
II. POWER, COMMUNICATIVE ACTION, OR LOOSE FEDERALISM?

An Alternative Conception of Power: Some Implications

Santiago Sia (Milltown Institute, Dublin)

Introduction

A particular conception of power has dominated much of the discussion on the nature of opposition in its various forms; namely, unilateral control by one over another. Whether one is talking of the state (or a similar group) or of an individual, it is assumed that its power over the other or others means that it has dominance or authority such that the other loses its freedom. Accepting its power means obedience or compliance. Rejecting or resisting it can take various forms, such as revolution, revolt, civil disobedience, etc. Underlying both reactions is the same conception of power.

In this essay I will like to put forward an alternative conception of power. Here power is understood as respecting the autonomy of the other; and the exercise of power takes the form of influencing, appealing or attracting the other rather than controlling it. Because such a conception of power is rooted in the metaphysical category of creative synthesis, as discussed by the American philosopher Charles Hartshorne, it is important to examine it in some detail. If power is conceptualized in this way, I believe that it will necessitate a re-thinking of our reaction to such a power, whether positively or negatively, and will lead to a different discourse on opposition. Limited to drawing out this implication, this essay aims to highlight the importance of revisiting the assumed concept of power in many discussions. Whether such a conception of power is credible and

workable will need to be critically examined.

The Concept of Power

Power is generally equated with authority. Thus, when one possesses power, one is deemed to have some authority. An individual can have power, and so can a body of individuals, like the government or the state. In connection with this general understanding one could ask about the kind of power one has, its basis, its legitimacy, and even the extent to which it applies and so on. But to some extent, power is really a relational concept. It does not simply connote possession but it also implies its exercise over another, the recipient of the action. Having power, despite the description, is thus more than just acquiring an entity or enjoying a particular status. There is the general expectation that whoever is regarded as powerful stands in a particular relationship with another, but the relationship is unequal since the powerful has authority over the other, and not vice versa.

The nature of that relationship, as exercised by the powerful, is the focus of this essay. The usual understanding of power is that one has unilateral control over the other. Thus, an important corollary to it is the concept of freedom since the other can become restricted in its exercise of whatever freedom it has by accepting the authority of the powerful. Thus, it is said that the more powerful one party is, the less free the other party becomes. On the other hand, assuming some freedom on the part of the other party, it can assert itself by opposing it. Hence, there is talk of the various forms of opposition such as rebellion, resistance, civil disobedience and so on. Such talk will necessarily involve other issues, but it seems to me that it rests on “what one does with the control over one” by the powerful. If this is true, then perhaps a case could be made for re-examining that very basis. The claim that is being made here is that a different conception of power will have significant implications for our conceptions of resistance, opposition, rebellion and so on.¹

¹ This point is well illustrated in the different understandings, with implications, of America’s role in international politics in the context of the current crisis as articulated by presidents Obama and Bush.

Creative Synthesis

In putting forward an alternative conception of power, I should like first of all to discuss at some length Charles Hartshorne's concept of creative synthesis since it is really the core of what power means in this context. Creative synthesis can perhaps be succinctly described as a metaphysical description of the workings of reality. Given the hostility in some quarters to anything that smacks of metaphysics, it is essential to add that the term "metaphysical" as he uses it is quite different from the usage of that term that has led to the criticisms of those who have opposed any reference to metaphysics in any philosophical discussion. Moreover, it will be asserted that such a conception - far from being a merely theoretical construct - is actually based on some scientific interpretation of the nature of reality.

In Hartshorne's philosophy, "metaphysical" means that the description can be said to be applicable to the whole of reality.² Creative synthesis as a metaphysical category is thus a description that covers all of reality and is necessarily true of every reality. According to Hartshorne, in every happening or event there is an old as well as a new (or creative) element. The old consists of previous happenings or experiences which give rise to and which persist in the new. There is permanence since in the synthesis the prior data are preserved, the synthesis being the holding together of data. The many become one, which in turn produces a new many, and so on. It is an accumulation of these prior acts or a "putting together" of factors into a whole. But the resulting synthesis is a new actuality or experience because a different kind of experience has emerged from the coming together of past experiences. Previously there was the separate existence of the included realities, but now there is a unity. Furthermore, the synthesis is spontaneous or free because none of these experiences - individually or collectively - dictated the exact unity that would arise. A synthesis emerges rather than being determined. Hence, an experience or happening cannot be fully described in its total unitary quality merely by specifying what its constituents are. Each experience enriches the totality of reality by being an

² For further discussion of Hartshorne's understanding of metaphysics, see his *Creative Synthesis and Philosophical Method* (London: SCM, 1970), chs. II and III.

additional member.

The concept of creative synthesis (or simply, creativity) is really Hartshorne's interpretation of causality. Every act is viewed by him as creative. However, each creative act is influenced by its past acts and does require them even if it cannot be determined precisely or fully by these antecedent acts, which are simply earlier cases of freedom. These acts, those of ourselves and of others, restrict the freedom of the new act, establishing and limiting the possibilities for an otherwise free and creative activity. On the other hand, they never determine them fully. Thus, Hartshorne defines causality as the way in which any given act of creativity is influenced or made possible, but yet not completely determined, by previous acts.³ Because past free acts narrow down any creative act, there can be a certain measure of prediction. Hartshorne uses the analogy of the banks of the river which give the flowing water its direction but do not entirely determine its movement. As he puts it, "Causality is the boundary within which resolution of indeterminacies takes place. Causal regularities mean not the absence of open possibilities but their confinement within limits."⁴

Hartshorne thus repudiates the deterministic version of causality. In his view, absolute determinism regards a happening as already completely predefined in its antecedent causes, each state of the world described as containing in reality an absolute map, as it were, of all subsequent and all previous states. Absolute determinism does admit that humans will never be able to read the maps except in radically incomplete and inaccurate ways. But Hartshorne regards this doctrine as an incorrect reading of the universality of causation because it is too strict an interpretation. Causes, as far as he is concerned, never determine the effect in all its details. A cause is necessary in the sense that without it, there can be no effect. But when all necessary conditions for an event have been fulfilled, it does not follow that the event will take place in precisely the way it is predicted, merely that it may take place. A cause is necessary, but not the effect. There will be an

³ Hartshorne, "Philosophy after Fifty Years" in P. Bertow (ed.), *Mid-Twentieth Century American Philosophy: Personal Statements* (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press, 1974), p.143.

⁴ Hartshorne, "Can Man Transcend His Animality?" *Monist*. 55 (1971), p.216.

effect but not a specific or a fully determinate effect. The creative aspect of a particular effect, therefore, lies in that it is never literally anticipated. According to Hartshorne, “To ask ‘why may not the antecedent cases completely determine the given?’ is to show that one has not grasped the meaning and pervasiveness of creativity or spontaneity”.⁵ There is a certain originality or freshness in every effect. Inasmuch as it is creative, it is partly unpredictable, undetermined in advance.

Some Logical and Metaphysical Underpinnings

To understand more fully Hartshorne’s concept of creative synthesis, we need to examine its logical and metaphysical underpinnings. It will be noted that the term creative synthesis indicates a certain amount of duality (as opposed to dualism) in the description as well as in reality itself. It is a concept that is grounded in the logic of what Hartshorne calls the law of polarity and supported by his general metaphysical scheme. To these we must now turn.

According to the law of polarity, which Hartshorne says he has taken over from Morris Cohen, “ultimate contraries are correlatives, mutually interdependent, so that nothing real can be described by the wholly one-sided assertion of [ultimate categories such as] simplicity, being, actuality and the like, each in a ‘pure’ form, devoid and independent of complexity, becoming, potentiality and related categories”.⁶ However, although polarities are ultimate, it does not follow that the two poles are in every sense on an equal status. As mere abstract concepts they are indeed correlatives, each requiring the other for its own meaning. But in their application to the reality itself, one pole or category includes its contrary.⁷

This law is said to pervade reality. If one reflects sufficiently, one can expect to find all of reality revealing certain abstract contrasts, such as complex-simple, relative-absolute and so forth, which are ultimate or metaphysical contraries. The two poles or contrasts of each set stand or fall together. Neither pole is to be denied or explained away or regarded as

⁵ Hartshorne, “Philosophy after Fifty Years,” p.143.

⁶ Hartshorne, *Philosophers Speak of God* (with William Reese) (University of Chicago Press, 1953), p.2.

⁷ *CSPM*, p. 99.

“unreal”. If either pole is real, the contrast itself, i.e. the two poles together, is also real. Although only one expresses the total reality, its correlative also says something about that reality since it is included in the other pole. There is a basic asymmetry or one-sided dependence: what is concrete includes what is abstract, not vice-versa. As a result, metaphysical categories as exemplified by concrete realities are always to be found in pairs. No concrete individual is merely simple, it is also complex. There is no such thing as pure effect. The same entity is, in another aspect, also a cause. No concrete entity can be said to be solely necessary, for in a different context it is also contingent. No happening is merely a synthesis, it is also creative.

The pairing of metaphysical categories runs through Hartshorne’s metaphysical system. He does not see any contradiction in ascribing opposite metaphysical categories to the same reality provided they refer to different aspects of that reality. According to him the law of non-contradiction is incorrectly formulated as “no subject can have the same predicates *p* and *not-p* at the same time”. What needs to be made explicit is they cannot be applied in the same respect. Hartshorne explains that a person can change in some respects without changing in every way and the world may be finite spatially and infinite temporally. In all of these the predication of contrasting attributes is not on the same ontological level for one set refers to the concrete aspect while the other to the abstract.

Turning now to his metaphysical scheme, it should be clear at this stage that reality for Hartshorne consists of events or happenings, not substances. The concept of creative synthesis is in fact a description of activity or of action rather than of things. It is for this reason that the term “process” has also been used with reference to his philosophy inasmuch as process or becoming, rather than being, is the fundamental reality. Reality thus is a series of events or activities or processes, interconnected in creative synthesis.

Hartshorne introduces a metaphysical distinction which has a bearing on the concept of creative synthesis. Calling the concrete state of any reality its actuality, Hartshorne says that actuality is always more than bare existence. “All existence ... is the ‘somehow actualized’ status of a nature in a suitable actuality, this actuality being always more determinate than the bare truth that nature

exists, i.e. in some actual state.’⁸ That the defined abstract nature is somehow concretely actualized is what Hartshorne understands by existence. How it is actualized, i.e. in what particular state or with what particular content, is what is meant by actuality. The abstract definition of something, its essence, exists if and only if it is actualized or concretized somehow or is in some concrete form. However, one cannot deduce actuality which is concrete from an essence which is the abstract definition of the thing. In other words, actuality never follows from essence. Thus, the essence ‘humanity’ exists if there are men, no matter which men or what states are actualized. But from ‘humanity’ one cannot ascertain which men are actualized.⁹ There is a manifest difference between existence (the truth that an abstraction is somehow concretely embodied) and actuality (how that embodiment occurs).

Since actuality is concrete, it is finite. This means that some possibilities are left out and thus prevented from being actualized. Actual reality in all cases is limited. Actualization is determination which, in turn, implies partial negation. It is the acceptance of limitation. It means choosing this and therefore not that. Hartshorne maintains that concrete actuality must always be competitive; that is to say, it must at all times exclude something else which could be equally concrete. Thus, as events come together or are “synthesized”, other events are being excluded. It would be more accurate in this metaphysics to say that the resulting synthesis comes into actuality (rather than into existence).

Creative Synthesis as a Conceptual Model for Power

Taking power in the first instance as implying a certain amount of autonomy - rather than exercising authority or control - creative synthesis means that there is truly a plurality of powers and that every reality is endowed with some power. In other words, to be is to have some power because it is the actualization of some potentiality. This is because actualization is to some extent self-creation. A plurality of beings therefore connotes a plurality of powers. For Hartshorne, every item of reality is

⁸ Hartshorne, “Tillich and the Other Great Tradition”, *Anglican Theological Review*, 43, 3 (1961), p.258.

⁹ Hartshorne, “How Some Speak and Yet Do Not Speak of God”, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 23, 2 (1962), p.276.

creative and thus exercises varying degrees of power. It can to some degree decide what it wants to be. Every reality has its own appropriate form of creativity.

This variety means that every concrete effect has numerous real causes. But every cause is also an effect. Creativity means freedom and novelty but it also signifies partial determination by previous creativities or creative acts. In being determined in this way, any creative act is at the same time, though not in the same respect, an effect. Activity and passivity are correlatives: what cannot act cannot be acted upon, and what cannot be acted upon cannot act. Power is thus acting upon other genuine powers. Every reality thus sets limits to the freedom of others but does not destroy it.

Recognizing the genuineness of the freedom of others means, not taking away or preventing the freedom of others, but fostering and inspiring that freedom. The powerful - in this conceptuality - is like the creative orator, thinker and artist who inspire creative responses in others. The powerful is one who encourages appropriate originality in others, rather than dictates specific actions. The powerful rulers are those who place others in a position to make fruitful decisions of their own. Such people awaken creativity in others, inspire them by providing them with opportunities and by fostering creativity in them. The powerful can impose limits on disagreements, conflicts, and confusion, but cannot simply eliminate these things. For that to be true there must be a monopoly of power, which is what is rejected in this conceptuality. This is not to deny people their existence since the meaning of power is, contrary to its more frequent usage, not controlling but eliciting responses which are partially self-determining or free. The ideal form of power does not monopolize power, but allots to all their due measure of creative opportunity.¹⁰ It inspires freedom in others, thus enabling them to act freely yet in such a way that a coherent and in general harmonious world comes about. There is nothing ideal about possessing total control and reducing others to powerlessness. Hartshorne maintains that such idealization is actually symptomatic of weakness. It is the inferior, weak beings who yearn to be able to manipulate everything.

¹⁰ Hartshorne, "Biology and Spiritual View of the World: A Comment on Dr. Birch's Essay", *Christian Scholar*, 37, 3 (Sept., 1954), p.409; also his, *Omnipotence and Other Theological Mistakes* (SUNY Press, 1984), pp.10-26.

Concentration of decision-making in the one being is in principle undesirable because the values of life are essentially social, involving the interactions of more or less free individuals.

Understood this way, power over others is comparable to the control of one mind over another. A mind is influenced by what it knows, its object. A mind which knows A but not B would be different from one which knows B but not A. Change is effected in the mind through a change in the object. By altering the object of our awareness, the powerful also influences us. When it changes, we as other knowers change in response to the altered state. The powerful thus influences us not by controlling every detail of our action but by determining its own action, which is the inclusive object of our thoughts. We can still disobey but not disregard it. In reacting against its suggestion the disobedient is still influenced even though negatively. A state of rebellion or resistance to a suggestion is not the same as the state of unawareness of the suggestion.

Governance in this scheme is taking each successive phase of development and making good use of that phase in one's own and furnishing others with such guidance or inspiration as will optimize the ratio of opportunities and risks for the next phase. The truly powerful sets the best or optimal limits to freedom. Optimal limits mean that they are such that, were more freedom allowed, the risks would increase more than the opportunities, and were less freedom permitted, the opportunities would decrease more than the risks. Those in power set optimal limits for the free action of others by presenting at each moment a partly new ideal which influences our entire activity. Thus, no guarantee of perfection results, because no power could insure the actions of others. There is no complete determination of any action by one will. Rather, all realities form themselves and form each other within limits. It is the setting of these limits which constitutes the ordering of all activities.

Some Observations

Given such a conceptual model of power, what are the implications for our understanding of the various forms of resistance? One important consideration is that such a description of the workings of reality - generalized to include human actions - means that the relationship of one cause with another does not result in the loss of freedom of the other causes, even when there is an attempt to do so. Rather, they become included or incorporated into the original cause, resulting in

a new entity. In others, there is no absolutizing of the control that one exercises over the other. There is no robbing of anyone's autonomy. The other remains an entity in its own right, and there is no loss of its own power, so to speak. Another consideration is that the attempt to exercise unilateral control; and it is merely an attempt in this way of thinking which, in fact, has an effect on that party as well. It becomes an integral part of the actuality of that party, and therefore has a real consequence on that party. In other words, one becomes a different reality because of what one does or tries to do.

It could be objected that such a conception of power is idealistic. If by this judgment one means that it cannot be regarded as effective for bringing about change because it is dependent on its acceptance by those who have or are in power, that may well be true. It is for this reason that it is indeed legitimate to discuss various forms of resistance, even radical ones. It would, however, be regrettable if this is the only recourse we have. On the other hand, if by "idealistic" is meant that it is too theoretical, that would hardly be true if indeed we take into account, not how we perceive the workings of nature but how, at a deeper level, reality actually works. This conceptuality, as clarified earlier, is based on a certain scientific explanation of reality. If this is indeed correct, then it is more realistic than idealistic.

Admittedly, this is not an easy task, and one would be naïve to think otherwise. Changing one's direction or adopting another perspective involves much more than just consenting to it. That difficulty becomes greater when one must think also of implementing it, as would be the case if we discuss not just a concept of power but how the other would respond or react to it. It is for this reason that there is a real need to continue to reflect and evaluate various forms of resistance to power as traditionally understood. On the other hand, our difficulty at times is continuing with our entrenched conceptions in our discourse regarding human activity. We do need to engage in what Herder Camara called "a cultural revolution". Otherwise, an unfortunate consequence here is not just confusion but also questionable behavior. And if we are to correct that, it is important that we do regularly and consistently uncover our assumptions and subject them to a critical appraisal. In the present context, the challenge of re-thinking our conception of power really means that there is a need to direct people towards a fundamental issue as it will have implications not just on how we are to think but also on how we are to live.