Power – A Surveyable Representation

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Abstract

Although Wittgenstein did not concern himself much with politics his work is useful in getting clearer about the notion of power in a number of ways. In the first place, although Wittgenstein did not have much to say about power he *did* have quite a lot to say about ways of getting clearer about concepts and he made clarity or understanding a central aim in his philosophy. One of the ways in which he helped us to get clearer about concepts was to guide us away from the assumption that all of the items subsumed under a term must have something in common. Wittgenstein highlighted that some terms, such as 'game' and 'number' were family resemblance terms and it is plausible that many terms used in discussing political matters are family resemblance terms. He also reminded us of the diversity of ways in which we use language and of the fact that speech takes place within a rich weave of activities. He called these different uses of language 'language games'. In analysing power it is useful to remember that discussions of power take place in many different spheres, in religion, in politics, in meteorology, chemistry, etc., and that we speak about power in many different language games. Moreover, Wittgenstein warned us against thinking that the methods of the natural sciences can be transferred straightforwardly to the social sciences and to philosophy. One of the problems with studies of power conducted in the past is that they have tried to be 'scientific' by focussing on observable instances of the exercise of power. Finally, this paper will briefly look at remarks from *Culture & Value* where Wittgenstein does talk about power: where he distinguishes power from its bases and brings our attention to the fact that human powers are two-way powers.

Power – A Synoptic Representation

Power plays a central role in many recent philosophical discussions of injustice and resistance to it. Miranda Fricker begins her hugely influential book, *Epistemic Injustice*, with a discussion of gender power, social power, and identity power (2007, 9-17) and the role they play in epistemic injustices. Stephen D'Arcy has discussed how power imbalances warp democracy and how protest can help correct those imbalances (2013, 101-2). In José Medina's recent book, *The Epistemology of Protest*, he discusses the performative power of protest that empowers those who suffer injustices (2023, 133-5; see also Moody-Adams 2022; Delmas, 2018).

Issues of power are part of our everyday lives. We adjust our behaviour due to being aware of those who have power over us. Other people have the power to deprive us of our work, our livelihood, our liberty, and even our lives and so we tend to do what we are contractually obliged to do, follow laws, avoid violence, and pay close attention to the activities of politicians, bosses, and

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armed forces (power is obviously implicated in activities like 'doomscrolling'). We are wise to be alert to our own powers and to develop them if we want to make better lives for ourselves.

So, power is clearly an important issue but it is also a difficult one to achieve clarity about. We speak about the power of an acid to dissolve metal, the power of a storm to destroy a village, the power of politicians and CEOs to make decisions which affect the interests of millions of people, identity power, formal power, and resistant power. We speak about being *in* someone's power, of people having power *over* us and of having the power *to* do certain things (see Pitkin 1972, 276 and Lukes 2021, 78 on this). Is there something that all of these varieties of power have in common that makes them all instances of power? How do we determine whether one person or group of people is more powerful than another? Is there any way of measuring power?

It is tempting to think that we already have sufficient command of the concept of power and that achieving clarity about a concept is less important than the empirical work involved in discovering where power lies and the empirical-philosophical work involved in thinking about its proper distribution as well as the legwork involved in bringing that about. However, work by sociologists, political theorists, and philosophers on these latter issues has been hotly disputed and these disputes are to some extent down to the different understandings of power the different theorists have. As Steven Lukes notes in his classic study of power, conceptions of power and the methods used to study its distribution are interrelated (2021, 8-10). Even if the work of studying the distribution of power, thinking about its proper distribution, and bringing about a better distribution is more important than the conceptual work it is clearly important that we first get clear about the notion of power before we go out and study it in society.

Wittgenstein and Power

Wittgenstein's focus was not on political theory or political concepts and he had very little to say about power in his philosophical work. However, there are a number of ways in which Wittgenstein's work can be useful. (1) Although Wittgenstein had little to say about power he did have quite a lot to say about clarifying concepts. The aim of clarity was central to Wittgenstein's philosophizing ("For me…clarity, transparency, is an end in itself" (1998, 9e),

"the clarity we are aiming at is indeed *complete* clarity" (2009, §133). Here I will take up his suggestion that what we lack is a survey of the grammatical terrain (the grammar of 'power' and its relationships with other similar notions such as 'potential', 'force', 'influence', 'control' and so on) and that what we need is a surveyable representation of that grammar. (2) One of the ways in which Wittgenstein helps us to achieve clarity is by alerting us to the fact that philosophers have been led astray by a "craving for generality" and one of the manifestations of this craving for generality is "the tendency to look for something in common to all the entities which we commonly subsume under a general term" (1958, 17). Being alert to this possibility we might be open to recognizing 'power' as a family resemblance concept (2009, §§66-7). Indeed, Steven Lukes has suggested that this is so (2021, 66; see also Gakis, 2025, 185). (3) Lukes also suggests another possible way in which a Wittgensteinian framework might be useful in getting to grips with the concept of 'power'. He suggests that, "different concepts of power have their place in different local 'language games' and this entails that the search for a single concept of power is illusory" (2021, 66-7). (4) Wittgenstein's criticisms of scientism are relevant to criticising particular (behaviourist) conceptions of power. (5) Wittgenstein did at least have a few things to say about power that are useful. It is worth looking at his scattered remarks where he uses the word 'power' and reflects upon the concept and one can also look at Wittgenstein's remarks about abilities and about dispositions in order to get clearer about the notion of power.

Power – a surveyable representation

Power is linked, etymologically, to words like 'potency', 'potent', and 'potential' (from the latin verb *posse*, to be able to). This close linguistic association between being able to do something and power is retained in many of the Latin languages. For example, in Portuguese the word for power is *poder* and *poder* is also the word for the verb 'to be able to'. This means that we should be careful to separate power from its exercise. Somebody might have a power (ability or capacity) to do something even if they never exercise the power to do that thing. Power very often operates in the absence of its exercise. Miranda Fricker makes this point in terms of the *active* and *passive* operation of power and uses the example of the traffic warden, whose power to issue fines affects the behaviour of motorists (they generally do not park on

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double yellow lines etc.) even when she is not issuing tickets (2007, 9-10). Her power is operative, even if not exercised. This might seem like a straightforward point but it is one that has often been ignored by philosophers. For example, Fricker criticizes Foucault for claiming that "power exists only when it is put into action" (Foucault 1982, 219). She notes that this cannot be correct "because it is incompatible with power's being a capacity" (2007, 10). Anthony Kenny criticizes Hume for saying that "the distinction…betwixt power and the exercise of it is… without foundation" (Hume, 2006, Book 1, Part 3, Section 14, p. 115; Kenny 1975, 10). Steven Lukes criticizes Robert Dahl and Nelson Polsby for thinking that they can study power simply by examining moments when powerful people make decisions (i.e. exercises of power) (2021, 21-33; see also Morriss and Pansardi 2025, 588). In this last case we can see a connection between the methodology used in studying power and a theorist's conception of power.

Recognising this connection between power and potential, ability or capacity, many theorists have said that power is a 'dispositional concept'. In their recent entry on power in the *Routledge Companion to Social and Political Philosophy* Peter Morriss and Pamela Pansardi note that disagreement over this point (identification of power with its exercise) has largely dissipated and that "there is now some agreement…that power should be thought of as a *dispositional* concept" (2025, 587). This is fine if all that we mean by describing power as a 'dispositional concept' is that, like dispositions, powers might be said to exist or operate in the absence of being actualised, put into action, or exercised at some particular time. However, we should be wary of identifying powers with dispositions. As Peter Hacker says, "Human dispositions…are possessed only if what they are dispositions to do is, from time to time, done" whereas human powers or abilities "can be possessed but never exercised. For an ability and an opportunity do not imply action. We all have the ability to kill other humans, but, mercifully, few of us choose to exercise it" (2007, 95) (note, however, that the powers of inanimate objects *are* dispositions in some sense (Hacker 2007, 94-5)).

Is 'power' a family resemblance concept?

As noted above we attribute powers to acids, storms, people, and groups of people, amongst many other things (perhaps also structural operations of power (Fricker 2007, 10-11) . We also make discriminations amongst the

powers that things have, describing them as natural, formal, charismatic, resistant, passive, dyadic and so on. The powers of inanimate things are a sort of disposition but the powers of human agents are not. Sometimes we use words like 'power' and 'force' interchangeably (as Wittgenstein does when he suggests that speaking of the "force of law" is roughly equivalent to speaking of "the power of custom" (1980, §343)). On other occasions 'force' and 'power' are not interchangeable (as in the case Wittgenstein describes where it is in someone's power to lift a weight (1998, 87e)). When we talk about the powers of inanimate and animate things to do something we can very often exchange the words 'power' and 'ability' without loss of meaning. However, in other cases we cannot do this. In speaking of 'the power of custom' or 'the power of love' we cannot exchange the word 'power' for 'ability' and retain the same meaning. One can turn on the power in one's house but it is not clear what 'turning on the ability' might mean. Human agents can choose to exercise their power when the opportunity presents itself but they can also refrain from exercising their power in appropriate circumstances. Human powers are very often *two-way* powers whereas the powers of inanimate things are not (Kenny 1975, 53; Hacker 2007, 95; Lukes 2021, 76). Although, as Anthony Kenny notes, the passive powers of human beings are not two-way powers: if "someone speaks a language I know in my hearing it isn't in my power not to understand it" (1975, 53). Polsby thought that 'power' and 'influence' were "serviceable synonyms" (1963, 3-4) but it is easy to see how the two notions could come apart. Van Gogh has been very influential but that does not mean that Van Gogh has been, is, or was, very powerful.

There is some unclarity about what it means when we ask whether somebody has a certain power. If we ask whether an American President has the power to overrule the judiciary someone might respond that formally he does not but that President Trump has nonetheless acted in defiance of court orders (as he did when he ignored a court order to turn around planes carrying deportees (Levine 2025). The fact that he was able to deport people without due process (and that it was not a fluke that he did so) tells us that it is in Trump's power to do so but the Constitution of the United States and its laws nonetheless tell us that it is not within Trump's (formal) powers.

These distinctions that we make between uses of the word 'power' suggest that power is a family resemblance concept, like the concepts 'game' and

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'number' (2009, §§66-7). In the *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein noted that there is no one thing in common between the activities that we call games ("board-games, card-games, ball-games, athletic games, and so on" (2009, §66). There are "similarities overlapping and criss-crossing" (Ibid.) between the various things we call games, much like there are similarities between members of a family. When it comes to the concept of 'power', it may be that we want to distinguish different concepts of power (the meaning of 'power' in 'turning on the power' is quite different to the meaning of 'power' in 'the power to overrule the judiciary') but it seems that when we talk about the powers of inanimate things and animate creatures to do certain things we are using the same concept. Although the concept is the same when we talk about the power of an acid to dissolve metal and the power of the King to dissolve parliament the concept will behave differently in the different cases (in some cases we will be talking about one-way powers, in some cases two-way powers, in some cases active powers, in others passive powers, in some cases formal powers, etc.).

Power and language games

In response to logicians and philosophers of language that particularly focused on assertions (Frege and the early Wittgenstein), the later Wittgenstein pointed out that there are "countless different kinds of use of all the things we call 'signs', 'words', 'sentences'" and Wittgenstein tries to capture this diversity in the uses of language by speaking about different "language games" (2009, §23). Wittgenstein uses the word 'language game' he says "to emphasize the fact that the *speaking* of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life" (Ibid.). Now, if we look at the different spheres within which we speak about power and the different kinds of utterances that the word 'power' appears in it is certainly plausible that 'power' makes an appearance within a number of different language games. A meteorologist might report that a powerful storm is approaching the mainland and that flood defences should be raised. A religious believer might enquire about and contemplate the power of God. A political commentator might discuss whether Trump has the power to ignore the rulings of judges.

As we have seen, Steven Lukes has suggested that "different concepts of power have their place in different local 'language games' and this entails that the search for a single concept of power is illusory" (2021, 66-7). Lukes is surely

right that there are different concepts of power (the Oxford English dictionary lists twelve different uses of the term 'power') and that the search for a single concept is illusory. However, the mere fact that the term 'power' appears in different language games is not enough to conclude that there are different concepts involved. If we follow Wittgenstein's suggestion and take reports of events and speculation about events to be distinct language games (2009, §23) we can see that it is clear that we might report that Trump does not have the formal power to defy court orders and that we might also speculate about whether Trump has the power to defy court orders but it seems implausible that different concepts of power are in the two cases.

Wittgenstein and Scientism

Lukes' criticism of Dahl and Polsby, criticising their focus on incidences of decision making where one party wins out over another, was briefly mentioned earlier. Dahl and Polsby were driven by a kind of scientism. Since potentialities cannot be observed they thought that the focus of studies of power must be on observable behaviour in order to be scientifically valid. Polsby asks,

"How can one tell…whether or not an actor is powerful unless some sequence of events competently observed, attests to his power? If these events take place, then the power of the actor is not 'potential' but actual. If these events do not occur, then what grounds have we to suppose that the actor is powerful? There appear to be no significant grounds for such a supposition." (1963, 60).

Dahl and Polsby subscribe to a kind of behaviourism, in thinking that in order to study the distribution of power one must study the behaviour which is the actualisation (or exercise) of that power because that behaviour is observable whereas the potentiality is not.

Wittgenstein warned against this kind of scientism in *The Blue Book*, where he said that one of the sources of the 'craving for generality' was "our preoccupation with the method of science…the method of reducing the explanation of natural phenomena to the smallest possible number of primitive natural laws" (1958, 18). We have already seen that we have reason to be wary of reducing power to its observable exercise, because we can observe the operation of power in the altered behaviour of people even when

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power is not being exercised. Moreover, we have reason to be wary of thinking that the methods of natural science will be applicable to power because examinations of political power are inevitably going to involve value judgements. We judge some people to be more powerful than others based on whether they make a significant impact on other people's interests but "the question of where people's interests lie, of what is basic or central to their lives and what is superficial, is inherently controversial" (Lukes 2021, 85-6; see also Hacker 2007, 21 and Morriss and Pansardi 2025, 588 for criticisms of reduction of power to its exercise).

Wittgenstein on power

I'll finish here with some quick remarks on what Wittgenstein has to say about power. In *Culture & Value* Wittgenstein remarks that, "Power & possession are not the *same* thing. Even though possession also gives us power" (1998, 18e). That is, it is useful to distinguish between power and the bases of that power (strength, wealth, popularity, and so on (see Lovett 2007, 710 on this)).

Elsewhere in *Culture and Value* Wittgenstein says,

> "'He refuses to…" means: it is in his power. And *who* wants to say that? Well, of what do we say 'it is in his power'? – We say it in cases where we want to draw a distinction. I can lift *this* weight, but I will not lift it; that weight I cannot lift" (87e)

This remark again highlights that human powers are often two-way powers. We can choose whether to exercise them when appropriate circumstances obtain. It also highlights that we use talk of power to distinguish cases where someone does not do something because they cannot and cases where someone does not do something but they could do it (they refuse or choose not to).

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