession testifies, it has intra-individual reference. We seem to be in the
grip of powers within us, as often as we find ourselves under their external sway. An initial identifying analysis of it, then, should be open to questions about its cosmic source and its private presence. And, as has already been hinted, it must be capable of traversing the moral, the immoral, and perhaps the amoral spheres of behaviour.

A. P. D’Entrèves’ *The Notion of the State*, one of the clearest and most comprehensive accounts of the theory and practice of political government in the West, contains, in fact, an analysis of power which might, with adjustments, be put to much broader use. D’Entrèves is concerned with the development of the state, not with the notion of power for its own sake; in effect, power is just one of the notions which he uses in order to plot this development in theory and practice. Freely admitting the similarity of his analysis to that of Max Weber, D’Entrèves describes political government in terms of force, power, and authority, treating these as elements in the make-up of the state, and appearing to discover that none of these can appear without some hint of the presence of at least one of the others. It is this tripartite distinction of essentially interrelated elements that suggests the initial definition we need.

Force, then, for D’Entrèves is the factor that is dominant in the state or kingdom ruled by the Machiavellian prince, and force is detected and measured by the sheer efficacy with which the state is secured against external threat and internal disruption; it is often detected also by such negative indicators as the absence of a rule of law and of the influence of moral value to which the prince’s choice of action might be subjected. Power, next, is recognised as the dominant factor of government where the rule of law holds sway, for then the use of what might otherwise be called force without more ado, is applied and regulated by a system of law to which all can appeal, both government and governed, and by which all are constrained. Authority, finally, names that factor by which a system of law, any system of law, is itself legitimised or validated, if only because it indicates the common goals that motivate a social group which takes the law to be obligatory upon itself. Authority refers in the first instance to the operative influence of
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certain values – order, freedom, or something as diffuse and evocative as ‘the common good’ – in the activity of those who rule and are ruled, values which legitimise or validate, in short, which justify before the court of reason, the expedient of recourse to a constraining system of law. Power refers to the operative influence of a system of law in the activities of rulers and ruled; force, in the absence of these two, to the operative influence of might indifferent to right.

These three factors – force, power, and authority – are required for any adequate account of the theory and practice of government, of states or comparable social entities, and, however some analysts might wish to confine analysis to one of these, and to exclude all reference to the others, in the name perhaps of empiricism or ‘realism’, it is difficult to find an example of human society in which one is operative to the total exclusion of the others. But that conviction cuts both ways. If it would be deemed cynical to suggest that a human society could be secured by naked force, it could equally well be deemed naive to think that a social group could for long cohere in free-wheel pursuit of general moral values.

The conviction of the need for some presence and interrelation of these three factors in any adequate account of a governed, or an ordered, society, is balanced in D’Entrèves’ book by fulsome appreciation of the essential contribution made to political wisdom by the most adamant exponents of each factor in turn, even when they appeared to see their favoured factor dominate to the point of exclusion of others. So, the ‘political realists’ who wish to tear away all verbal illusions and simply to look at the facts (hence their claim to realism), who concentrate on the force factor and see the state (if their more recent representatives use that term at all) as nothing more than a system of force-relations between individuals, have this at least to their credit, that they realise the ‘fictive’ nature of such societies as are now commonly called states. In other words they realise the extent to which the state is a human artifact – as Hobbes put it, the state is ‘an artificial man’. This need not be taken to endorse the more naive of social contract theories of the origin of human society, or to
deny Aristotle’s insight that humans are by nature animals who live in a polis or its many equivalents. Political realists need not be taken to deny that there is something anterior to the free-floating decision of individuals to co-operate socially; or that social groupings, even if they be but extended families, can be said to form individuals as much as individuals can be said to form structured societies. But these force theories of the state can claim to their credit a sturdy resistance to mystifying ideas of corporate personality, personified abstractions of their nature subversive of all individual autonomy.

Similarly, those who analyse political society predominantly, if not exclusively, in terms of power, those who believe that law is the very nature and extent of government, whether the law be promulgated by ‘the One, or the Few, or the Many’, can count amongst their achievements the end of subordinations of secular governments to religious pretenders, even if they cannot always claim to their merit the facilitating of those pluralist societies which too rigid a view of the sovereignty of law seemed at times to prevent. Finally, those few brave souls who might still wish to introduce moral values to modern political thought, who would see society predominantly, though they would scarcely dare to see it exclusively, as the locus and pursuit of such values, those believers in authority above power and force, might reasonably see in their preference for value over fact the only effective antidote to that modern poison which, in the name of the freedom of the masses to govern themselves, results only too often in the totalitarianism of majority rule.

Nevertheless it is the impressions of mutual need that these three factors seem naturally to reveal, each for some complementary presence of the others, and not the impressions conveyed by partisan accounts of their individual achievements, that must provide the impetus towards the more general definition of the term ‘power’ that might prove most useful for the purposes of this book. Instead of confining power to that factor in the construing of human societies which consists in the existence and exercise of legal systems, as D’Entrèves does, suppose one were to consider power as a phenomenon that
effects things, that brings about states of affairs, but tends to oscillate between the extremes of force and authority, both of these being understood more or less as D’Entrèves defined them. Some of the reasons for this change would better appear later, when for instance it is shown that law and values are alternative forms of human morality, so that they can scarcely be held so distinct as to define alternatively power and authority – although there will always be a sense in which some very generally perceived values will resist codification, if only because they must be held in a position from which they must justify codes of any kind in the most comprehensive of human societies. In a similar vein in another later context the possibility of any clear distinction between state law and morality must be challenged. And, as far as the idea of power is concerned, de Jouvenel is shortly to be called to witness that power seems inherently inclined, in the human condition at least, to emerge as raw force, and that it then constantly needs the control and conscious corrective of operative moral values in order that it should cease to be destructive of the freedom and dignity of human beings.

The suggestion is that an initial definition of power, for general purposes of identification, could derive from a slight rearrangement of D’Entrèves’ three elements: power is a phenomenon which brings about states of affairs and which can be located on a continuum between the extremes of force and authority. It is possible for it to appear as pure force or pure authority, although it is more normally in our experience located somewhere on the continuum between these extremes, and its precise location on this continuum can be plotted by the relative presence or absence of the properly moral factor. It remains to be determined later what a properly moral factor is, but, since it is impossible to do everything thoroughly at the same time, take it that where a rational will in pursuit of a value (or an anti-value), perceived by that will itself to be such, is operative, the moral factor is present. Where that factor is altogether absent, power takes the form of force; where that factor is exclusively operative in bringing about a state of affairs, power takes the form of authority.
It would take but a little reflection to realise that the alternatives are seldom, if ever, found in pure form. The play of power at what are called in popular game-show parlance the vegetable and mineral levels, and even at the animal level if humanity is excluded, might seem at first sight to provide a broad panoply of the instances of power as force. But what if the resources of the physical, the vegetable, and the animal realms are being manipulated by human beings for their own goals? If these in turn are in pursuit of values or anti-values, must we not then detect some presence of power as authority rather than the pure presence of force. Flooding takes thousands of lives. A natural disaster? A phenomenon of raw force? But, if the greed of developers stripped surrounding lands of trees which could retain soil, and the soil water, is the ensuing disaster really an example of pure force? As the God of Genesis said, having decided to make male and female in its image: ‘let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth’ (Genesis 1, 26). To the extent that that dominion is exercised, to the extent that it is exercised in pursuit of moral ends, good or bad, the resulting states of affairs might better be attributed to power in the mixed form of force and authority.

Mention of the ordering and arranging God of Genesis may well tempt one to carry that last thought a good deal further. For this God is surely a moral being, inspired in all actions only by the highest of moral values, and, when the idea of this God creating out of nothing develops from the Genesis image of ordering all things in providential fashion, it becomes quite difficult for Jews and Christians to see in the emergence of any state of affairs in this world an instance of power in terms of pure force. For them, every single state of affairs that exists and is active upon us is held in being and in activity by this divine rational will, a will motivated by moral values such as faithfulness, loving kindness, justice, or others which the subsequent books of the Bible may suggest. That is presumably why believers adversely affected by disease or other ‘natural forces’ which do harm to people, ask the question, ‘why me?’ Just as
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some of the same believers, seeing some others relieved of disease or of the worse effects of ‘natural disasters’ ask the question, ‘why them?’

Christian theologians who can see how quickly this topic opens up before them the daunting vistas of theodicy, the task of justifying God’s ways to man, can sometimes move just as quickly to distance God as much as possible from the empirical states of affairs which immediately harm individuals, and just as unexpectedly sometimes heal them. God’s all-power, some will say, is not a manipulative, interfering, tinkering power vis-à-vis intra-mundane causes, but the original bringing-into-existence power, and subsequently a power of ‘letting be’. Such solutions seem more verbal than real. God can also let be the killer tiger whose ‘fearsome symmetry’ on this account of the matter God has somehow forged; and letting be is not in all cases the way in which love as a moral value rather than indifference as at times at least an anti-value, might be expected to manifest itself. It is not necessary, and it would not be wise, to enter here into the treacherous marshlands of theodicy. Suffice it to say that all the efforts to produce a theodicy, from the most ingenious to the most evasive, bear their own testimony to the fact that it is extremely difficult for any believer in a creator God to point to any state of affairs in the resulting creation as an instance of power as pure force. The whole must seem a play of moral power, and that means power in the form of authority, rather than power in the form of pure force. Reference to a creator God makes this point relevant well beyond the religions of Judaism and Christianity. Indeed the greatest tour de force in Western literature in the effort to show that the last detail in what might otherwise be seen as the effects of the force of impersonal fate is in reality the effect of the minute care of personal providence, Boethius’ The Consolation of Philosophy, has persistently puzzled commentators who search for some distinctively Christian elements within it. But that, it might be said, is to look at states of affairs brought about, from the point of view of their sources or creative origins, their authors. Would they all seem like exercises of authority still if looked at from the viewpoint of those
they affect? For rational agents can be affected by states of affairs as much as they can be the authors of these. There is a social, as well as a cosmic, dimension to the play of power.

Rational agents act upon each other as often as they act in consort. Both sorts of activity are characteristic, and perhaps together constitutive, of human societies. When they act in consort and produce the intended effects, the distinction of power in the form of force from power in the form of authority should not be problematic. In such cases power will always take the form of authority; only in the most exceptional cases will moral agents act together without any morally identifiable intent, or any consequent moral responsibility; act, in other words, as a grouping of bodies without reason or responsibility (and even here the cosmic concept of a creator God could turn the resulting release of power into an instance of authority!). But when moral agents act upon each other it is entirely possible that what might be seen as an exercise of power as authority, when looked at from the point of the moral agent who initiates the action, may be in fact experienced as an exercise of power as raw force from the point of view of the moral agent acted upon, the receiver or the patient. If I am physically restrained from doing the evil act which I fully intend to do, then what I now do instead of that evil deed – pace my prison cell, fuming – will seem to me, and indeed be, the effect of power as force and not of power as authority, even though my jailer, who was inspired by ethical motives in so restraining me, will see from his point of view an act of power as authority. Yet, had I been persuaded by cogent reasons to love my enemy instead of doing him the injury I fully intended to inflict, or had I been persuaded to lock myself away voluntarily until the likelihood of inflicting injury was over, I should presumably see the resultant love, or even the confinement, as an exercise of power as authority from my point of view also. In both cases it could clearly be said that power was exercised upon me, and in both cases it could be said that the power exercised was from the point of view of its source or original agency power as authority; yet in one case the further effect which this exercise of power produced, now through the inter-