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Power, Causation & Explanation*

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The concept, power, is here analyzed in terms significant not only to students of political philosophy but to all sorts of political science folk. Scrutiny of the pluralist-stratificationist controversy over community power (including explication of the assumptions of Dahl and Bachrach/Baratz on whether non-events can be causes) provides an example of defective uses of the concept, power. Ball criticizes the assumption that power has a single meaning and specifically questions the mechanistic, causal “power over” model, asking us to see the conditional in power, the sense of ability or capacity to do things.

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One might suppose that if political scientists were agreed about anything, they would agree about “power”—if not about who has it then at least about what “it” is. But they do not, and the literature on “power” continues to grow.¹ The result is not so much an embarrassment of riches as an embarrassment: for when speaking of power political scientists often appear to talk past one another. This failure to communicate stems in

* For criticism, advice, and encouragement I am indebted to Andrew McFarland, Donald Moon, Felix Oppenheim, Hanna Pitkin, and Stephen Toulmin. All errors are, of course, mine alone.

1. See, for example, *Political Power: A Reader in Theory and Research*, ed. Roderick Bell, David V. Edwards, and R. Harrison Wagner (New York: Free Press, 1969); and *Power*, ed. John R. Champlin (New York: Atherton, 1971); both contain useful bibliographies. See also n. 57, *infra*.

part, I believe, from certain submerged conceptual and metascientific differences whose import remains unrecognized and unappreciated by the protagonists themselves. My aim here is to locate and disinter some of these differences, to trace them to their sources, to analyze their implications for political inquiry, and to resolve them insofar as resolution is possible.

Briefly, my argument is this: (i) Power, as employed in modern political inquiry, is generally held to be a causal concept, that is, to exercise power is to cause a change in someone's behavior. This "causal" conception of power is then subjected to three critiques. (ii) First critique: causation, and hence power, is given an unduly narrow construal by some political scientists; specifically, the requirement that causes be *events* (occurrences, happenings, overt behaviors) is so narrow and exclusive as to violate both commonsensical and scientific canons of causal inference and power-attribution. (iii) The first critique is used to explicate and bring to light some of the issues in the "community power" controversy: more specifically, the dispute between "pluralists" and "non-decision" theorists is traceable to their entertaining different conceptions of causation and thence of power. (iv) Second critique: If political power is understood in mechanistic event-causal terms, then the Hobbesian problem of "action at a distance" becomes a problem—or rather a pseudo-problem—for political science. (v) Third critique: If political power is indeed a causal concept, then there must be general laws available for warranting power-explanations. Yet there are no such laws: there are only rules and maxims of prudent and rational action. Therefore power-explanations are not law-covered causal ones. (vi) Finally, I shall offer an analysis of power as an explanatory concept, arguing that power attributions are conditional ascriptions of ability or capacity to an agent or agency.

I. Power, Causation, and Mechanism

Political science, it is sometimes said, is the systematic study of politics; politics has to do with the possession and exercise of power; power is a "relation" describable in causal terms; *ergo*, political science is the study of political causation. Thus Lasswell and Kaplan contend that "The experiential data of political science are acts considered as affecting or determining other acts, a relation embodied in the key concept of power. Political science, as an empirical discipline, is the study of the shaping and sharing of power."² Similarly, Oppenheim notes that "Power tends

2. Harold D. Lasswell and Abraham Kaplan, *Power and Society* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950), p. xiv.

to be viewed as the key concept, if not of the behavioral sciences in general, at least of political science.”³ Dahl likewise views political science as the systematic empirical study of the political system, which he defines as “any persistent pattern of human relationships that involves, to a significant extent, power, rule, or authority”; but power is “the primitive notion underlying all of these concepts.”⁴ In a similar vein, Key maintained that “the essence of politics lies in ‘power,’” and that political science “is the study of [power] relationships.”⁵ Simon goes even further, for he says that the question of how to define and measure power “is clearly a central problem of political science. Indeed, until it is solved, political science, defined as the study of power, cannot be said to exist.”⁶

How then define “power?” Simon tells us that he turned

to the task of defining political power, only to find myself . . . unable . . . to arrive at a satisfactory solution. The difficulty appeared to reside in a very specific technical point: influence, power, and authority are all intended as *asymmetrical* relations. When we say that *C* has power over *R*, we do not mean to imply that *R* has power over *C*. . . . When I had stated the question in this form—as a problem of giving operational meaning to the asymmetry of the relation between independent and dependent variable—it became clear that it was identical with the general problem of defining a *causal relation* between two variables. That is to say, for the assertion “*C* has power over *R*,” we can substitute the assertion, “*C*’s behavior causes *R*’s behavior.” If we can define the causal relation, we can define influence, power, or authority, and *vice-versa*.⁷

Simon’s lead is followed by Dahl,⁸ March,⁹ Oppenheim,¹⁰ and McFarland.¹¹

3. Felix E. Oppenheim, *Dimensions of Freedom* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1961), p. 91.

4. Robert A. Dahl, *Modern Political Analysis* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1963), p. 6; “The Concept of Power,” *Behavioral Science*, 2 (July, 1957), pp. 201–15, at 202.

5. V. O. Key, Jr., *Politics, Parties and Pressure Groups*, fifth ed. (New York: Crowell, 1964), pp. 2–3.

6. Herbert Simon, *Models of Man* (New York: Wiley, 1957), p. 4.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 5. Here, as throughout this essay, I have substituted the now-standard notation of *C* for causative agent and *R* for respondent.

8. Dahl, “Power,” *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* (New York: Macmillan-Free Press, 1968), xii, pp. 405–15, at 410.

9. James G. March, “An Introduction to the Theory and Measurement of Influence,” *American Political Science Review*, 49 (June, 1955), pp. 431–51, at 437; but

Power is central to modern political inquiry because, as Morgenthau says, "Without such a concept, a theory of politics . . . would be altogether impossible, for without it we could not distinguish between political and nonpolitical facts, nor could we bring at least a measure of systematic order to the political sphere."¹² The concept of power organizes, focuses, and simplifies the task of explaining political behavior; and this concept, in its turn, is simplified by defining it in causal terms. What will count as a *political* fact will depend upon its having something to do with "power," so understood.

It is of course true, if not indeed by now a truism, that there are few "facts" which are not in some sense "theory-laden." As Easton says, a "fact" is "a particular ordering of reality in terms of some theoretical interest."¹³ The danger comes when a "theoretical interest" becomes an exclusive preoccupation. I shall argue that the characterization of power as a species or subset of causal relations is systematically distorted and misleading in its theoretical exclusivity. The understanding of power as cause is not (simply) a "mistake," but rather a partial understanding which is mistaken only when generalized or formulated as a rule covering *all* cases of power-attribution and explanation.

It has been truly said that "The conviction that all science is mechanics dies hard."¹⁴ In political science one might justly wonder whether the death certificate will ever be signed. In analyses of power, especially, we see continuing evidence of the presumed vitality and validity of a "mechanistic" understanding of science. Dahl, for one, acknowledges that his

way of thinking about [power or] influence is analogous to the concept of force in mechanics. In mechanics object *C* exerts a force on object *R* if *C* produces a change in the velocity of *R*. Galileo's famous law of inertia states that a body left to itself will move with a uniform velocity in one and the same direction. Any change in the velocity of a body, then, indicates the presence of a force. And the size of the force is proportional to the size of the change in velocity.

cf. his "The Power of Power," in *Varieties of Political Theory*, ed. David Easton (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1966), pp. 39–70.

10. Oppenheim, *op. cit.*, pp. 40–41.

11. Andrew S. McFarland, *Power and Leadership in Pluralist Systems* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1969), p. 3.

12. Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, third ed. (New York: Knopf, 1965), pp. 4, 5.

13. David Easton, *The Political System* (New York: Knopf, 1953), p. 53.

14. Norwood Russell Hanson, *Patterns of Discovery* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958), pp. 65–66.

While “we ought not to push such analogies very far,” Dahl adds, “there is little doubt that our ideas about underlying measures of influence rest on intuitive notions very similar to those on which the idea of force rests in mechanics.” The “underlying idea in both cases” is essentially the same.¹⁵

Yet such well-meant attempts to remain self-conscious and critical of our mechanistic metaphors and analogies may be foredoomed to fail. For, as Black and Hesse have noted, models and metaphors belonging to a theoretical or “secondary linguistic” system, tend to establish an *imperium* over the descriptive or “primary linguistic” system whose features the secondary system was meant to illuminate. Having grown accustomed to thinking and speaking in the vocabulary of the one we find ourselves unable to think and speak any longer in the “descriptive” terms of the other: the secondary system turns upon and transforms the primary system.¹⁶ Perhaps Dahl and the other analysts of power have not “pushed” the analogy with mechanism so much as they have been pushed by it. They have been forced by their own thought-models into some rather tight corners; but, instead of seeking escape, they have accepted their imprisonment as the price of precision, rigor, and theoretical economy.

Is the mechanistic conception of power and causation viewed by political scientists as a metaphorically inspired understanding? Or is it seen as a literal truth, more or less independent of the vagaries and putative vagueness of metaphor and analogy? Not surprisingly (in light of Black’s and Hesse’s analyses), it is often hard to tell. Dahl’s evolving analysis of power discloses an interesting ambivalence here. In his early paper on power, Dahl aims to “steer clear of the possible identity of ‘power’ with ‘cause,’ and the host of problems this identity might give rise to;” yet he speaks in synonyms of “necessary conditions,” “connections,” and so on.¹⁷ In his later essays Dahl is less reticent about viewing power relations as “causal” ones. Power, as one of “the key concepts in political science,” is “strictly causal.”¹⁸ For “in political discourse . . . a relation-

15. Dahl, *Modern Political Analysis*, p. 41.

16. See Max Black, *Models and Metaphors* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1965), pp. 25–47; and Mary B. Hesse, *Models and Analogies in Science* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1966), pp 157–77. Compare J. L. Austin, “A Plea for Excuses,” in *Philosophical Papers*, second ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), p. 202.

17. Dahl, “The Concept of Power,” pp. 203–4. Dahl’s initial reluctance to view “power” in “causal” terms derived from his erroneous supposition (since abandoned) that the notion of “cause” was rendered scientifically suspect by Hume (*ibid.*, p. 203).

18. Dahl, “Cause and Effect in the Study of Politics,” in *Cause and Effect*, ed. Daniel Lerner (New York: Free Press, 1965), pp. 75–98, at 88.

ship of power, influence, control, or authority is a causal relation among two or more human actors.” And finally he succumbs completely to the persuasiveness of the mechanistic causal conception of power which he has, apparently without his knowledge, inherited from philosophers long dead.¹⁹ “To put the matter in this way,” he says finally, “may render the notion of power rather peculiar as a central concept in political science: Does any other field of empirical investigation take *cause itself* . . . as an object of study?”²⁰

This understanding of power-as-cause is widely shared. As McFarland notes:

Definitions of power or influence based on such concepts as force [Cartwright], incentives or utilities [Karlsson], and minimal winning coalitions [Riker, Shapley and Shubik] are also reducible to causal terms. The idea of force essentially refers to a cause that *pushes*; definitions of power based on force differentials refer to what happens when a first causal agent *pushes* one way (force) and a second causal agent *pushes* another way (resistance). The stronger *push* or stronger force is the “stronger” cause, i.e., the more powerful agent. Utilities and incentives are inward forces that start people moving, make them go, i.e., *cause* people to do things. Incentives and utilities are inward subjective causes that *push* or *pull*; in other words, they are subjectively experienced forces. Hence, definitions of power or influence that refer to *C*’s manipulation of *R*’s utility function or incentive system merely add a set of intermediary variables to the idea of power as causation: *C causes a change* in *R*’s utilities or incentives (the intermediary variables), which, in turn, *cause a change* in *R*’s behavior. Definitions of power that emphasize the last added member of a minimal winning coalition essentially refer to the idea of necessary and sufficient cause. Whereas all members of the minimal winning coalition are *necessary* causes for changing the behavior of others, the last to join is the *sufficient* [sic] cause for the change. . . . The last to join provides the final amount of needed force or causal push.²¹

19. See my “Models of Power: Past and Present,” *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences* (July 1975).

20. Dahl, “Cause and Effect in the Study of Politics,” p. 89.

21. McFarland, *Power and Leadership in Pluralist Systems*, p. 11; my italics. The bracketed references are to: Dorwin Cartwright, “A Field Theoretical Conception of Power,” in *Studies in Social Power*, ed. Cartwright (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1959); Georg Karlsson, “Some Aspect of Power in Small Groups,” in *Mathematical Methods in Small Group Processes*, ed. J. H. Criswell, H. Solomon, and P. Suppes (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1962); William Riker,

Power, that is to say, is cause, and causation is in turn viewed through the mechanistic imagery of push and shove, contact and collision.

II. Power as Cause: First Critique

When Dahl, Riker, and others speak of power “relations” as a species or sub-set of causal relations they adopt, perhaps unwittingly, an unduly narrow conception of causation. Specifically, they construe causes as antecedent *events* isolable in space and time. “A necessary condition for the power relationship,” Dahl maintains, “is that there exists a time lag, however small, from the actions of the actor who is said to exert power to the responses of the respondent. This requirement merely accords with one’s intuitive belief that *C* can hardly be said to have power over *R* unless *C*’s power attempts *precede* *R*’s responses.”²² Similarly, Riker stipulates that “one *event* causes another if and only if the terminal situation of the causing event is identical in space-time location and in movers and actors with the initial situation of the caused event.”²³ Or, as McFarland puts it:

A necessary condition for the causality (power) relation is that there exists a time lag, however small, from the first *event* (actions of the actor), which is said to be the cause (who is said to exert power), to the *event* said to be the effect (the responses of the respondents). This requirement merely accords with one’s intuitive belief that an event can hardly be said to have caused another event unless the cause *precedes* the effect (*C* can hardly be said to have power over *R* unless *C*’s *power attempts* precede *R*’s responses).

McFarland adds: “this property of the causality relation is also a property of the power relation, and vice versa.”²⁴

Proponents of this analysis agree that *C* (the causal agent) cannot be said to be “powerful” relative to *R* (the respondent) unless he actually *does* something to or with *R*—unless, that is, *C* makes some sort of observable “power attempt.” *C* is presumed to be powerful with respect to *R* not by virtue of *being* (in some position, for instance) or *having*

“Some Ambiguities in the Notion of Power,” *American Political Science Review*, 58 (June, 1964), pp. 341–49; and L. S. Shapley and Martin Shubik, “A Method for Evaluating the Distribution of Power in a Committee System,” *American Political Science Review*, 48 (September, 1954), pp. 787–92.

22. Dahl, “The Concept of Power,” p. 204; emphasis supplied.

23. Riker, *op. cit.*, p. 346; my italics.

24. McFarland, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

(wealth or a reputation for power, for example), but only by actually *doing* something, that is, performing some action which is observable as an *event* (the cause) followed by an observable effect, that is, *R*'s compliance or noncompliance. Causes can only be events isolable in space and time.

There is, however, something seriously wrong with this understanding not only of power but of causation as well. I shall first suggest what is wrong with this understanding of causation and then, by implication, what is wrong with its analysis of power.

In stipulating that only *events* can figure as causes, Dahl and the others make the mistake for which I have elsewhere criticized Gilbert Ryle.²⁵ In *The Concept of Mind* Ryle denies that behavioral dispositions can be causes because dispositions "are not happenings and are not therefore of the right type to be causes."²⁶ Although Ryle is surely right in saying that dispositions are not happenings, occurrences, or events, he is quite mistaken in claiming that only events can be causes. For such non-"events" as dispositions, attitudes, standing conditions, processes, etc., can and do figure as causes—not only in our everyday discourse but in the natural and social sciences as well.²⁷ In stipulating that causes *must* be events, Dahl, Riker, McFarland, and the others have narrowed unduly, and done violence to, our multifarious conception of causation; and if power is, as they maintain, a causal notion, then we might expect their conception of power to be an unduly narrow one. That this is indeed the case can be seen, I think, in the recent "community power" controversy.

III. Excursus on Community Power

Briefly, and by way of preview, I shall argue that the continuing controversy surrounding the "community power" studies derives in part from several as yet unrecognized metascientific or conceptual differences. I shall argue that different conceptions of "cause" and thence "power" lie, like the disembodied smile of the cheshire cat, at the bottom of everything.²⁸ Still more specifically, the controversy is rooted in two competing

25. In my *Laws and Explanation in Political Science* (University of California, Berkeley: Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, 1973), chap. 4, § 3.

26. Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (London: Hutchinson, 1949), p. 113.

27. See J. L. Mackie, "Causes and Conditions," *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 2 (October, 1965), pp. 245–64; H. L. A. Hart and A. M. Honoré, *Causation in the Law* (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), chaps. 2–3; and Rom Harré, "Powers," *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science*, 21 (1970), pp. 81–101.

28. Riker, for quite different reasons, also notes that "differences in the notion of

claims whose conceptual differences remain unrecognized. These claims are that (1) only *events* can count as causes, and contrariwise, that (2) non-“events,” for example, standing conditions, may also figure as causes. This is not, of course, the level at which the disputants’ arguments proceed; but it is at this level that we must operate if we are to understand, and to come to grips with, the *conceptual* sources of this controversy. For indeed the insistence with which the disputants advance their apparently incompatible claims suggests that this is no ordinary controversy about techniques, method, or measurement, but a philosophical one whose solution requires a detailed analysis of the logic of competing claims. Before undertaking that analysis, however, it might be well to rehearse briefly the background of the “community power” controversy.

A major controversy within sociology and political science concerns the question *Who Governs?* or more bluntly, *Who’s Running This Town?*²⁹ Two different “theories” of, or “approaches” to, the study of community power give two sorts of answers. On the one side, “stratification” theories hold that members of a “power elite” are apt to wield power out of all proportion to their numbers in the general population.³⁰ On the other side, “pluralist” theories are more likely to maintain that power resides not in any social or economic elite, but is rather more or less widely dispersed among many different groups, each having different membership, constituencies, interests, resources, and skills, and each having greater or lesser power or influence in limited “issue-areas.” Stratificationists find American communities riven by differences of class, status, and wealth, along with corresponding differences in the distribution of political power. Pluralists acknowledge the presence and importance of differences of class, wealth, and status, but deny that these differences are invariably reflected in the distribution of political power.

Studies by early stratificationists like the Lynds, C. Wright Mills and Floyd Hunter were notable neither for their subtlety nor methodological

cause stand back of . . . differences in the notion of power” (op. cit., p. 346). While averring that disputes about power may be traceable to “disputes over . . . alternative models of causation,” Dahl nevertheless wishes to avoid these “somewhat rarefied philosophical and definitional questions, which many social scientists are prepared to abandon to metaphysicians or philosophers” (“Power,” p. 411).

29. See Dahl, *Who Governs?* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961); and Ritchie P. Lowry, *Who’s Running This Town? Community Leadership and Social Change* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965).

30. Here I borrow Polsby’s terminology. See Nelson W. Polsby, *Community Power and Political Theory* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963), pp. 8–11.

sophistication.³¹ Dahl's "Critique of the Ruling Elite Model," published in 1958, was, for a while at least, thought to have administered the *coup de grâce* to these earlier and methodologically unsophisticated "stratificationist" approaches to the study of community power.³² Although presumed to be dead, stratification theory refused to lie down and pass peacefully to the shades. And in 1962 it was resurrected in a rather more sophisticated form by Bachrach and Baratz in their "Two Faces of Power," followed shortly by their "Decisions and Non-Decisions."³³ The appearance of these papers reopened a debate that continues even now, and shows little sign of abating—or of resolving very much either.³⁴

I shall focus upon the presuppositions and implications of each of these perspectives, arguing that two different conceptions of causality are implicit in the dispute between them. Pluralists hold that only *events* can be causes; non-decision theorists, by contrast, are willing to admit non-"events" to causal status. I shall defend the latter as the more acceptable understanding of causation and causal explanation. But first a reminder, and a disclaimer: mine is not the level of analysis at which the disputants' arguments proceed; nor, although I shall defend the non-decision thesis against the still prevalent pluralist view, should my arguments in its behalf be understood as a defense of its empirical validity in all the cases cited by its proponents and defenders.

Non-decision theorists hold that some would-be issues never come to light because some person or group may *believe, perceive* or *feel* that he or they could not prevail against some other group believed to be capable of blocking any such power attempt. As early as 1937 Carl Friedrich formulated this truism as "The Rule of Anticipated Reactions."³⁵

31. Polsby, *op. cit.*, esp. chaps. 2 and 3.

32. Dahl, "A Critique of the Ruling Elite Model," *American Political Science Review*, 52 (June, 1958), pp. 463–69.

33. Peter Bachrach and Morton S. Baratz, "Two Faces of Power," *American Political Science Review*, 56 (December 1962), pp. 947–52; and "Decisions and Non-decisions: An Analytical Framework," *ibid.*, 57 (September, 1963), pp. 632–42.

34. See Richard M. Merelman, "On the Neo-Elitist Critique of Community Power," *American Political Science Review*, 62 (June 1968), pp. 451–60; and the rejoinder by Bachrach and Baratz in *ibid.* (December 1968) pp. 1268–69; Raymond E. Wolfinger, "Nondecisions and the Study of Local Politics," *ibid.*, 65 (December, 1971), pp. 1063–1080; and the critical comments by Frederick W. Frey, "Comment: On Issues and Nonissues in the Study of Power," in the same issue, pp. 1081–1101; followed by Wolfinger's "Rejoinder to Frey's 'Comment'," pp. 1102–1104; and Geoffrey Debnam, "Non-Decisions and Power: The Two Faces of Bachrach and Baratz," *ibid.* (forthcoming).

35. Cf. Carl J. Friedrich, *Constitutional Government and Democracy* (New York: Ginn and Co., 1937), pp. 16–18; and his *Man and His Government* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1963), chap. 11.

Roughly and simply stated, the rule—which is actually a generalization about the behavior of prudent rule-following agents—is that *R* is less likely to raise an issue if he believes that *C* can and probably will block his attempt and defeat it, can take reprisals against *R*, and so on. Bachrach and Baratz suggest as much with their example of the discontented professor: “Aggrieved about a long-standing policy around which a strong vested interest has developed, the professor resolves in the privacy of his office to launch an attack upon the policy at the next faculty meeting. But, when the moment of truth is at hand, he sits in frozen silence. Why?” One reason could be that, “given the *beliefs* and *attitudes* of his colleagues . . . , he would almost certainly constitute on this issue a minority of one.” The fearful professor’s beliefs about his colleagues’ beliefs and attitudes explains his silence and inaction. Bachrach and Baratz conclude: “to the extent that a person or group—consciously or unconsciously—creates or reinforces barriers to the public airing of policy conflicts, that person or group has *power*.”³⁶ By this criterion the fearful professor’s colleagues may be said to have exercised power over him. Note, however, that his colleagues did not actually *do* anything; they made no observable “power attempt,” nor did the professor; and yet we should almost surely say that “power” *was* involved. The professor’s *belief* that any “power attempt” on his part would almost surely fail can hardly be gainsaid in explaining why certain issues do not get raised, or challenges made, in the first place. The issue not raised, the challenge not made, the decision not taken—one may legitimately seek explanations for these, too, and expect that under some circumstances the explanation will have something to do with power.

Now the important thing to note here is that the professor’s *belief* (about the probable failure of any challenge to “the powers that be”) is assuredly not an “event.” Nor are the prejudices, biases, beliefs and attitudes of his colleagues “events.” That is not, of course, to say that as non-“events” they are unreal or nonexistent.³⁷ They rather more closely resemble standing conditions. As such, there would appear to be

36. Bachrach and Baratz, “Two Faces of Power,” p. 949.

37. The way in which pluralists sometimes deny the non-decision thesis entails the metaphysical claim that only “events” are “real.” Thus Merelman: “Non-Events are, by definition, non-empirical. You cannot observe what has not happened.” (Reply to Bachrach and Baratz, *American Political Science Review*, 62 [December, 1968], p. 1269.) By the terms of this account, all “non-events”—for example, dispositions, processes, standing conditions—are somehow unobservable, nonempirical, or even “unreal”: a metaphysical howler. (Consider, for example: *Getting* pregnant is an event; but *being* pregnant is a *state* or *condition*, not an event. Yet pregnancy is none the less “observable” or “empirical” for being a non-event.)

no reason why beliefs (etc.) could not figure as causes of (or reasons for) certain behaviors, for example, sitting in frozen silence. But this is to get ahead of our story.

The pluralists object to the non-decision thesis on a number of grounds; but their primary objection turns implicitly upon their three-fold contention that (1) power relations are causal relations, that (2) only *events* can be causes, and hence that (3) all power attributions and explanations must refer to observable events. Pluralists and non-decision theorists are agreed about (1); but non-decision theorists *implicitly* deny the truth, adequacy, and/or sufficiency of (2), and explicitly deny (3). Pluralists require that *C* and/or *R* make some observable “power attempt” which the other then attempts to block or resist and which can then be seen to actually succeed or fail: such a power attempt must, in other words, be an observable *event*.

Now since a belief (for example) is manifestly not an observable event but is rather more closely akin to a disposition or standing condition, it cannot, by the terms of the pluralist account, be a cause of action or inaction, decision or non-decision. If there is no preceding event, there can be no cause, and hence no warranted attribution of “power” to a dominant person or group about whose power a non-elite holds certain beliefs, with regard to which a non-elite has perceptions of powerlessness or inefficacy, and so on. Therefore the pluralists require that actual behaviors, observable as events, be studied closely before power can be attributed to any person or group. No one, Dahl says, “can suppose that he has established the dominance of a specific group in a community or nation without basing his analysis on the careful examination of a series of *concrete decisions*.”³⁸ For, he argues, power relations are causal relations in which the causal event—the “power attempt” or “concrete decision”—must *precede* the outcome: “*C* can hardly be said to have power over *R* unless *C*’s power attempts precede *R*’s responses.”³⁹ But of course *C*’s and/or *R*’s beliefs, attitudes, etc., not being “events,” cannot be said to *precede* anything. Hence there can, on the pluralist account advanced by Dahl and others, be no causal attribution and thus no warrantable attribution of power either to *C* or *R*.

The non-decision thesis advanced by Bachrach and Baratz, by contrast, holds that *C* (the putative elite) does not actually have to *do* anything; it merely “is,” its power “exists”—at least by reputation or in the attitudes, perceptions, and/or beliefs of would-be challengers (*R*). The non-decision account of political power maintains that much is missed if

38. Dahl, “A Critique of the Ruling Elite Model,” p. 466.

39. Dahl, “The Concept of Power,” p. 204.

we require (always and invariably) that (say) *C act* and *R respond*—two “events” that may be contingent and temporally contiguous—before we can impute power or causal efficacy to one or the other. Power has “two faces,” one readily observable as event-causation (as the pluralists recognize), the other less easily detected. The pluralists have clearly seen one face, yet their metascientific blinders prevent them from seeing power’s other face. The pluralists have rightly recognized that a group’s power—its ability to influence outcomes—may sometimes be discerned by noting how often its views or preferences prevail over those of competing groups who dare to make observable “power attempts.” Sometimes, but not always. For there *may* be cases in which power shows its other face. Non-decision theory attempts to sensitize us to its possible presence. Or, as I should prefer to say: non-decision theory at least attempts to cure us of the metascientific tunnel vision of event-causation.

So stated, the non-decision thesis is quite above reproach. Can the pluralists be entirely blind to its possibility in principle? In fact, they are not. Dahl, for one, recognizes the possibility that a person’s or group’s perceptions of (or beliefs about) its relative power or powerlessness can influence its behavior. Interestingly, however, this recognition finds no place in his methodological inquiries, but is to be found only in his in-depth study of New Haven. In *Who Governs?* Dahl admits that while all citizens presumably have access to political resources some *use* them less frequently than others, or use them to lesser advantage, or perhaps not at all. In trying to explain this, Dahl notes that someone with a low “estimate as to the probability of succeeding in an attempt to influence a decision . . . is less likely to use his resources than one who is optimistic.” Later he reaffirms that “an individual who is relatively confident of success in attempting to influence decisions is much more likely to make the attempt than one who fears failure.”⁴⁰ (He does not, however, mention the possibility that such fear may have a rational basis.) Thus Dahl concedes that there may be instances in which “power” is present and operative even though no isolable decisions or behavioral *events* are observable. Yet in the pluralist *corpus* these are rare concessions indeed. In their methodological treatises such concessions are virtually nonexistent. Pluralism’s inability to see power’s other face is, I have argued, due to its unduly narrow conception of causation, and the extension of this partial understanding to the concept of political power.

A further and rather important point needs to be made and underlined here. The pluralists, it must be admitted, have detected an apparent flaw in the stratificationists’ logic. For they rightly note that one’s *belief(s)*

40. Dahl, *Who Governs?*, pp. 274, 286.

about who wields what kinds of power and in what degree may well be *mistaken*.⁴¹ Thus while *R* may fail to challenge *C* because *R* believes that *C* could defeat *R*'s move, that belief might be *mistaken*; therefore one cannot attribute power to *C* without first verifying the truth of *R*'s belief—the test of truth being to see what happens if *R* actually challenges *C* on some issue. If *R* makes no overt move against *C*, then, on the pluralist account, we have no grounds for attributing power to *C*: for reference to *R*'s (perhaps mistaken) belief, *simpliciter*, cannot license the attribution. This criticism goes to the heart of the matter. Unfortunately Bachrach and Baratz fail to answer it in any satisfactory way. Let me try to make good their omission.

Suppose that *R* *mistakenly* believes that *C* could and probably would block any challenge or “power attempt” that *R* might make. If *R*'s (erroneous) belief prevents *R* from making any such attempt, can we then say that *C* has exercised power over *R*? We *can*, if either of two conditions is met: if, that is, *C* has (1) deliberately inculcated this belief, or has (2) knowingly taken advantage of a pre-existing belief of *R*'s that *C* knows to be mistaken. But, contrary to what Bachrach and Baratz maintain, we *cannot* attribute power to *C* if *C* is unaware that *R* holds such a belief. For, as I shall argue in section VI, power-relations between human beings are intentional: there can be no *unintentional* or “unconscious” *exercise* of power; the idea of exercising power has an element of intention “built into” it. The point, in any case, is this: the objection that *R*'s belief (about *C*'s power to block any challenge by *R*) may be *mistaken*, is by no means a fatal one; for even if *R*'s belief be mistaken we may nevertheless attribute power to *C*, so long as either of the aforementioned conditions is met.⁴²

41. See Raymond Wolfinger, “Reputation and Reality in the Study of ‘Community Power,’” *American Sociological Review*, 25 (October, 1960), pp. 636–44.

42. Still, there *is* a puzzle here; and it is due in part to the view that power is a causal concept. For while we may say that *R*'s mistaken belief about *C*'s power is not, by itself (that is, without reference to *C*'s knowledge of *R*'s belief and *C*'s intention to exploit it), tantamount to saying that *C* therefore has power over *R*, we *can* say that *R*'s belief about *C*'s power may figure as a cause (or necessary condition) of *R*'s behavior. Hence we may discern a “causal” relation (between belief and behavior, in this case) without, however, having discerned a *power* relationship—unless one wants to make the distinctly odd claim that *R* has (inadvertently) exercised power over himself! Now we do, to be sure, speak of exercising power over oneself: that is what we mean by “will power;” but will power is both monadic (hence ostensibly nonpolitical) and intentional (since I cannot *will* something unintentionally or inadvertently). This raises a further and stickier question: Granted that a reason (stated as want, motive, intention, etc.) may be a necessary condition of some action, can we say that the reason is a *cause* of the action? In my

IV. Power as Cause: Second Critique

According to the push-and-shove, bump-and-grind mechanistic picture of causal relations, the prior (change in) movement of one thing can be said to cause a change in the position of another only if it exhibits some sort of "connection" or "contact." One cannot "push" without first "touching": herein lies the fondness of Hobbes and his philosophical progeny for colliding billiard balls. Indeed, collisions of this sort were long thought to be paradigmatic of all causal relations. Political scientists are still largely in the grip of this earlier model, and nowhere more than in their understanding of "power."⁴³ I turn now to a critical consideration of yet another aspect of this mechanistic-causal model of power and the confusions, distortions, and omissions likely to result from it.

The problem is this: If power relations are causal ones, and if cause is understood in mechanistic terms, then what, in political-scientific discourse, corresponds to the mechanist's principle of "no action at a distance?" That this should be a problem for a mechanistic materialist like Hobbes is hardly surprising; what is more surprising is that the problem in its original form is with us even today. Simon, for example, asks: "What corresponds, in the social sciences, to the postulate of 'no action at a distance?'" He answers that "the direct analogue is 'no influence without communication,'" adding: "Of course 'communication' cannot be taken quite literally as 'verbal communication,' but the principle remains an important, and probably indispensable, tool for the identification of influence mechanisms."⁴⁴ Simon's way of posing and resolving the problem is shared by Dahl, Cartwright, and McFarland.⁴⁵ The sort of "communication" envisaged here is similar, if not indeed identical, to that of Hobbes, Locke, and Hume, who speak of one moving ball "communicating" its force to another, thereby causing a subsequent movement observable as an effect.⁴⁶ Human agents can also "communicate" their "motions" to others, causing them to "move" in their turn: herein is believed to lie the essence of power and influence in politics. The idea that all science is mechanics dies hard.

Laws and Explanation in Political Science (chap. 4, § 2) I argue that reasons *can* be causes, but not Humean ones conformable to the deductive-nomological model of explanation. I have put this argument (or rather conclusion) to work in section v of the present paper.

43. See my "Models of Power: Past and Present," *passim*.

44. Simon, *Models of Man*, p. 7.

45. Dahl, "The Concept of Power," p. 204; Cartwright, "Power: A Neglected Variable in Social Psychology," p. 7; and McFarland, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

46. *Vide* my "Models of Power: Past and Present."

The mechanist's problem of "action at a distance" is not confined to the pluralists. Bachrach and Baratz, for instance, contend that "In a power situation there must be a clear communication between the person who initiates policy and the person who must comply."⁴⁷ They differ from the pluralists, however, in allowing the communicative "connection" between *C* and *R* to be tacitly understood and unspoken: *C* need not, that is, always or necessarily *say* or *do* anything to *R* or in *R*'s presence—state a preference, give a command, make a decision, or indeed any overt "power attempt"—before a warrantable inference can be made about *C*'s power or lack of it.

Let me briefly sort out and summarize what is being claimed here. Pluralists and non-decision theorists alike are agreed that power relations are causal ones; that there is "no action at a distance" but always some sort of "connection" between *C* and *R*; and that, since most instances describable as power or influence relations between human beings do not involve actual physical contact or collision, there must be a synonym or substitute for contact or "connection" between them. All are agreed that the human-behavioral synonym for, or "translation" of, causal contact or collision is to be found in "communication." But while pluralists insist (because of their peculiarly narrow Humean conception of causation) that this communicative connection must refer to an observable *act* or signaling *event* of some kind, non-decision theorists deem this requirement too strict, insisting that such a connection may be tacit or implicit rather than overt and observable. In any case, both agree that there must be a causal "connection" of some sort between *C* and *R* before one can surmise anything about their relative power. This "connection" is variously termed "communication," "persuasive communication," and "preference communication." The consensus appears to be that this is quite a satisfactory answer to the question about what corresponds in political science to the mechanist's principle of "no action at a distance."

Yet this answer is misleading, if not mistaken. For on this account almost anything may figure as a "persuasive communication," and hence as a causal connective or link. Considering only "verbal communications" (or, in a philosophically more respectable idiom, "speech-acts") they may presumably be as diverse as these: "Your money or your life!" "Stop!" "No smoking allowed." "I'll do it if you will." "It's in your interest to do *x*." "My turn." "Your move." "Please don't cry." "Forgive

47. Bachrach and Baratz, "Decisions and Nondecisions," p. 634. But compare Jack Henry Nagel, "Some Questions About the Concept of Power," *Behavioral Science*, 13 (March 1968), pp. 129–37, at 132–33.

me." "Honor thy father." "Your attention, please." "Listen." "Buy only brand names." "Depress the clutch before shifting gears." "Close the door." Now, given a list of speech-acts as diverse as these—some being threats, others being pleas, reminders, commands, exhortations, warnings, advice, instructions, and so on—try substituting each of them as instances of "persuasive communication" from *C* to *R*. Suppose also that in every case *R* complies (consents, obeys, agrees, accepts). Can we then say in each and every instance that *C* (the communicator) has exercised *power over R* (the respondent, or recipient of the communication)? Surely not. Even without performing an exhaustive Austinian analysis, it seems evident that some of these will appear as instances of *C's power over R*, some as examples of *C's power to persuade* (convince, mislead) *R*, some as *C's attempts to influence R*, still others as evidence that *R* is *in C's power*, and many more as evidence for *none* of these.

Political scientists tend nevertheless to take "power over" as paradigmatic of all intelligible talk about political power. Dahl, for one, insists that it is "intuitively" obvious that *C* has "power over" *R* if he causes *R* to do something that *R* "would not otherwise do."⁴⁸ As an example Dahl cites a hypothetical case in which he asks his student, Jones, to read a certain book. If Jones, who would not have otherwise read the book then reads it, Dahl can (he claims) be said to have exercised "power over" Jones. Yet something is seriously wrong with this "intuitive idea" of power. For it allows an attribution of "power over" Jones' behavior to be made—so long as Jones makes *some* response. Suppose that Dahl tells Jones to read the book, whereupon Jones refuses. Now, according to the terms of Dahl's definition, he could still be said to have "power over" Jones' behavior, inasmuch as he made Jones "do something that he would not otherwise do," namely, refuse! To avoid absurdities of this sort, one must refer to *C's intention* with respect to *R's* behavior.⁴⁹ Hence McFarland requires that *R* acts as *C* intends, before one can say that *C* has power over *R*. Power is "intended social causation."⁵⁰ This is an important refinement.

But is it enough? Are all instances of "intended social causation" examples of *power*? Consider the following cases. *C*, an extrovert, knows that *R* is so shy that *R* never greets anyone unless the other person greets

48. Dahl, "The Concept of Power," p. 203.

49. For an incisive analysis of the intentionality requirement in power attribution, see D. M. White, "Power and Intention," *American Political Science Review*, 65 (September, 1971), pp. 749–59.

50. McFarland, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

him first. So *C* makes it a practice to say “hello” first, and is always greeted in turn by *R*. Has *C* then exercised power over *R*? We might say that *C* has intentionally influenced *R*’s behavior, or even that *C* caused it (since *R*’s behavior would not have occurred without *C*’s signaling-action having preceded it); but is this to say that *C* has exercised power over *R*? Consider yet another case: *R*’s secretary, *C*, says to the absent-minded *R*, “Don’t forget your raincoat (dental appointment, car keys, or whatever),” whereupon *R* does what *C* intends and what he would not otherwise have done—he picks up his raincoat (remembers his appointment, etc.). Has *C* then exercised power over *R*? Again, we might maintain that *C* has by means of a communicative action (intentionally) influenced *R*’s behavior, or even that *C*’s behavior “caused” *R*’s response: but hardly, I think, that *C* has in any intelligible sense exercised *power over R*. (And this in spite of the fact that *C*’s communication caused *R* to do something that *R* would not otherwise have done.) To understand either of these cases of influence and/or interpersonal causation as instances of *C*’s *power over R* is—for reasons to be advanced and defended in section VI—to quite misunderstand them. Suffice it here to suggest that this misunderstanding rests upon two mistaken suppositions: (a) that “power over” is the model or paradigm to which *all* power-attributions are assimilable; and (b) that “power” and “influence” are synonymous and interchangeable concepts. Having given a promissory note in lieu of a fuller analysis and defense, let me move straightaway to my third critique.

V. Power as Cause: Third Critique

Power, as an explanatory-causal concept, is likely to be “ambiguous” only if viewed outside of the many and varied contexts in which we use the term. Its meaning *is* its use, the ways in which it is used. If we are clear about context, the concept of power is no more apt to trip us up than is any other word. Ambiguities arise when we give power a single meaning, or attempt always to use it in only one way, regardless of context. Yet those whose analyses of “power” we have considered here insist that power is one (kind of) concept: it is a species of *cause*. In a variety of ways, and from a number of different angles, I have criticized this view. I turn now to a criticism which must, I think, prove fatal to this understanding of power. Briefly, I shall argue that power explanations cannot be “causal” in the sense required by covering-law theory, inasmuch as there are no genuine *laws* available to warrant them.

The covering-law model of explanation requires that causal explana-

tions be warranted by universal laws.⁵¹ I have shown elsewhere that this model is widely accepted by political scientists—including those whose analyses of “power” we have been considering in this paper.⁵² Power is viewed as a causal concept, and power explanations as law-covered causal explanations. But what sorts of laws are available as warranting generalizations for power explanations? This question is not raised in *any* of the analyses of power-as-cause: an omission well worth noting. Perhaps, however, we can glean some sort of answer by looking more closely at some of their examples.

Consider Dahl’s example of a policeman directing traffic at a busy intersection. The policeman has power that an ordinary citizen does not have, inasmuch as he can cause the traffic to stop and go, to turn right or left, and so on.⁵³ Now, this might seem an unexceptionable way of talking about (the policeman’s) power—except that, as we have seen, Dahl holds that the relation between *C* (the policeman) and *R* (the motorist) is causal in the contingent Humean sense: *C*’s signals are understood as *events* which regularly precede outcomes (stopping, going forward, turning). But if *C*’s overt behavior (raising his arm, blowing his whistle, or whatever) is to be accounted a Humean *cause* of *R*’s behavior, then we may ask: what form does the licensing general “law” take?

Now there *is* an observable regularity or constancy of conjunction between police-signaling behaviors and motorist-responding behaviors. But this regularity is *not* statable in Humean terms. For what we observe in this signaling-obeying relationship is not the instantiation of a universal law of human behavior, but evidence that a *rule* is being applied and widely obeyed. Its truth being contingent upon human agents’ continued acceptance of, and adherence to, a rule, this inference-license is not timeless and universal—as a genuine causal law must be—but is, rather, historically situated and may be obeyed or disobeyed, changed, rescinded, broken, overridden, and so on. One cannot change, break, disobey (or obey), or override laws of the kind required to license causal inferences and explanations.⁵⁴ Or, to put the matter most bluntly in terms of Dahl’s

51. See Carl G. Hempel, *Aspects of Scientific Explanation* (New York: Free Press, 1965), esp. pp. 335–425.

52. See my *Laws and Explanation in Political Science*, chap. 2, § 2.

53. Dahl, “The Concept of Power,” p. 202.

54. Or, as Hart might say: a law of nature has no “internal aspect”: see H. L. A. Hart, *The Concept of Law* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961), pp. 55–56 and 86–88. Cf. also my “On ‘Historical’ Explanation,” *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, 2 (September, 1972), pp. 181–92.

example: Motorists do not stop at red lights (or for a traffic officer) in the same way—for the same *kinds* of causes or reasons—that falling stones stop when they reach the ground. The policeman’s “power” to “cause” the traffic to stop does not consist in actual antecedent *events*—although we might *infer* (the presence of) his power *from* such events (whistle-blowing followed by traffic-stopping)—but resides rather in his *capacity* or *ability* to perform certain (legally recognized) sorts of actions, *if he so chooses* (see section VI). We do *not* say that he is without power unless he actually engages in certain overt behaviors (observable as events), whereupon certain other behavior-events follow regularly. We can and do attribute to him the power to direct traffic, even when he is not actually directing it.

Lest one object that the command-obedience relation between policeman and motorist is not a “political” one, consider the case of constituent and congressman. Miller and Stokes, along with Cnudde and McCrone and others, have devised causal models of constituency influence in Congress. With the aid of these models they discern the direction and degree of influence (or power or control) wielded by constituents over their elected representatives. By analyzing roll-call voting in sensitive issue-areas, for example, civil rights, they found strong correlations between constituency attitudes and preferences (at least as congressmen *perceive* them) and congressional voting behavior.⁵⁵ They conclude that there is indeed a causal influence-relation between constituency attitudes and the behavior of representatives. Yet the *law(s)* needed to license such a causal inference are nowhere stated, and for good reason: no such laws are available. A congressman acceding to the will of his constituents (because he wants to be reelected, say) is acting upon the prudential maxim that congressmen who desire reelection would be well-advised to heed the voters’ wishes. The explanation of the congressman’s compliant behavior is not law-covered but *rule-referring*; that is, the inference-license is (or may be restated as) a rule or maxim of conduct (a deterministic law of behavior is not so restatable). Therefore the explanation is not causal in the Humean sense required by covering-law theory: it is a rule-referring *reason* explanation rather than a law-covered causal one.

We might say that the observable regularity, or constancy of conjunction, between constituency attitudes and congressional behavior, or be-

55. Cf. Warren E. Miller and Donald E. Stokes, “Constituency Influence in Congress,” *American Political Science Review*, 57 (March, 1963), pp. 45–56; and Charles F. Cnudde and Donald J. McCrone, “The Linkage Between Constituency Attitudes and Congressional Voting Behavior: A Causal Model.” *ibid.*, 60 (March, 1966), pp. 66–72.

tween policeman *C*'s behavior and motorist *R*'s subsequent behavior, is an *artifact of a rule(s)*; for it provides evidence that men *know*, have *learned*, and are *correctly following* the relevant rule(s). (The idea of *learning* a law of nature—as distinguished, of course, from learning *of* or *about* it—would be absurd, as would the idea of breaking, enforcing, overriding, or revoking a genuine causal law.) Thus the “power” relationship between policeman and motorist, or constituent and congressman, is better understood in rational or rule-referring than in Humean causal terms.

The defects so far exposed inhere not in “the” concept of power but in a particular conception of power, namely, the Humean-causal one. The Humean model of *causal* relations, while useful and appropriate in some circumstances, is not a paradigm to which all *power* ascriptions are assimilable. That other, non-Humean models of causation might serve as models of power is, I think, a promising possibility.⁵⁶ Unfortunately that possibility cannot be explored here. Instead I shall conclude inconclusively, with some remarks meant to be propaedeutic to a non-Humean analysis of power.

VI. Notes Toward an Analysis of Power

There is, as we have seen, an almost overwhelming temptation to look for a single extra-contextual definition of “power.” Political scientists have been only too willing to listen to this siren song and so, like the sailors of yore, have come to grief on the treacherous shoals of an apparent but illusory clarity. My aim here is less to pin-point their precise location than to supplement the map-making attempts of others.⁵⁷ While the most perilous terrain has been mapped already in my three critiques of power-as-cause, several other points of peril remain uncharted.

The perils of “power over.” Toward the end of section IV I advanced,

56. For non-Humean models of causation, cf. Richard Taylor, *Action and Purpose* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1966, passim; and G. H. von Wright, *Explanation and Understanding* (Ithaca, N.Y. Cornell University Press, 1971), chaps. 2–4.

57. *Vide* S. I. Benn, “Power,” *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Paul Edwards (New York: Macmillan, 1967), vi; John R. Champlin, “On the Study of Power,” *Politics and Society*, 1 (November, 1970), pp. 91–111; Harré, “Powers,” *op. cit.*; Quentin Gibson, “Power,” *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, 1 (May, 1971), pp. 101–12; D. M. White, “The Problem of Power,” *British Journal of Political Science*, 2 (1972), pp. 479–90; Hanna Fenichel Pitkin, *Wittgenstein and Justice* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1972), pp. 275–79; William E. Connolly, *The Terms of Political Discourse* (Lexington, Mass.: D. C. Heath, 1974), chap. 3.

but did not adequately defend, the claim that “power over” is decidedly *not* a model or paradigm to which all power attributions are assimilable.⁵⁸ Indeed, in political discourse, “power over” may not even be the most important kind of power, much less a model or paradigm. Thus *C* may, for instance, have *power to*: he may, if he is chairman of a key congressional committee, have the power to block or to favor certain kinds of bills. And he may *have* this power without overtly and observably using it, in which case (his) power is traceable not to some (set of) antecedent behavioral *event(s)*, but is better described in terms of his *capacity* or *ability* to do certain kinds of things, if he so chooses. But he need not always or necessarily *do* anything (that is, perform some overt action) before power can be attributed to him: “unexercised” *power to* may indeed be power’s “other face.”

We also speak, for example, of the president’s power *to* veto legislation, and of the Senate’s power *to* pass legislation over a presidential veto. This does not readily translate as the president’s power *over* the Senate, or its power *over* him. The president does not (that is, cannot ordinarily be said to have) power over the Congress—although he may have more or less *influence with* that body, or have “powers” that they do not constitutionally possess. As Neustadt observes, “presidential power is the *power to* persuade.”⁵⁹ He further notes that “persuasion is a two-way street,” and “the power to persuade is the power to bargain.”⁶⁰ Indeed, as Neustadt avers, presidential power is rarely describable as *power over* anyone. His is, rather, the power of a well-placed trader in a marketplace of competing claims. Neustadt concludes that the power of the president and the Congress is “so intertwined that neither will accomplish very much, for very long, without the acquiescence of the other. By the same token, though, what one demands the other can resist. The stage is set for that great game, much like collective bargaining, in which each seeks to profit. . . . It is a game played catch-as-catch can, case by case.”⁶¹

Political scientists might do well to consider power descriptions and explanations “case by case,” rather than trying to describe all political power relations in terms of a “causal” model in which one actor is said to exercise “power over” another. The cases are much too diverse, and

58. Cf. Pitkin, *op. cit.*, pp. 276–77.

59. Richard E. Neustadt, *Presidential Power* (New York: Signet Books, 1964), p. 41; my italics.

60. *Ibid.*, pp. 44, 45.

61. *Ibid.*, pp. 45–46.

the contexts too varied and rich, to sanction such procrustean economies of description and explanation.

Power and Influence. At the end of section IV I advanced, but again did not defend, a second claim: that “power” and “influence” are not synonymous and interchangeable concepts. To elaborate: the meaning, or more often the various senses or meanings, of a word can often be brought out by distinguishing the ways in which we may use it and then contrasting these uses with those of supposed “synonyms.” In most political-scientific explications of “power,” however, quite the opposite tack is taken: we are told to look for synonyms, and to ignore contextually variable shades of meaning as “merely verbal” and hardly worthy of scientific consideration. This might be all very well, if we could, by simple linguistic fiat, banish these differences. But of course we cannot: they merely manifest themselves in ways that are likely to bring more confusion than clarity—all the more so when they remain hidden and willfully unrecognized.⁶² This is surely the case in the analyses of power, where we are told that power, influence, authority, and a number of related words, are (more or less) synonymous. But consider the differences between power and its supposed synonym, influence. One of the first differences to note is that influence can be both a noun and a verb, while power is always a noun. Power always requires the presence of a verb. In cases of power attributions to human agents, the action-word generally has *intention* “built into” it. Thus we say that an agent *exercises* power. And since one cannot “exercise” anything (for example, judgment) *unintentionally*, this means that we cannot intelligibly maintain that an agent exercises his power *unintentionally* (although he may not, to be sure, *intend* all the outcomes). One can, however, *influence* someone’s behavior either intentionally or *unintentionally*. Or, to put it in slightly different form: one can be influential without intending or even knowing it; but it sounds distinctly odd to say that someone *exercises* power without intending or knowing it.⁶³ Even so, one may *have* power without knowing, wishing, or intending it.

Consider some ordinarily unexceptionable ways of speaking about power and influence. We say that someone “did everything in his power”

62. Pitkin, *op. cit.*, p. 277.

63. This claim rests upon two others: that the exercise of power is an *action*; and that a performance must, in order to *be* an action, be intentional under at least one of its several descriptions. An adequate defense of these claims is beyond the scope of the present essay; but cf. G. E. M. Anscombe, *Intention* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1957), *passim*; and J. W. Meiland, “Are there Unintentional Actions?” *Philosophical Review*, 72 (1963), pp. 377–81.

but not that he “did everything in his influence.” We say that someone is “*in power*” but never “in influence”—but also that he can be influential and/or powerful. We also say that “power corrupts; absolute power corrupts absolutely,” but not that “influence corrupts; absolute influence corrupts absolutely.” And this points up yet another difference: we talk about absolute power but not about absolute influence. Or, again: we say that someone is all-powerful, but not all-influential. A tyrant or dictator is said to wield power, but not influence. And we speak of tyrannical power but not of tyrannical influence. We say that God is all-powerful, or that Caesar was a powerful leader; but we do not say that God is an influential deity, nor that Caesar was an influential leader.

Still other differences between power and influence can be discerned by attending to what we can say, and when. We can, for instance, say that the policeman has the power (ability, capacity) to make the traffic move as he chooses; but not that he influences its movement, nor that he has influence in traffic-directing situations. The president’s implied or threatened use of his power to veto legislation may influence congressional action; but this is not to say that he therefore has power *over* their actions, nor that they are *in* his power, nor even that he is more powerful than they. One can also have the *power to influence*. Mayor Daley doubtless has the power to influence the outcome of elections in Chicago. If power and influence were synonyms, this way of speaking might strike us as redundant; but since it does not, this suggests that power is not (always) synonymous with influence. Their respective uses or meanings are likely to be quite different; to equate them is to obscure much and to clarify little, if anything.

Power and Ability. Our word “power” comes by way of the French *pouvoir* from the Latin *potestas* or *potentia*, meaning “ability” (from *potere*, to be able). The concept has, of course, undergone various mutations along different dimensions, but its original sense is still alive and well in our language. When we ascribe power to something or someone, we may, for example, be attributing to it or him certain kinds of abilities or capacities. (“What is power,” asked Hamilton, “but the ability or faculty of doing a thing?”: *Federalist*, No. 33). Thus we say that the policeman has the power to stop traffic, the president the power to veto congressional bills, the falling stone the power to break the skylight, the acid the power to dissolve glass: and all these are attributions of ability or capacity to do certain things (if one chooses, in the case of human agents; following necessarily under certain conditions, in the case of things). Professor Emmet rightly admonishes us to think of power not as a “thing word” but as a “capacity word.” We need, she says, “to learn not to treat the word ‘power’ as a ‘thing word’ which is uniquely referen-

tial but to try in each case to see who or what is being thought of as effective and in what way.”⁶⁴ And what is “learned” here is nothing *new*, but rather a reminder about what it makes sense to say in certain kinds of contexts.

Attributions of power are conditional, and this feature is common to human agents (policemen and presidents) and to inanimate things or objects (falling stones and acids). The sorts of things that can figure as conditions are, however, apt to be quite different as between agents and objects. In cases involving objects, as Harré notes, “*X* has the power to *A*” is equivalent to the conditional statement “*If X* is subject to stimuli or conditions of an appropriate kind, then *X* will do *A*, in virtue of its intrinsic nature.”⁶⁵ But the attribution of power to a human agent is conditional in a further sense. For, in place of “will,” one must substitute “can” (or “could”). I should add the further stipulation that human agents (can) exercise political power not by virtue of their “intrinsic nature,” but by virtue of some recognized social convention or rule: which is but another way of saying that the way in which power attributions and explanations are warranted or licensed differs as between natural and sociopolitical phenomena (see section v). To bring out the difference to which Harré alludes, consider for example the ways in which we speak of an acid’s power to dissolve a substance and the English prime minister’s power to dissolve Parliament. The acid’s power to dissolve the substance is intrinsic; under the right conditions it *will* dissolve it. The prime minister’s power to dissolve Parliament is not intrinsic to the man but is, rather, part of his *role* as defined by certain rules; under certain rule-defined conditions, he *can* dissolve Parliament. But this is not to say that, given those conditions, he *will* (always) dissolve it; on the contrary, he may judge dissolution to be ill-timed, not in his party’s interest, and so on. At any rate, we can say of the prime minister (but not of the acid) that it is “in his hands” or “up to him” or, indeed, “within his power” as to whether he will dissolve or no. The difference between the ascription of power to an acid and an agent is, then, a logical or conceptual one, turning upon our being able to say different things about them. And this in turn entails differences in the manner of explaining these two kinds of dissolution: the acid’s power is amenable to covering-law interpretation, while the prime minister’s power is not. Or, to put it another way, these two power explanations are of different *logical types*, the one being causal and licensed by a uni-

64. Dorothy Emmet, “The Concept of Power,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 54 (1954), pp. 1–26, at 19–20.

65. Harré, “Powers,” p. 85.

versal law, the other “rational” and licensed by legal and/or prudential rules.

All power attributions are *conditional ascriptions of some ability or capacity* to do certain kinds of things, perform certain kinds of actions, or whatever. So we say that the acid *can* dissolve the substance and that the prime minister *can* dissolve the Parliament: and both of these are power attributions. But the difference lies in what is, or can be, entailed by a full statement of the relevant conditions. In the case of the acid, the *can* entails *will*, supposing the relevant conditions to obtain. Not so for the prime minister: to say that he *can* dissolve Parliament under certain conditions is *not* to say that he *will* dissolve it whenever those conditions obtain. In the case of human agents, the explanatory *can* need not entail the predictive *will*.⁶⁶ Therefore power explanations do not conform to the “symmetry thesis” of covering-law theory, which holds that explanations and predictions are logically identical and interchangeable.⁶⁷ This is, of course, only one of many ways in which power explanations fail to conform to covering-law requirements. But this seems less a reason for outlawing power explanations than for jettisoning the covering-law model: that, however, is another argument for another occasion.

66. Cf. my “On ‘Historical’ Explanation,” esp. pp. 186–89.

67. *Vide* Hempel, *op. cit.*, p. 367–76.