

POWER OVER POWER

*What power means in ordinary life,
how it is related to acting freely,
and what it can contribute to a
renovated ethics of education*

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The Very Idea of Power

In 1887 Lord Acton wrote a severely critical review of Mandell Creighton's *History of the Papacy during the Reformation* and sent a personal letter to the author in which he defended his point that popes and kings ought to be held to account for the criminal acts they authorize. That letter was the context for Acton's mighty maxim: "Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely."¹ Although it remains the best-known sentence ever written about power, it is only a partial truth.

There are two levels of meaning in Acton's aphorism: (1) that *power* tends to corrupt, and (2) that absolute power (always) *corrupts*. Perhaps the nefarious Nixon White House Staff is a good enough example of the first sense. Its members all gave the impression, and some gave testimony, that they could not resist the corrupting effects of their powerful new positions, and that they were a little surprised at their own debasement.

But what are we to make of someone like the killer who, feeling his personal state to be impotent and wholly lacking in self-respect or the respect of others, chooses to become somebody by killing a well-known person, or a lot of less well-known people? This sort of corruption surely comes from powerlessness and not from power. Rollo May has gathered case studies to support the view that precisely those who do not develop a sense of, or a position of power in the everyday social world are

the ones most likely to become corrupted psychologically and morally in ways that lead to violence.²

It may well be then that human beings have multiple sources and talents for corruption, but the question remains whether absolute power always *corrupts*. I would challenge the very possibility of *absolute* power, if by absolute we mean "accountable to no one." I argue later that all power is delegated and because of this it is accountable to those whose consent and delegation support the power-holder's position. I will use absolute power to mean "much effective social power." Stalin, Hitler, and Joe McCarthy are clear enough examples that power *corrupts*, but what of other powerful people such as Lincoln, Gandhi, Franklin Roosevelt, and Martin Luther King whose power did not apparently corrupt them? What of a mother's near absolute power over her infant, or of the tutor's power over Rousseau's Emile? It is no good to say that although people like these have wielded great influence and effected enormous social changes they have not used power, or they were not people of power simply because they were not corrupted by their success. Such argument begs the question of how power, in all of its social forms, is related to corruption. It will not do simply to say that if what we took to be power did not actually corrupt, then it must have been something else posing as power (charisma, leadership, influence, or moral authority). Power is power even though it comes in many different forms, is used by many different kinds of people for all sorts of purposes, and is difficult to manage well.

Nevertheless, public suspicion of power per se lends support to Acton's presumption, and his nifty phrasing will continue to mislead people in their thinking about power, especially those who feel they have none themselves and are victims of those who do. Edgar Z. Friedenberg's epigrammatical twist—"All weakness tends to corrupt, and impotence corrupts absolutely"³—is amusing and partially true, but it will never defeat the original for mass appeal because most of us, while

recognizing that we are (relatively) weak, do not want to think we are corrupt, as well.

The effect of Acton's aphorism has been to simplify our view of a complex concept. For this he is not so much to blame as are those who quote him heedlessly. Power is complex and can be defined only in terms of its various facets. An appreciation of power's complexity makes it possible for one to re-examine its place in ethics.

Facets of Power

My image for the labor of defining the facets of power is that of the lapidary at his stone. Power is the stone, identified by Niccolò Machiavelli half a millennium ago, and like Mephistopheles it was broken away from its place in the coalescence of human psychology and left to develop an independent and infernal character of its own. The banished stone has remained nearly untouched since the quondam Florentine statesman stood before it, the sun at his back for a closer look, and cloaked it with one of the longest shadows in all of Western civilization.

The stone has a rough, hard crust and is believed to possess esoteric evil qualities. (Diamonds were at one time thought poisonous, too.) My lapidary chips at it and, like a sculptor, seeks the forms contained within—forms that he believes are there to be discovered, displayed, and reconciled with ordinary life.

What then does the idea of power mean?⁴ Bertrand Russell argued for the importance of the question when he said that "the fundamental concept in social science is Power, in the same sense in which energy is the fundamental concept in physics."⁵ He elaborated briefly by asserting that the "laws of social dynamics are laws which can only be stated in terms of power, not in terms of this or that form of power . . . power, like energy, must be regarded as passing from any one of its forms into any other, and it should be the business of social science to

seek the laws of such transformations."⁶ Russell then stipulated his definition of power as "the production of intended effects"⁷ and went on to describe various types of power, leaving the search for power transformations to others.

That power is a fundamental concept in social science, if not the fundamental concept, I take to be a given. To begin with, power is inherent in social life. We cannot choose whether power shall be present as a quality of relations among people; we can only choose whether to think about it, to understand it, and thereby improve our chances of managing it. Whenever at least two people are related in some way relevant to at least one intended action, power is present as a facet of that relationship. The minimum and necessary conditions of power are two people and one plan for action. This means that power is partly psychological and partly social.

Power is never only psychological: it is not merely a property of some minds and not others, nor is it a special individual trait or motive as Winter,⁸ McClelland,⁹ and psychologists before them have tried to show. It does not make sense to think of a recluse, a hermit in complete isolation, as having power or being powerful, no matter what is in his mind. We say such a person lost what power he had in the very act of retiring from the world of social relations and public notice. Other psychological traits and properties of individual minds such as capricious thought, whimsical moods, and deluding imagination are easy to associate with isolation from other persons; power is not.

But power is never only social either. At least two persons are necessary, and that makes power at least social, but more is implied by the concept. One of the persons must intend an action and have a plan—no matter how inchoate—to do something. The mental activity of the planner involves foresight with some degree of organization and control of information. The mental activity of the other includes some form of consent to the planner or to the plan itself. The relation between the one's intention to act and the other's consent to that intention is close to the heart of power theory. This relation suggests

another facet of power, namely, that it always exists in connection with a state of relative powerlessness. One consents to the other, and transfers power with that consent.

In addition to being social and psychological, power is also always instrumental. It is a means; it is not a commodity. The Latin root of power is *posse*, to be able. Power is thus an action idea that exists in the mediation of events and must be judged by its effects. Although always of a situation, power can emerge from or precipitate particular events.

Each of these three facets of power needs further explanation.

The Social Aspect of Power: Order Out of Chaos

Chaos, the shapeless, turbid mixture of all potentialities, has been both the genesis of social life and a hazard to human survival. It posed the first metaphysical question, all answers to which were premised on the idea of relation. Chaos contained all seeds of all things, but none in relation to another, and because of this it was everything and nothing; it was intolerable. In chaos there was no pattern to the modes in which one thing stood to another; neither causal nor consanguine connections held things together. In chaos, the metaphor of absolute freedom, thinking itself is impossible because thinking depends on the ordered relation of ideas. Relation is the primordial philosophical idea by which we come to understand all other ideas. There is no good without better and bad, no truth without certainty and doubt, no justice without fairness and inequity, no freedom without independence and enslavement, no reason without faith and ignorance—no order without chaos.

The idea of relation is also the first principle of social life, but here it is quickly transformed into organization. Organization is present as an aspect of the relations among individuals at every level of social life, from the mating pair and subsequent family to the nation-state and multinational corporation.

It should be pointed out that organization includes both the traditional arrangements and customs that have developed in response to various threats to survival (e.g., extended families, ritualized beliefs in messiahs or witches, food taboos), and the intentionally created superstructures of a society already self-consciously systematical (e.g., I.B.M., I.R.S., A.F.L.-C.I.O., the interstate highway system). In a nation of more than 200 million social beings, chaos is certain to break out frequently and irregularly—but order will recuperate and organization will recur because power abhors a vacuum. The dynamic of human organization is not the battle of power and morality, it is the battle of power and chaos.

Organization is an expression of our awareness that we are interdependent, and that in modern circumstances the very numbers of people make this interdependence essential for the maintenance of life. The recognition of this interdependent condition leads us to create the organizations necessary for accomplishing what the individual cannot do either alone or working independently in large numbers. This ability to organize for work in concert is the genius both of human civilization and of non-human civilization, such as the social systems of the ant, the bee, and the wolf.

The two oldest of human traits are the bases of our tendency to organize in response to the threat of chaos. One of these traits is the emotional disposition *to be related* with others in a bond of affinity; the other is the need *to be able* in accomplishing plans. The first is called love, the second power. In this view love and power are connected, not as opposites, but as the basic human elements in organized social life. Great acts of love, as well as acts of other kinds, depend for their realization on power.

The claim that love and power belong together may sound strange given the bias our culture has developed, following a biblical tradition, in separating the two as opposites. It would be more in keeping with this tradition to say that organized

human life is based on love and threatened by power. There are other views of love—the Platonic, the Romantic, and the Freudian—that see it as a kind of power, or a context for power relations; but our culture has made it difficult to think of power in terms of love, or love in terms of power. It is usually assumed that power is the ethical antithesis of love, that it means hubris, a wanton disregard for others, violence, and selfish exploitation—immoral means to immoral gains. Power is often associated automatically with authoritarianism, and those who seem to covet (or simply to understand) power are met with furrowed brows and the straight-faced admonition that “love conquers all.” The irony of such a ferocious notion of love, alas, goes unappreciated by the most earnest lovers of love.¹⁰

Organization and power are therefore conjugal concepts. They are bundled together. Where there is organization, there is power; where there is power, there is organization. If organization is inevitable in social life then it is also true that power is inevitable in all social relations. Power is present or potential as a quality of relationships not only in the courtrooms, war rooms, and boardrooms, but also in the nursery, kitchen, bedroom, schoolroom, and the ubiquitous waiting room, too.

Every organization is a matter of at least two people (but there is no maximum number) and at least one idea for action. Usually an organization operates with a system of ideas for a number of interrelated actions. These two factors make organization conceptually very similar to power, and the similarity holds as the elements of organization are expressed in more detail. At times, it is not clear whether there is a significant difference between saying something is “an organizational aspect of power,” or a “power aspect of organization.” These are words to be used in talking about each other.

Hierarchy. The people in an organization are usually related in a formal or informal ordering. Hierarchy is a ranked ordering, a system of priorities or prescriptions for attending to

assignments, and for making the assignments in the first place. It is a principle of order which is close to the essence of governing in all of its familiar political forms. Furthermore, as Robert Michels¹¹ has pointed out, in all organizations of half a dozen or more members there seems to be an irresistible tendency toward an emergent leadership, toward oligarchy. On the face of it, this tendency (toward rule by the few) would seem to contradict democracy (rule by the many) but this conflict need not be serious when other aspects of power, namely, delegation and consent, are considered.

Mixed in with this "iron law of oligarchy" is another tendency, the inclination to distrust those in leadership positions when their lead is difficult to follow, or to swallow. In democratic, or demidemocratic arrangements, such distrust is organized in different ways—opposition parties, special interest groups, the journalistic media, dissenting intellectuals, and so on. This tendency to distrust individuals in a hierarchical system acts to guard the long-term interests of those who support a governing hierarchy. The hierarchy itself has become a permanent value in social life, inherent to organization just as organization is inherent to social relations, but any given set of individuals has only temporary tenure in the hierarchy. This is a formal representation of the great democratic principle of rule by law and not by individuals.

A central but seldom appreciated virtue of hierarchical organization is that individuals are vulnerable in direct relation to their visible responsibility. If someone can be identified as responsible for X, and if X fails or is judged to be wrong, then the responsible individual can be held to account. This aspect of hierarchy may be more clearly appreciated when contrasted with another form of government control known as bureaucracy, or the "rule of an intricate system of bureaus in which no men, neither one nor the best, neither the few nor the many, can be held responsible, and which could properly be called rule by Nobody."¹² Hannah Arendt has suggested that this may be the most tyrannical of all forms of government:

If, in accord with traditional political thought, we identify tyranny as government that is not held to give account of itself, rule by Nobody is clearly the most tyrannical of all, since there is no one left who could even be asked to answer for what is being done. It is this state of affairs, making it impossible to localize responsibility and to identify the enemy, that is among the most potent causes of the current world-wide rebellious unrest, its chaotic nature, and its dangerous tendency to get out of control and to run amuck.¹³

Notice again the implied alternative of clear relations in visible, accountable, hierarchical organization as the answer to chaos. When the organization is dissipated and its identity dissembling, chaos creeps in like the London fog (of old) and obscures the rise of tyranny. Arendt's view runs close to the lines of Plato's argument that the excessive freedom of democracy leads inflexibly to despotism.¹⁴

Delegation and Consent. Hierarchy is a tendency to organize for leadership in concerted action. To act in concert requires some number of individuals and separate parts for them to play, and it requires agreement as to plan. In other words, it requires both delegation and consent.

The idea of delegation, or division of labor, is the heart of hierarchy and it is close to the heart of power, too. The person who has a plan and someone else who can help carry it out is more powerful than the person who has only a plan. The effectiveness of delegation depends on a group's acceptance of its leader and consent to the plan, at least as it affects individual obligations. Delegation works both from a group to the leader, as in electing a president who is thus delegated power to lead the electors, and from the leader to a group, as in a boss's giving orders to employees who must then perform their delegated labors. Both senses are governed by the same principles of division of labor and consent.

Every effective governing order, including the tyrannous, is dependent on acceptance, or the consent of the governed. The

power of a governing order is great, but that power is grounded in majority consent that may at any time be withdrawn. In this way one can argue that the withdrawal of consent is the final power act. Consent is a form of control over power.

Authority is often said to be "legitimate" power. When a group acquiesces to power claims on grounds that these are acceptable and deserved, the group transforms power into authority. Authority based on forced acquiescence is tenuous for it is extremely vulnerable to the withdrawal of consent which can destroy it. Refusal to respect authority is the power over power which is present in the minds of all persons. Individual refusal to respect authority is not the same sort of power as organized refusal, but the two share a principle: power itself is delegated through consent, and without consent power inevitably is reduced to force, and thus eventually it is lost.

The Psychological Aspect of Power: Conformation of Consent

If delegation is central to understanding the social aspect of power, consent is central to understanding its psychological basis. Consent is the other side of delegation. Indeed, consent can be conceived as a sort of delegation—the delegation of power to the power claimant by way of accepting his claim. An elected official is delegated power by the voters who express their consent in votes; the official loses power when recalled or by failing to be re-elected. A boss exercises powers of delegation through the consent of the workers to work; the boss loses power through voluntary absenteeism, work slow-downs, sabotage, and strikes. The withdrawal of consent is the power most feared by the powerful.

Kinds of Consent. The complex concept of consent has two main categories of meaning: consenting attitudes and consenting actions. These categories can be separated for purposes of analysis of the concept, and it is possible to maintain that a consenting attitude need not lead to a consenting action, and

that a consenting action can be effected without an attitude of consent. There are difficulties, however, in maintaining this distinction when one turns to the analysis of social events.

In political theory it is customary to think that the right to exercise authority is grounded in the attitude of consent. Political agency is a function of permission and the accord of various beliefs, just as authority is finally a function of respect. But beliefs may be held, permission and respect given, either passively or actively. Consent is an idea that takes many forms along a passive/active continuum, no single form of which can stand as the sole definition of consent, all forms of which are common to all social and political organizations.

The Consent Continuum. The forms of consent can be arranged on a scale defined by increasing degrees of willingness and the quality of information one has when deciding whether to give one's consent.

1. Acquiescence under threat of sanction. The form of least willing consent is forced obedience under threat of extreme sanction. One may have a choice only between consent and death or severe physical pain. A threat of force raises fear of certain violent consequences and this fear then produces desperate consent. Threats of moderate sanction work in a similar way. A person will consent to do (or not to do) something because the known consequence of not consenting is less desirable. A pupil will avoid detention by coming to class on time but reluctantly. It is force exhibited through the threat of sanction, whether extreme or moderate, that distinguishes this form of consent from the others. The threat of sanction also produces opposition and because of this, consent is won at the price of instability. Consent unwillingly given is but delayed opposition and must be maintained under constant watch and continued threat.

2. Compliance based on partial or slanted information. A person who is told that he now has "all the information he needs" to make a choice, and who doesn't realize that the in-

formation he does have is incomplete, or has been selected with bias, or carefully edited to serve the interest of those who control his access to that information, is likely to comply on what he takes to be rational grounds. This sort of compliance is the heart of all indoctrination and shows the enormous importance of the control of information in power relationships. Until recently parents of schoolchildren whose first language was not English accepted the placement of their children in remedial curriculum tracks based on IQ and achievement tests given in English. The State of California has challenged the legality and the morality of this procedure after establishing that the distribution of these same children when tested in their own first language was virtually the same as the distribution of children in other language groups.

3. Indifference due to habit and apathy. A person might follow the lead of someone just because there is no reason not to follow, or because one is used to being a follower. Such a person, if interested in anything, is probably most interested in avoiding the personal, social, and political entanglements that are inevitable when one participates in questions of who shall lead and for what reasons. I remember being "elected" to membership in an eating club at college because the club's president understood that his power was largely supported by the principle of apathy. When he wanted the membership to approve a proposal, as he did in the case of my candidacy, he would put the question this way: "Anyone *not* in favor please stand." Of course no one cared that much one way or the other, so the proposal passed.

4. Conformity to custom. A person may well believe that "what is done" is what others do, or have done. A disposition toward traditional obeisance is common not only among the religious but also among all those for whom it is important to be associated with stable groups of some kind. Having been raised in a certain tradition is sometimes enough to ensure continuous consent to that tradition and the demands of its arbiters. The same is true even for the casual conformists to

short-term contemporary norms and mores, those who have been thoroughly socialized *in* groups, but not always *as* groups. No one can avoid conformity altogether, one can only exercise some control over the object of one's conformity. Conformity to custom is perhaps the most common of all the forms of consent, and although it often is based on a rational understanding, this is not always the case. The lengthy continuous history of the Catholic Church is due largely to the membership's willingness to conform to certain of the church's expectations, for example, the promise to raise one's children in the Catholic faith regardless of whom one marries. While consent of this type is often rational and deferential, the extreme and bizarre "spiritual" cults of modern origin demand conformity so total as to be not only irrational but pathological. And of course the fashions of any given day command slaves enough to build pyramids.

5. Commitment through informed judgment. This type of consent is the ideal to which political theorists from Locke's time on have appealed in their defense of the democratic structuring of governmental authority; such consent represents an ideal more profoundly attractive than any other as the basis for a theory of government. Under this principle of consent through understanding, the informed majority delegates power deliberately, allowing for its temporary concentration in the hands of a few. When this contractual arrangement proves unsatisfactory to the majority of informed delegators, they collectively withdraw their consent from their chosen representatives and invest it in others. In a system based on this type of consent, protest can terminate authority peacefully because the protest is articulated through the procedures of legalized election.

Commitment through informed judgment is also an educational ideal, and it is in considering this type of consent that we see the link between education and the concepts of power and freedom. The nucleus of all three is information and its control. Indeed, one might read this consent continuum as a progres-

sion in the control of information and the formation of judgment. The last stage in the continuum describes the autonomous—that is, self-governing—individual who is capable of participating in rational deliberation, willing to make judgments based on that deliberation, and disposed to honor those judgments as personal commitments.

Of course this kind of informed judgment requires certain skills in reasoning and in using information to make plans and to resolve questions. These skills are at the core of any school curriculum designed for educational purposes in addition to socialization. In fact, one might say that the capacity to make autonomous and well-informed judgments, and the disposition to commit oneself to such judgments are central aims of education. The lesser forms of consent are more closely related to the aims of socialization, starting with the primitive use of threatened sanction, and leading up to the more civilized, but sometimes insidious, use of reward for conformity. Power is greatest when it employs the instruments of education, not the instruments of force or conformity. The instruments of education are designed to help individuals move from simple acquiescence all the way to the informed and critical approval of delegated authority—an approval based on the understanding that organized consent (and its withdrawal) is the ultimate source of all social power.

The Field of Consent. A person may be asked for consent to any of three parts in a power relationship: the plan or system of ideas which is to be implemented, the person(s) in delegating positions, and the particular assignment given. Of these three the first is most interesting as a power variable.

There is a signal difference between the cooperation that can come from a shared understanding of ideas and values that are deemed to be personally important and philosophically significant and the compliance that comes from treating people merely as "behaving organisms." Since all human beings long for a sense of purpose as part of their lives and their labors,

most people want to understand what they are doing, or why they are being asked to do it. Purposelessness, anomie, and alienation are symptoms of a modern illness caused by a deficiency of organizing ideas; the cure is meaning, that is, a hierarchy of values.

If people are treated merely as behaving organisms, as operational units, with no regard for their sense of purpose and their need to know, all that can be expected is temporary compliance and a tendency toward minimizing every effort—except the effort to escape from the power relationship. If people understand, or at least think they understand what is going on, why it is going on, and what part they play in a system of purposeful activity, the chances that cooperation will replace compliance increase considerably. In a limited but important way this need for a sense of purpose, which transforms mere compliance into cooperation and acts to keep the power-holders consistent in their actions, is the moral basis of power. Anyone interested in maintaining an institutional form of power would do well to keep in mind that consent informed by at least some understanding of the institution's purposes is necessary for both efficiency and stability.

While consent may be strong in this part of the power relationship, there may still be objections to the individuals who occupy positions of delegation (be they electors or bosses). Often the individual in charge of a cult, when it is new, is inseparable from its binding ideas and purpose, so to accept the purpose is to accept the leader, too. Christ was such a leader for his disciples, and so was Jim Jones for the members of the People's Temple. But in most institutions ideas and individuals are separate, and when there is conflict the individuals will change before the system of ideas does. A president is free to replace cabinet officers who disagree with his policy, for example. It is important to notice that even as individuals come and go, their institutional positions or roles remain, and are filled by other individuals.

Even when there is consent to the purposes of the institution

and to the individuals who do the delegating, it is still possible to withhold consent from one's own particular assignment. This problem is not likely to be as serious as problems in the other two parts of the power relationship because one often feels a duty to do unchosen labor for people and purposes one can respect. The promise of a change in assignment for a job well done can of course be used as an incentive, but this tactic usually works only with the persons who already consent in general to the organization's purposes and its leaders.

Tactics of Withdrawal. One effective tactic for withdrawing consent is minimally organized dissent, not flagrant enough to attract punishment or personal acrimony, but sufficient to warn authorities that a protest is being made and claims to power challenged. Sneers, satire, and silence are all forms of such dissent, as is the "work slowdown," a situation in which the workers agree among themselves to do no more than the minimum as required by formal regulation. This tactic shows dramatically the importance of good will (and the potency of ill will) as the psychological basis of power.¹⁵

Saul Alinsky was a master of psychological power tactics, which he designed for use in organized community action groups. I recall hearing Alinsky explain a tactic that he never actually had to implement: it was so brilliantly conceived that the mere thought of it was enough to convince the late mayor of Chicago, Richard Daley, that he should comply with Alinsky's request to meet with the poor blacks whom Alinsky represented. The plan was simple. Alinsky studied the mayor to ascertain what was for him the proudest symbol of his administration's achievements, and found that it was O'Hare Airport, busiest in the world. The scheme was to make the nation laugh at O'Hare, and by extension, at Mayor Daley. Insult was the game, for as Alinsky knew well, power is secretly terrified of insult and ridicule.

Alinsky proposed to count all the toilets and urinals in the airport, and then to enlist enough constituents to provide one

person for each toilet and two or three men for each urinal. On a given weekend, when passenger traffic was heavy with families and especially children, Alinsky's people would occupy all the toilet stalls and the men would stand in front of the urinals all day if necessary. In American society, one does not ask a gentleman to hurry up in such circumstances. There is really nothing one can say or do, except leave, avoiding the risk of embarrassing confrontation. No law is violated. The event is peaceful; except for the hundreds of seeping children and their vexed parents, and the thousands of travelers who most desperately need what O'Hare, for the first time, cannot provide.

The story (and pictures) of such a preposterous affair would have delighted viewers of the evening news in every state, and the sport made of Chicago would have driven Daley mad. Alinsky's telephone description of this perfectly legal insult and his promise that he already had two hundred or so volunteers was sufficient to break the Mayor's grip on power in this particular case and accomplish Alinsky's purpose. By himself Alinsky would have succeeded at no more than becoming a nuisance, but with a large organized social interest behind him he clearly demonstrated the power of withdrawing consent, even in quite ordinary circumstances.

Perhaps the ultimate in the withdrawal of consent is not revolution, recall, or insult, but laughter. Authority fears no threat more than the laughter that comes from scorn, for that which is scorned is not respected and authority cannot survive without respect. The regent whom the people ridicule in public will not be regent long; scorn is the scourge of power.

Obedience. On the face of it obedience seems a concept distant from consent. I would suggest, however, that obedience is a form of consent and that it deserves separate discussion for several reasons, the most important of which is its significance for education.

Étienne de la Boétie, a contemporary and friend of Montaigne, was the first to develop the insight that tyranny is

always grounded in the general acceptance of tyranny. He was curious to know

how it happens that so many men, so many villages, so many cities, so many nations, sometimes suffer under a single tyrant who has no other power than the power they give him; who is able to harm them only to the extent to which they have the willingness to bear with him; who could do them absolutely no injury unless they preferred to put up with him rather than contradict him. Surely a striking situation!¹⁶

Assuming that no one would knowingly and willingly choose to relinquish power to a tyrant, la Boétie suggested that force and deception are the two major factors that lead to such mass obedience. He touched the heart of the problem when he added that those who lose their liberty through deceit are "not so often betrayed by others as misled by themselves."¹⁷ Like Mithridates, who trained himself to drink poison, those who give away their power do so through an unthinking, gradual habituation to servitude. La Boétie viewed self-deception as the greatest enemy of freedom. Passive consent to the way things are soon becomes absolute obedience; it is the tyrant's best friend, whereas education about the nature of consent, freedom, and power is his greatest enemy.

Faced with the enigma of mass civil obedience, la Boétie wrote the first protocol for mass civil disobedience, a call that was relayed to Gandhi through Tolstoy. He emphasized the instrumental importance of education for the subjects of tyranny—they had to be taught to understand that mass civil disobedience, the organized withdrawal of their consent, is the only remedy for state tyranny, and that they had thoughtlessly deceived themselves into the condition of obedience which makes tyranny possible. Control of education, la Boétie insisted, is closely related to the control of power and freedom.

Civil obedience is support for the tyrant, just as it is the foundation of support for any state. Obedience per se is neither

a wholly bad nor wholly good relationship. It is important to say, as la Boétie failed to, that there are occasions that require obedience if freedom is to be exercised and tyranny controlled. That we obey traffic laws and rely on others to do the same is the essence of one's "freedom of the road"; everyone is equally constrained by a public system of rules, rather than acting according to an individual code. Exceptions are always hazardous in traffic and sometimes in government—for example, when "executive privilege" is abused for purposes of self-aggrandizement.

However, the larger point is clear: we cannot excuse the paradigmatic criminal obedience of an Adolf Eichmann on the grounds he offered, namely: (1) it was his duty to obey orders and the laws (acts of state); (2) he was no one to judge, or even have his own thoughts on the matter of the orders he was asked to execute; (3) obedience to superiors had always been praised as a virtue and he was trying to be virtuous; and (4) he was not acting as an individual man but as a functionary whose actions could easily have been carried out by (many) others.

In political circumstances obedience is support, no matter how great the psychological distance one achieves from one's actions. Eichmann's dissociation from the meaning of his action was not his evil genius nor was it his evil ignorance—he was a man of ordinary intelligence. His dissociation was his thoughtlessness and his inability to withdraw consent, to disobey what he had previously agreed to without full understanding. Hannah Arendt has made an observation on obedience that is worth preserving: the thoughtlessness of the obedient one is what makes obedience to evil tyrants so dangerous, and this same ordinary thoughtlessness makes evil of Eichmann's kind banal.¹⁸ Such unwillingness or inability to think about what one is doing, to comprehend the morality of one's actions, and to understand how a power relationship educes obedience is an educational problem of greater serious-

ness than any other. Thoughtless obedience is potentially the most lethal form of consent, and its only known cure is learning to think—about power and powerlessness.

Stanley Milgram's empirical studies¹⁹ of Arendt's observations have shown that an appalling number of "average" Americans easily give away control of their own behavior and become utensils for carrying out the wishes, the "orders," of presumed "authorities" whom they have agreed to obey without coercion of any sort. (In fact, Milgram's subjects were paid \$4 and carfare for volunteering to participate in "a psychological experiment in memory and learning.") Milgram's data, gathered from more than a thousand people—men and women, young and old, blue- and white-collar, poor and wealthy—chill the imagination and wreck the theory that Eichmann was a uniquely perverted villain who had nothing in common with the mailman, our teachers, friends, and neighbors.

The basic experiment was simple:

Two people come to a psychological laboratory to take part in a study of memory and learning. One of them is designated as a "teacher" and the other a "learner." The experimenter explains that the study is concerned with the effects of punishment on learning. The learner is conducted into a room, seated in a chair, his arms strapped to prevent excessive movement, and an electrode attached to his wrist. He is told that he is to learn a list of word pairs; whenever he makes an error, he will receive electric shocks of increasing intensity.²⁰

The "teacher" sees all this, but he does not know that the "learner," a middle-aged man, is an actor in cahoots with the experimenter and that he actually receives no shock at all. The "teacher" is seated at his station in another room where he is confronted with a shock generator that has switches designated in 15-volt increments from 15 to 450 volts. The high end switches are marked "Danger!" in red. The "teacher" is to administer a shock for every wrong answer he gets from the "learner," each time increasing the voltage by one increment.

Milgram states that conflict arises

when the man receiving the shock begins to indicate that he is experiencing discomfort. At 75 volts, the "learner" grunts. At 120 volts he complains verbally; at 150 he demands to be released from the experiment. His protests continue as the shocks escalate, growing increasingly vehement and emotional. At 285 volts his response can only be described as an agonized scream.²¹

Eventually (after 330 volts) he falls silent and his answers no longer appear on the signal box.

If the "teacher" indicated at any time that he (or she) did not wish to go on, the experimenter said:

- 1) Please continue, or Please go on.
- 2) The experiment requires that you continue.
- 3) It is absolutely essential that you continue.
- 4) You have no other choice, you *must* go on.²²

The chief finding of this study is the extreme willingness of American adults to follow commands, mild as they were and carrying no punitive sanction, issued by someone whom they perceived as an authority. Nearly "two-thirds of the participants fall into the category of 'obedient' subjects, and . . . they represented ordinary people drawn from working, managerial, and professional classes."²³ This is not to say that the participants did not suffer great tension because they were violating their own fundamental moral standards, for many did. It is to say, however, that even when this was the case only a few people had the resources to challenge the power they had delegated to the experimenter. Two-thirds of the participants were made powerless on the spot, having donated their sense of responsibility to the authority when asked to do so. The experiments never threatened them, yet they obeyed, some with sorrow, because they did not understand the dynamic principles of a power relationship.

Obedience is delegating to another the power of control over

one's behavior; it is divesting oneself of the responsibility and the initiative to make judgments. La Boétie, Arendt, and Milgram help make the case that thoughtless obedience is an urgent educational problem and that study of the power/powerlessness relation is a salient educational concern. Educators who persist in ignoring the study of power are a tyrant's delight and a peril to democracy.

The Instrumental Aspect of Power

Power is pragmatic. It is a term that cannot be understood apart from practical bearings. Power is always found in relation, not in isolation, and its presence is measured by reference to effect and consequences. Although power is sometimes spoken of as an end in itself, or as a personality trait, or motive, or even as some sort of metaphysical entity, it is better represented and better understood when spoken of as a means.

Power is used primarily as a noun in English, a fact that inhibits our ability to think clearly about the concept. While a transitive verb form is listed as obsolete in *Webster's New International Dictionary*, Second Edition, the Third Edition drops that designation and lists additional meanings—"to give strength to," "to supply with or propel by means of motive power," "to give impetus to." But the fact remains that in discussing power as an aspect of social relations, its noun form predominates. One rarely, if ever, hears the transitive verb form in use. Cousin terms like "influence," "control," and "force" have common noun and verb forms, but power does not. It should. If we think of power as a noun, as a thing, it is difficult to bear in mind that power is a quality of relations—it is a relational concept that is part of any context that includes at least two people and one intended action. Power is an aspect of the transaction-in-context, it is part of the action. It designates the expression of means or agency.

Power language is the language of problem-solving. It is use-

ful to the degree that it helps to show just how a problem and a subsequent plan of action are set up and how the individuals involved are related to it and to each other. The instrumental aspect of power is perhaps most easily understood in relation to the philosophy of pragmatism: a focus on intelligently controlled purposive action in a social context, and on planned effort to produce intended consequences in that context. Pragmatism is a philosophy of agency and practical effect; it is an action philosophy at home in the busy and constant transactions among mind, self, and society. Pragmatism emphasizes the thinking person's ability to imagine circumstances that do not yet exist, to plan the realization of what has been imagined, and through cooperation to achieve that planned set of circumstances. In short, pragmatism is interested in the exercise of ability in a context of social relations. It is the philosophy of ordering chaos incrementally, the philosophy of power.

As a way to see the value of a verb form for power, it is useful to borrow the language of pragmatism on the subject of means and ends (verbs and nouns). This language reflects the point of view that ends and means are in a relation of continual transformation, and that the distinction between them is both temporal and relational. Once an end-in-view is achieved, it joins the antecedent conditions for the next end-in-view, and therefore constitutes part of the means to that end. Similarly, means transform the ends they produce by the very nature of their influence (a means is a change). Since power is instrumental in achieving intended consequences (ends), it is in turn contained in those consequences. Power is therefore inherent in all social transaction, and, whenever it is present as actuality or potential, we measure it in terms of the further consequences it produces.

There is, however, a distinction to be made between power's short-term and long-term consequences—a distinction that limits the power any particular agent can hold. Simply put, short-term events can be pretty well controlled, but long-term

events (or long-range consequences) cannot. As Berle has pointed out:

One impact of power holding on the holder is his discovery that the power act, the direction of an event, causes surprisingly unpredictable consequences. . . . The power to cause an event has scant relation to capacity to control the feelings and opinions of men about the thing done, or assure their adhesion to a larger plan.²⁴

Predictability is the guardian of power, but in the long run it cannot protect power against its own fickle effects. This situation should be a comfort to those who fear that we face a future of stable, concentrated power monopolies.

In attempting to understand power it is important to remember that as an instrumental aspect of social relations power is contingent on the always mutable details of those relations. As a result power should be thought of as temporal and relational; its fluctuations parallel those between ends and means. Power always occurs in relation to powerlessness, but the relative dimensions of power and powerlessness are continually being rearranged, readjusted. If only two people were related through only one plan, then the power/powerlessness balance would be clear and highly predictable. But social life is much more complex than that. Every person is related to many others through many plans, and any individual will be powerful or powerless depending on the circumstances and the particular people and plans in question. In the course of a single day one can act as a grandson, son, brother, husband, father, boss, employee, taxpayer, coach, shortstop, customer, passenger, driver, and patron with vastly different instrumental effects and manifestations of power. Powerlessness means not being able and it suggests a sense of personal insignificance in all sorts of planned action. When one cannot affect the instrumental aspects of social relations, and when this inability is felt as a loss of significance, the result is powerlessness.

Summary: The Configuration of Power

This analysis of power has not produced a strict definitional closure, but it has developed a set of specifications and a pattern of meaning which challenge the putative understanding of power. My purpose has been to sharpen our analytical ability to perceive the several aspects of power in social relations, not to reduce the idea to another brittle, splintered stipulation. Fundamentally important social ideas like power are inclusive—they are so central to life that all of life's variety must be contained in their definitions if the definitions are to be wholly accurate and satisfying. It would seem that aiming for a total definition of power is rather like aiming for the stars—all of them at once—with arrows.

I have tried to show that Acton's apothegm, while entertaining, is not especially useful as a general proposition about power. Among the proposals offered in establishing my point of view were these:

1. Power is only one of many sources of human corruption, and in fact powerlessness may be more often and more violently corrupting than power.
2. The idea of relation (organization) is the first principle of social life, and two equally primitive and genuine categories of human experience lie beneath organization (as an answer to chaos). These are love (the disposition to be related with others in a bond of closeness in feeling), and power (the motive and capacity to accomplish plans with others). These two traits are not necessarily antithetical and can be complementary.
3. Order, organization, and therefore power are universally inherent in social life, because wherever there is organization there is power, and vice versa. Organization and power are conjugal concepts.
4. The minimum necessary conditions for actual or potential power are two people and one plan for action. These conditions mean that power is always partly social, partly psychological, and invariably instrumental. The social aspect is marked by

hierarchy, delegation, and cooperation; the psychological aspect is identified with several forms of consent (including obedience) and the withdrawal of consent. The instrumental aspect is a blend of the pragmatic principles that govern rational problem-solving—the exercise of executive abilities in a social context by way of cooperative effort in accomplishing plans of action.

5. Power has no commonly used verb form in English, even though it is preeminently an action concept, and this inhibits the understanding of power.

6. Any power-holder is limited by the unpredictability of power's long-term effects, and by the consent (good will) of those who delegate the power.

7. A great deal of power's meaning lies in its instrumental significance. The anti-power concept that makes most sense, given this analysis, is not "morality" (as certain self-consciously moralistic traditions would have it) but instrumental insignificance.

Although this analysis has produced only a configuration of power and not a new definition, it would be an error to conclude that, because power cannot be securely gripped in language, we would spend our time more wisely if we stopped trying to understand it. Whether well understood or not, power plays a serious part in all aspects of our lives, but if we keep our attention fresh and our debate lively we may reach a fuller understanding—an understanding that can help someone to imagine the means for transforming the conditions that cause so much unnecessary pain, odium, and shame. We cannot avoid being affected by power, we can only avoid thinking about it. The greater danger is not the growth of power, but foolishness. As G. B. Shaw reminds us: "Power does not corrupt men; fools, however, if they get into a position of power, corrupt power."²⁵