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Power, Liberalism, and Political Science: Some Christian Reflections

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POWER, LIBERALISM, AND POLITICAL SCIENCE:
SOME CHRISTIAN REFLECTIONS

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"Politics is a struggle for power over men..."—Hans J. Morgenthau[1]

How Should a Christian Political Scientist Think about Power?

The purpose of this paper is to explore the concept of *power* and its implications for a Christian perspective on political theory and political science. Specifically, an examination of power will flow into reflection on political theory, which will flow into an examination of the nature of political science. Power is certainly a central concept of political science, and indeed in some accounts, the central concept; a famous definition of politics is that it is the struggle for power. In fact, the theme of the 2006 Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association was "Power Reconsidered." By no means can I exhaustively discuss the concept of power. The literature is enormous and much of it has to do with the question of defining what power actually is. The difficulty of defining this concept is notorious in political science; it is clearly a crucial concept for the discipline, but there is no agreed upon definition of what power actually is.

What I hope to do in this paper is explore some of the various conceptions of power that have been put forth and see what kind of issues they raise for a Christian

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[1] Morgenthau 1946, 195.

perspective on politics. The key integrative question driving this paper is "How should a Christian political scientist think about power?" What inevitably emerges is reflection on the nature of politics itself as well as reflection on the nature of the discipline of political science. Thus, in this paper I wish to explore how power, liberalism, and political science interrelate. The concept of *power* (and *politics* as well) can be used in a wide variety of situations: family, the office, church bodies, and so forth, but I will confine my discussion to the various activities surrounding the state or what Michael Oakeshott has called *civitas*: the civil condition (Oakeshott 1975, 108; cf. Katznelson 2007, 8).

In posing the question, I have deliberately used the term *how*, rather than *what*, as the former has less implication for particular solutions and more for the proper way to approach the subject. In other words, I want to highlight the issues that I think are important in thinking about power, although I do go on to present some substantive conclusions. Are some definitions of power more problematic for a Christian perspective? How does a Christian perspective inform how we define power? Are there some types of power that it would be illegitimate for Christians to wield? If power is an inescapable part of social life, and power itself is morally suspect, what does that mean for the Christian citizen or office-holder? Lest however we go too far down this road, contending that power is suspect altogether, a moment's reflection may cause us to reconsider. Unless one is an anarchist, believing that power can never be justified, one would agree that lawless places like Somalia could use a great deal more power to keep order.

An additional difficulty of this paper is that to the best of my knowledge, there has been little in the way of specific Christian reflection on the concept of power as such,

although there has been a tremendous amount written on politics in general and the uses of power in particular.[2] I will try to situate this discussion of power within the broader Christian conversation on the nature of politics. In fact, the discussion of power very quickly touches on several other topics of importance to political theory. Such topics include freedom (does *freedom* refer only to external restraints or does it include internal restraints? Does it refer to things besides restraints?), human nature (what are a person's "real" interests, i.e., those that enable him or her to flourish?), and liberal and non-liberal conceptions of authority and legitimacy.

Rather than engage in an exhaustive survey of various authors and their various discussions of power, in this paper I have chosen to use as a starting point for engagement the classic sixty-page book *Power: A Radical View*, written by Steven Lukes, Professor of Sociology at New York University. It was first published in 1974 and recently reissued in a second edition (2005) with two additional chapters that revisit, defend, and extend his argument. Other authors and perspectives will be brought in as the discussion warrants, but to maintain focus I have thought it best to concentrate on Lukes' seminal work. In general, I agree with Lukes' account of power and his conclusions will guide the discussion. Along the way, I will try to highlight issues of interest for the Christian political scientist.

In sum, the reader of this paper ought to come away with, first, a general sense of the various debates about power, and second, a sense of their implications for a Christian approach to political science. I am following Lukes when I contend that the issue of power is integrally related to a broader political theory.

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[2] The literature is huge. Some standard works include Kuyper 1931, Maritain 1951, O'Donovan 1996, Ramsey 1968, Simon 1951 [1993], and Wolterstorff 1983. An excellent recent work focusing in particular on political ideologies is Koyzis 2003.

What is Power?

Before I get to Lukes' argument, it will be helpful to have some clarification of terms. Terms such as *power*, *force*, *coercion*, and *influence* do not have a single accepted meaning among political scientists. The following definitions are derived from Robert A. Dahl's classic textbook *Modern Political Analysis*. Dahl is among the most influential political scientists in the development of the discipline and so we may take his definitions as mainstream.

- *Influence*. A relation among human actors such that the wants, desires, preferences, or intentions of one or more actors affect the actions, or predispositions to act, of one or more actors in a direction consistent with—and not contrary to—the wants, preferences, or intention of the influence-wielder(s) (Dahl and Steinbrickner 2003, 17).

Dahl also distinguishes among forms of influence (Dahl and Steinbrickner 2003, 38-43).

- <u>Inducement vs. Power</u>. *Inducement* occurs when A gives B a positive incentive to comply, e.g. receive a financial benefit. *Power* occurs when A threatens B with deprivation or sanctions.

- <u>Force vs. Coercion</u>. *Force* is physically compelling B to do A's will. Option of non-compliance is removed. *Coercion* is threatening B with the use of force; a form of power.

- <u>Persuasion vs. Manipulation</u>. *Persuasion*: truthful communication by A convinces B to change action or thinking. *Manipulation*: intentionally false, misleading, or distorted communication by A convinces B to change action or thinking.

- *Authority*. B automatically, unthinkingly obeys A. Many scholars add that this

obedience is because B perceives a moral obligation to obey A.

With these definitions in mind, let me summarize Lukes' argument. In the current discussion on power there are generally considered to be three dimensions or "faces" of power. Lurking beneath this somewhat theoretical debate about what power is lies the question of how widely power is distributed in American society; that is, who wields power? Lukes believes that the perspective on power one takes (one, two, or three dimensional) correlates with liberal, reformist, and radical political positions.

The first face of power is what we would think of as ordinary politics: various pressure groups, political parties, and government officials competing openly to make policy. The powerful are those who win. Probably the most significant exponent of this perspective is Dahl, with his book *Who Governs?* (1961) being taken as an exemplar of this position. The key here is that in order to determine who is powerful, the observer looks at behavior: what actually happens. The conclusion that Dahl draws is that power is widely dispersed and that American democracy is not dominated by a small elite, as various pressure groups, parties, and government officials prevail at various times on various issues. In this work, Dahl roughly defines power as the ability of A to get B to do something B would not otherwise do.

The second face of power focuses on the ability to set the agenda; that is, it has as much to do with decisions that are *not* made as with those that are made. Peter Bachrach and Morton Baratz (1962) criticize Dahl for ignoring non-decisions. Surely, they argue, it is a form of power to keep certain alternatives "off the table," to prevent them from being discussed. So, in this case, there is not open conflict, but rather the conflict is avoided

through the use of power. In this case A is powerful if A can prevent an opportunity for decision from even getting on the agenda.

Lukes contends there is a "third face" of power. He criticizes both of these camps for ignoring the formation of preferences (wants, interests, etc.), and for both camps being overly focused on observable behavior. Lukes asks whether the absence of articulated interests means that power is not being exerted. What if the powerful are, consciously or not, shaping the perceived interests of the weaker so that they do not perceive their true interests? In other words, if A is exercising power over B, the things that B wants are not actually in B's interests, but in A's interests; B's real interests are obscured. For example, suppose the reigning ideology of a society justified natural slavery. Power is exerted on a slave in that society who believed there was such a thing as natural slavery and that he himself was a natural slave.

This account of power is quite similar to Dahl's account of the four levels of influence found in *Modern Political Analysis* (Dahl and Steinbrickner 2003, 45-48).

1. *Available Options*. A's influence over B is limited by the agenda of available options. Examples: A influences B to go to a movie rather than stay home and watch a video. A influences B to vote for Candidate 1 rather than Candidate 2.

2. *Shaping the Agenda of Options*. A is able to influence B by influencing the composition of the agenda. Examples: A owns the movie theatre and has a say on what movies will be shown. A has influence in getting Candidate 1 on the ticket.

3. *Structures*. "Structure" is an enduring institution, organization, or practice that shapes the allocation of values like prestige, money, power, education, and so forth. Examples of structures are political parties, churches, families, legislatures,

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market, and so forth. A is able to influence B by influencing the structures that present the agenda. Example: A influences B by getting a law passed that offers a tax break to theatres to show documentary films.

4. *Consciousness*. A influences B by influencing the way they see the world. Some options that actually exist may not even be considered. Example: due to the reigning ideology of a society, A fails to consider the option that there is no such thing as natural slavery.

What difference does it make that Dahl uses the term *influence* and Lukes uses the term *power*? The word power has something of a sinister connotation. Many people, including Christians, seem to conceive of using power as a bad thing; are these same people against using influence?[3]

From Lukes' perspective consensual authority with no conflicts of interest is *not* a form of power. Rather, the exercise of power involves conflict of interests (2005, 35). Lukes modifies this perspective in his retrospective on the original book when he concedes that the exercise of power can be beneficial or productive. This revision gives Luke's analysis greater analytical power. Power can be used in a way that benefits people's real interests; there are "manifold ways in which power over others can be productive, transformative, authoritative, and compatible with dignity" (Lukes 2005, 109). However, Lukes does not retract his statement about power involving a conflict of interest. So presumably for it to be called power in Lukes' terms, it would have to go against a person's *perceived* interests, not necessarily his or her actual interests. It seems the word *domination* better captures power that thwarts people's interests, and Lukes states that what is called power in his original argument is better described as domination.

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[3] Thanks to Jeff VanDerWerff for calling this point to my attention.

Lukes does not use the term *domination* in his original discussion. "To speak of power as domination is to suggest the imposition of some significant constraint upon an agent or agents' desires, purposes or interests, which it frustrates, prevents from fulfilment or even from being formulated" (Lukes 2005, 113). Lukes gives no name to a use of power that furthers an agent's interests or fulfillment; I will use the term *emancipation*.

Power and Political Theory

Lukes contends that how one thinks about power is closely related to one's larger political theory; thus the concept of power as domination is an essentially contested concept (Lukes 2005, 124). Why is this so? Domination is the use (or non-use) of power that violates a person's real interests. But how do we know what a person's "real" interests are? How do we know we are not just imposing our preferences on other people and stating that they simply don't know any better? Thus there is a temptation to "vanguardism," the idea that there is a particular elite that has greater insight into human nature and interests than the unenlightened masses, and thus this elite is justified in using the power of the state to enact their vision.

This is where the truly contested nature of the concept of power arises. Lukes writes: "These difficulties become less serious if one simply takes what counts as 'real interests' to be a function of one's explanatory framework and methods, which in turn have to be justified. There is no reason to believe that there exists a canonical set of such interests that will constitute 'the last word on the matter'—that will resolve moral conflicts and set the seal on proffered explanations, confirming them as true" (Lukes 2005, 148). So, in order to determine whether a particular exercise of power is positive or negative, one must refer to a particular political philosophy. Presumably a political

philosophy will have an anthropology, an account of what human beings are like. Domination adds "to the notion of power over others the further claim that those subject to it are rendered *less free*, in Spinoza's phrase, *to live as their nature and judgment dictate*" (Lukes 2005, 114; italics in original). This raises the question of what constitutes *being less free* and *living as one's nature and judgment dictate*. In other words, what is *freedom*?

To know what kind of power violates my freedom, we need an account of freedom. Lukes distinguishes between the "minimalist," "objectivist," and "identity" perspectives on what constitutes freedom, and invasions thereof. Lukes contends, and I agree, that the objectivist perspective is most satisfactory. In the minimalist perspective, I am free to the extent that I can do what I prefer to do; how these preferences are formed does not really matter. This is held to be so for a variety of reasons, generally because no other person can have a better vantage point than I do on what is in my interests. In some highly skeptical accounts, my interests are simply preferences. Another person may think these preferences are noble or base, wise or foolish, but has no objective standard by which to judge this. In other less skeptical accounts, the other person could objectively morally judge my preferences to be good or bad, but the moral importance of my freely choosing the good would override any interference by the other. This minimalist account downplays the idea of a human nature, according to Lukes. "My 'nature' is simply an array of given preferences as revealed by my choices, and my 'judgment' is whatever I choose" (Lukes 2005, 114). In other words, I don't really have a nature against which to judge my particular preferences.

However, most people would want to say that there are instances when my preferences are objectively bad and that I am in error in having them: I am not being autonomous (thinking for one's self) and authentic (being true to one's nature) in preferring these things. This raises the question, as Lukes notes, of what constitutes rationality. Some reasons for concluding that I am in error are that I have reasoned poorly, am deceived, miscalculate, or am manipulated. Or perhaps I have an incorrect idea of what my nature is. Power can be used to bring these errors about: for example, in a slave-holding society, propaganda can inculcate the idea that some humans are naturally slaves. To the extent that slaves actually believe this, they cannot choose rightly. Furthermore, if I am not acting autonomously, it is in my real interest to have power exerted against me to prevent me from doing what is only apparently in my interest, but really is not. Conversely, it is in my real interest to have power exerted to compel me to do something which is truly in my interest, but apparently is not. In these cases, power is used to benefit me, to further my flourishing; such a use of power is emancipatory.

If this is true, we move to an "objectivist" position, in which the question is asked: "what are the necessary conditions for human beings to flourish?" (Lukes 2005, 117). A variety of answers have been given to this question but most involve things like food, shelter, clothing, emotional attachment, self-direction, and the like. There can of course be some cross-cultural variation on this, but the basic idea is that every human being, no matter in what place or what time, must have things like these in order to flourish. Hence this provides an objective vantage point for an outsider to make some judgments as to whether or not a particular use of power should be considered

emancipatory or dominating. To prevent an objectivist position from becoming repressive, we would have to include in our account of human flourishing some sort of concept of self-direction such that doing something in our interest must be done willingly, else it is not truly conducive to our interests.

Lukes goes on to consider a position that might be considered as an alternative to the objectivist position: the "identity" position, in which domination is seen as a violation of one's individual or collective identity. Bringing in the issue of identity highlights the subjective aspect of human existence. Regarding identity, domination can occur when a person's connection to a particular identity is repressed, or when a particular collective identity represses a person, compelling him or her to identify with that identity regardless of that individual's wishes. But how do we know when the assertion of identity is repressive? Lukes concludes that the identity position is not really distinct from the objectivist position, for presumably an account of human flourishing would include an account of how identity plays a role in human flourishing. That is, when is identity expressed or imposed in ways conducive to human flourishing and when it is expressed or imposed in ways that are not conducive to human flourishing? So, we are thrown back on to the objectivist position. "In short, it is hard to see how the notion of identity-related or recognitional domination can do without presupposing a notion of real or objective interests, grounded in a theory of human nature" (Lukes 2005, 121).

I endorse Lukes' conclusion; if he is correct, then it seems then that a Christian political scientist ought to have at the very least a sketch of what constitutes human flourishing, or to use a biblical term, shalom. There is a long history of this in Christian political thought. Probably the most significant tradition is that of Thomism, which draws

on Aristotelian roots. Aristotle saw men (the masculine term is deliberate) as political animals; a man who did not live in a *polis* was either a beast or a god. In Aristotle's view, the *polis* was necessary for human flourishing. Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* was about human flourishing, and its immediate successor *Politics* was about the institutional and social requirements for that human flourishing.

A gap in Lukes' analysis is that it does not adequately discuss *political* power. Ira Katznelson (discussed in more detail below) notes that many post-1950s analyses of power are disconnected from the problem of the state; Lukes' work falls into that category, although his discussion of the inevitability of philosophical framework necessarily raises the questions of political philosophy. Assuming that Lukes' analysis is correct, we are still faced with the questions of, first, the legitimate *scope* of the wielding of political power, second, the *capability* of political institutions to exercise power in an efficacious manner, and third, the potential *abuse* of political power.

Regarding the first question, noted political philosopher Michael Oakeshott (1901-1990) usefully distinguishes between civil association and enterprise association. The former is characterized by law as a set of rules that enables citizens to pursue their various purposes, without imposing a purpose on them. The latter is characterized by common agreement on the substantive purposes of the association, and the rules are written so as to further that purpose. European political thought and the practice of European states can be described as a tension between these two conceptions of association.[4]

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[4] Oakeshott 1975. For a discussion of the two ideal forms of association, see Part II; for the historical investigation of these forms see Part III.

Regarding the second question, the fact that policy makers seek to accomplish a particular goal does not mean that they will be successful. Furthermore, regardless of whether or not the institution accomplishes its goal, there may be all kinds of undesirable consequences that outweigh the benefits achieved.[5]

Regarding the third question, it is a commonplace that the wielders of political power do not always wield it in the public interest. The containment or channeling of political power has thus been a common theme in modern political thought. In reflecting on the use of power, one should keep these limitations in mind.

Christian Political Theory and the Use of Power

How has Christian political thought considered the use of power? The mainstream of Christian political thought, particularly the Catholic and Reformed traditions, has seen power as a legitimate tool of political authority. Some thinkers such as Augustine seem more suspicious of power, noting its temptations and its remedial nature due to human sinfulness, while others such as Aquinas seem less suspicious, focusing more on the ideal government and its use of power.[6] Among contemporary Christian political thinkers, both the neo-Calvinists and neo-Thomists follow Aquinas, while the Christian realists have a more Augustinian approach. Both the optimistic and pessimistic strands however read Paul's discussion in *Romans* 13 as legitimizing government and its use of power and validating Christian participation in government. The major question about political power then is the question of legitimacy: who has the right to use this power?

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[5] A useful discussion of this is Rhoads 1985. Classic works on this topic are Hayek 1994 and Lindblom 1977.

[6] There is considerable debate among Augustine scholars as to whether Augustine believed government itself was a result of the fall or is natural to humans. For a useful list of sources on this topic, see Breyfogle 2005, 231.

A succinct statement of the mainstream position was given by the late Christian ethicist Paul Ramsey. He states: "The use of power, and possibly the use of force, is of the *esse* of politics. By this I mean it belongs to politics' very *act of being* politics. You never have politics without the use of power, possibly armed force" (Ramsey 1968, 5). If this was so, then the problem was to consider how power ought to be used to further the national and international common good. Power could be used to further good or bad political goals, but one could not escape the use of power. However, even though power was of the *esse* of politics, it was not the entirety of politics. For Ramsey, good politics is the attempt to balance order (power), law, and justice. These three aspects of politics do not always (and perhaps rarely) fit together and sometimes one of them must be deemphasized to achieve the other two. However, it is never permissible to ignore or completely downplay one of them (Ramsey 1968, 12).

Likewise, in *The Desire of the Nations: Rediscovering the Roots of Political Theology*, Oliver O'Donovan defines power as "an ability to get things done by any means, whether by force, by authority, or by persuasion" (O'Donovan 1996, 30). Furthermore, power can be a good and even essential thing for political life. "It is a Western conceit to imagine that all political problems arise from the abuse or over-concentration of power; and that is why we are so bad at understanding political difficulties which have arisen from a lack of power, or from its excessive diffusion. There is no abuse of power that can be blamed for the ills of Somalia" (O'Donovan 1996, 94).

In his recent book *Jesus and Politics: Confronting the Powers*, the Anglican neo-Calvinist Alan Storkey seems to disagree that power is of the *esse* of politics. He seems to equate *power* with *control over*. Presumably *control over* means domination: the

wielding of power against a person's real interests. In Storkey's account, this desire for control results from self-slavery, the slavery to sin. Liberated from this self-slavery, residents of the Kingdom renounce control over in favor of freedom. Those who are alleged to be weak are not actually so.

> What then replaces power as *control over*? For those who have suffered control and domination, there is the experience of freedom. Jesus makes a great offer: 'My yoke is easy and my burden is light' (Matt. 11:28-30). But this is no magic offer. Its costs are also weighed: if the weak are to become free, the powerful must become weak. They must discard and deconstruct their systems of control (Storkey 2005, 154).

What are the implications for actual politics from this perspective? Since politics is about power, isn't this an anarchistic perspective? Given Storkey's support for extensive state activity it is clear he is not an anarchist. And he does seem to hint at the possibility of power as being something other than control. "Political control gives way to something deeper—the Word and ways of God opening up lives to the power to do good" (Storkey 2005, 154). However, Storkey is vague as to who is wielding this power: is it politicians who have repented of their selfish uses of power? Does redeemed political power become the "experience of freedom"? Storkey is not clear as to whether political power is intrinsically *control over*.

O'Donovan seems to see power in more neutral terms than Storkey does. Storkey and O'Donovan have different readings of the Gospels on the question of whether power is bad. O'Donovan notes that the Gospels are to some extent hesitant about Jesus' powers, but largely because people might be attracted to the power and not the Kingdom.

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However, Jesus' powers themselves seem unproblematic (O'Donovan 1996, 96). Storkey

seems to see power as intrinsically problematic, although apparently not entirely ruling

out the constructive use of power. My intention here is not to adjudicate between their

readings (that is beyond my competence) but simply to note their divergent readings

regarding power.

The Anabaptist tradition has displayed considerably more suspicion of political

power. It sees Paul as acknowledging that God uses political power to maintain order, but

generally sees it as problematic for Christians to wield, particularly if it involves

violence. The state, in the words of the Schleitheim Articles, is "outside the perfection of

Christ." The late John Howard Yoder is the most significant contemporary exponent of

this position (Yoder 1994). Some thinkers in the Reformed or evangelical world have

attempted to incorporate this tradition into their own thought; Storkey seems to be in this

camp. Some contemporary Christian political thought of an ecclesiological bent, both

Protestant and Catholic, has incorporated this perspective into its thought.[7] In this

perspective, the Church is generally seen as an alternative *polis* to that of the state. A

Christian's primary loyalty and source of identity is the Church, not the state; to do

otherwise is idolatrous.

The dissident Czech playwright Václav Havel wrote a seminal 1978 essay entitled

"The Power of the Powerless" (Havel 1992) in which he put forth the idea of "living in

the truth" as the antidote to ideology. One would simply refuse to go along with the

ideology. Ideology, the reader will recall, is closely related to Lukes' third face of power.

This approach seems to bear resemblances to scholars such as Storkey, Yoder, and

Hauerwas. The key idea is that Christians do not play by the rules of liberal democratic

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[7] See for example Hauerwas 1985 [1992], Cavanaugh 2002.

society which institutionalize violence and oppression; they do not live according to the dominant ideology but rather as the peaceable people of the kingdom of God. Discussing the U.S. Catholic Bishops' pastoral letter *The Challenge of Peace*, Hauerwas writes:

It [the alternative to war] is an alternative to which the bishops point in their sensitive portrayal of the peace brought by Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. Such a peace, as the bishops quite rightly note, is not simply the absence of war, but it is rather a peace that is itself an alternative to a world at war. As such it is not some ideal, but is an actual way of life among a concrete group of people (Hauerwas 1985 [1992], 193).

The Church constitutes an alternative *polis*, the true *polis*, to that of the state. In reality, the Church may well do an extremely bad job of this. Part of Hauerwas' project is that he believes the Church has been too compromised to the violence propounded by (and inherent to) the state. Hauerwas also does not develop a substantive theory of the state, although in fairness that is not his agenda. An additional difficulty, which Hauerwas to my knowledge does not address, is the problem of Christian division. If we cannot even be peaceable and in communion among ourselves, how can we be an adequate witness to the world?

Hauerwas's emphasis on the Church is an important contribution to Christian political thought, but I do not follow him into his pacifism. But he pushes Christian political theorists to develop a political theory which includes a robust view of the Church, despite all its shortcomings, as well as includes a developed theory of the state.

Political Science and Liberalism

At this point I wish to explore the concept of liberalism, the dominant political ideology of the past few centuries, and see how it relates to power and political science. Is there a link between how Christian political thought has viewed the use of power and how power ought to be studied? That is, what link, if any, is there between normative evaluations of the use of power and how one conceives of the empirical study of political power?

Engaging the theme of "Power Reconsidered" in his presidential address at the APSA meeting, Ira Katznelson (2007) discusses the marked break, or "historical fracture," in the nature of politics in the 1940s. Such things as massive intentional non-combatant death, the Holocaust, "predatory stateness," the perversion of the democratic impulse in mass movements such as fascism and communism, and the rise of utopian ideologies made the human condition resemble Milton's Chaos in *Paradise Lost*. Before the 1940s, cruelty and bloodshed was nothing new, of course. But there was something unprecedented in the "fanaticism, levels of violence and wanton depravity achieved in the next half-decade." He goes on to recommend a retrieval of authors writing on power in the immediate aftermath of this great upheaval, singling out in particular C. Wright Mills' 1956 book *The Power Elite*. Katznelson contends that later authors' analyses of power, while making valuable contributions, seemed to have lost the connection of power with the modern state, which had been at the heart of this historical fracture. That is, the state was intricately involved in the "barbarism and carnage" of the 1940s (Katznelson 2007, 4).

Interestingly, in the opening section of his address leading up to his main contentions, Katznelson contended that

> The Creation story in *Paradise Lost* tells how God supplanted the normless, disorderly, uncertain "eternal anarchy" and "confusion" of Chaos with a universe that place these elements in decent order. Few of us are believers quite like Milton. Living in a disenchanted world, our hopes for Creation, as it were, must lie within a modernized liberal tradition, the tradition within which political science resides (Katznelson 2007, 3).

This assertion raises several interconnected issues. If Katznelson is correct that political science is a product of liberal modernism and is, as he puts it, "invested in the purposes of Enlightenment and liberalism" then it might seem that the way political science should analyze power would reflect that particular philosophical framework.[8] That is, what constitutes domination would be dependent on liberal conceptions of freedom and autonomy. Furthermore, if political science is a product of a disenchanted, Enlightenment world, what does that mean for a Christian in political science? In this section I wish to contest this dominant narrative of how political science ought to be done. In short, it wrongly brackets out key aspects of human experience relevant to the study of politics.

Katznelson's comments on the connection between liberalism and the discipline of political science strike me as overly broad; there are of course many political scientists of a variety of political dispositions that would not consider themselves to be working in the Enlightenment tradition. Prominent examples would

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[8] Randy Jensen reminded me that Katznelson, despite referring simply to "political science," is really referring to *modern* political science.

be the postmodernists as well as modernity critics who derive inspiration from pre-modern modes of political thought. Furthermore, the kinds of things that Katznelson associates with a liberal perspective seem hardly confined to it. As he says himself, "Who amongst us would prefer a world lacking toleration, pluralism, government by consent, institutionalized representation, political rights, and a commitment to reason?" (Katznelson 2007, 3). While certainly such things are at the heart of the liberal tradition, few critics of liberalism would dismiss such things. Further yet, it is inaccurate to pit all Enlightenment thought against religion. In fairness to Katznelson, he only mentions this connection of political science and liberal modernity in passing and does not develop it. However, it does raise the question of the "Christian political scientist." Much scholarly work has been done in recent years on modernity in general, and in particular on the compatibility of liberal modernity and Christianity.[9]

What is meant by *liberalism* and *modernity*? These two concepts are closely related. In general, I take liberalism to be a more politically-oriented rendition of the philosophy of modernity; that is, while not confining itself to analysis of particular political structures, liberalism seems always to keep one eye towards politics, while modernity itself may not have that limited perspective.

What is liberalism? At its most basic, liberalism simply refers to limited government. However, the most common arguments for limited government generally rest on a particular set of philosophical assumptions about human nature and political life. Many accounts have been given of this; for our purposes I find John Kekes' account to be

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[9] Scholars such as our own Mike Kugler have questioned the equation of Enlightenment with secularism or irreligion.

a good summary of the various renditions of liberalism (Kekes 1997, 1-22). According to

Kekes, all forms of liberalism value pluralism, freedom, rights, equality, and justice.

Among liberals, there is considerable controversy as to the content of these values.

Crudely, we can divide liberals into two camps based on how they view the answers to

these questions: classical liberals and egalitarian liberals. Classical liberals, according to

Kekes, see freedom as the primary value, and conceive of freedom as the absence of

external impediment. For example, if I desire to go to Sioux Falls to go shopping, I may

do so. There are no laws impeding me from doing so; I am limited only by my own

resources, such as whether I have money for gas. This view of freedom correlates with

the first dimension of power we discussed above. Egalitarian liberals also assert the

primacy of freedom, but add in the necessity of welfare rights, which enable the less

fortunate to exercise meaningful freedom. How many meaningful choices does one have

if one is poor? However, among all these values, Kekes contends that the irreducible core

of liberalism, of whatever variety, is *autonomy*. All the values of liberalism are intended

to protect this core value. What is autonomy?

> The essential feature of autonomy is a specific form of control that individual
>
> agents exercise over their actions…Autonomy therefore requires the kind of
>
> control that involves an unforced choice among alternatives that the agent has
>
> reasonably evaluated in the light of sufficient understanding of the significance
>
> of choosing one among the available alternatives (Kekes 1997, 16).

This core value of autonomy touches directly on the debate over power raised in

Lukes' work and particularly on the contested nature of power. To exercise power

(dominate?) over some one is (possibly) to violate his or her autonomy; it compels him or

her to do something they would not otherwise do, and a significant part of autonomy is the making of a free, uncoerced choice. Is all power over people bad? Few would argue that a parent's power over his or her child is bad, but what about power over adults? Can't it be used in people's interests? Lukes thinks so and notes that the suspicion of dependence is part of the liberal canon but may not be warranted; possibly this is a culturally specific assumption (2005, 84).

Many versions of liberalism are highly skeptical of claims that others can see an agent's real interests better than he or she can. Other versions conceive of freedom as simply the right to choose, regardless of what other people may think of that particular choice. As long as a particular choice does not harm another person, others have no right to interfere in the name of what that other conceives of to be in the agent's "real" interest. This is the "minimalist" account of freedom that Lukes describes. Much of the debate in liberal political theory is about the extent that the state may justly coerce someone.

The idea of modernity includes the liberal conception of the autonomous individual, but also involves the idea of the rise of capitalism and the increasing bureaucratization of society, combined with the "disenchantment" of society, the discrediting of the "supernatural" or religious components of life, these being seen as relics of a more primitive past. Thus involved in modernity is the idea of progress, of ascending from a lesser to a greater state of life.

How then is political science involved in this project of liberalism? An exhaustive account is well beyond the scope of this paper, but we can sketch some of the outlines of such an account.[10] Positivism, the mainstream approach to political science, which I do not share, has conceived of itself as modeling itself after the hard sciences, such as

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[10] The account that follows is in part indebted to Heilke 2001.

physics. Just as the hard sciences seek to uncover regularities in behavior which may be stated in the form of laws, which can be used to predict behavior in the future, so political science sought to uncover laws of political behavior which could be tested and give rise to predictability. In other words, political science is a science just as much as physics is. In some ways, this is overstating the case, for while some political scientists seek the same level of prediction as physics, most political scientists tend to speak in terms of probabilities. However, what this all has in common is the idea of value neutrality. Just as a physicist makes no moral judgment on the outcome of the interaction of two particles, likewise the political scientist makes no judgment on the outcome of political phenomena. The values of the political scientist may guide the choice of research topic, but they play no role in the actual conduct of research. However, American political science, as we can see from Katznelson's comments above, has also seen itself as seeking to preserve American democracy from illiberal alternatives. As a result, or so critics charge, there is somewhat of a bias towards the status quo. There is also a tension between value-neutrality and valuing the preservation of American democracy.

Very often this scientific approach is tied in with modernity's concept of progress. This includes the idea that increased political knowledge will enable greater manipulation of social forces. Furthermore, it often includes the idea of moral improvement or human perfectibility. Thus the idea is that the political scientist is a technician studying the political arena dispassionately yet at the service of American liberal democracy. In the same way that knowledge in the physical sciences is cumulative and can be exploited to increase human control over the natural world, so it is also the case that knowledge in the

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social sciences is cumulative and can be exploited to increase human control over the political world.

This vision of political science has been challenged. Many scholars have called into question both the desirability of Enlightenment modes of thought as well as the possibility of a value-neutral political science.[11] These scholars have criticized the conception of human beings as autonomous, self-creating individuals, free of any authority outside themselves that is often assumed by modern political theories. Typical of these critiques is that of noted Catholic political philosopher Charles Taylor. He argues that supposedly neutral explanatory theories are actually based on a political philosophy, and he rejects the mainstream view of value-neutral political science.

For Taylor, a philosophical framework given has consequences for political science. "For a given framework is linked to a given conception of the schedule of human needs, wants, and purposes, such that, if the schedule turns out to have been mistaken in some significant way, the framework itself cannot be maintained." Needs, wants, and purposes affect human behavior, so an accurate conception of needs, wants, and purposes is necessary for an accurate science of human behavior. "A conception of human needs thus enters into a given political theory, and cannot be considered something extraneous which we later add to the framework to yield a set of value judgements." To repeat, political philosophy is all about human needs, wants, and purposes, or in other words, it is about human flourishing (Taylor 1985, 75). Just to remind ourselves, Lukes sees an evaluation of power as domination or emancipation as bound up in a theory of human flourishing.

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[11] See, among others, Alasdair MacIntyre (1984), Leo Strauss (1953), Charles Taylor (1985), Eric Voegelin (1952), and in a different vein Sheldon S. Wolin (1969).

Hence questions of political value are not independent of political facts; "…a given framework of explanation in political science tends to support an associated value position, secretes its own norms for the assessment of politics and policies" (Taylor 1985, 81). "[A] *political* framework cannot fail to contain some, even implicit, conception of human needs, wants, and purposes." Therefore, a supposedly neutral framework has a conception of the good, "by restrict[ing] the range of value positions which can defensibly adopted" (Taylor 1985, 89-90).

For example, if human nature is as Hobbes said it was (atomistic), that implies the political arena works a certain way, and that also implies which policies will be effective. If human nature is as Aristotle said (communitarian), then one gets a different picture of how the political arena works and what are appropriate policies. Aristotle's conception of humans as political animals is incompatible with Hobbes' view of humans as atomistic individuals.

In sum, every theory has a perspective on what is important and what is not in studying a phenomenon. That is, some set of variables is seen as relevant and other sets of variables are seen as irrelevant, or at least less relevant. To study the irrelevant would be pointless. But different theories have different takes on what is considered relevant, and this is so because of differing philosophical perspectives on what is important. These philosophical perspectives act as what Nicholas Wolterstorff has called *control beliefs*. He argues that philosophical perspectives derived from Christian thought can act as control beliefs (Wolterstorff 1984). If this is so, then there can be such a thing as a Christian political science.

A Christian Approach to Political Science

What then would a Christian political science look like? Or more accurately, how should a Christian approach the study of political science? To begin with, I should emphasize that there is no such thing as *the* Christian political science. Different individual Christians and different Christian traditions will emphasize different aspects of the faith. These divergent emphases may even lead to contradictory views, as in the debate between the justifiable-war and pacifist traditions. The interaction between these traditions of course may also be illuminating and productive of a more fully Christian perspective. What follows is an attempt to sketch out my own approach.

First of all, my criticism of standard social scientific methodology should not be taken as a complete dismissal. There have been great advances in survey methodology, the comparative method, and other such social scientific strategies. There is also plenty of room for the use of reductionism as a heuristic device. That is, it can be useful to investigate economic life by assuming a motivation of interest defined as wealth, or to investigate political life by assuming a motivation of interest defined as power. But, when the full-orbed nature of human beings is forgotten, this becomes distorted. Political theorist Ruth Grant of Duke University draws a helpful distinction between the humanistic and scientific approaches to the study of politics. Roughly speaking, the humanistic approach examines issues of meaning and significance, while the scientific approach examines cause and effect. These approaches are not mutually exclusive and in fact illuminate each other (Grant 2002). Unfortunately, the title *political science* used for naming most departments concerned with the study of politics would seem to reinforce a one-sided connection to the scientific approach.

To say that the positivist approach to political science is the only source of true knowledge and to ignore "non-veriable" aspects of political life is quite narrowing. At worst it can completely rule out as purely subjective the consideration of philosophical concepts such as *the good or natural rights*, substituting for them the idea of preferences.[12] The political system in this view is an arena which enables the various actors to pursue their preferences. If this is so, it is unclear how political outcomes can be evaluated as just or unjust, furthering or hindering human flourishing, respecting or violating natural rights, or the like. This observation ties us back into our discussion of the three faces of power. Can A's preferences be evaluated by B with a standard other than B's own subjective preferences? The answer that is given to this question is dependent upon a particular political philosophical framework. If the answer is no, they cannot be evaluated, we inhabit some sort of liberal framework in which ultimate questions of the good are privatized (at least rhetorically, for law generally sees itself as furtherance of the common good, and not simply the amassed preferences of the stronger). Likewise, questions of how power shapes preferences are set aside.

From my discussion of power above, the reader could extract two strains of thought: a radical or critical strain and a conservative strain. The critical strain would focus on puncturing the illusions of ideology and for some thinkers the potential emancipatory use of political power. The conservative strain would emphasize the limitations of politics due to the human lust for power, the need for order, and the limits of human knowledge. An Augustinian approach to politics can incorporate both of these strains. Augustine's *City of God* is a deconstruction of the claims of the Roman Empire's ideology. Since no political community is the City of God, all states fall short of justice,

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[12] I owe this insight to Canavan 1995, 95. He singles out Dahl 1956 for making this move.

and hence their polity, policies, and ideologies can be critiqued. On the other hand, Augustine is very aware of the shortcomings of human beings, especially when they achieve positions of power. Since any state will fall short of justice, an emphasis on order exists. Ramsey perhaps captures both strains with his threefold account of good politics: order, law, and justice.

This critical/conservative dynamic is not confined to Augustine. Grant contends that the humanistic approach itself has this dynamic: conservative in that it has one immersing oneself into a tradition of theoretical reflection on politics, but critical in that this immersion prompts one to question one's current theoretical constructs. But given Augustine's place both in the canon of political theory and his preeminence as a Christian theologian, his thought forms a good starting point.

My approach is definitely on the humanistic side, and tends to be more classical and Augustinian in nature, although on my more optimistic days I feel a bit more neo-Thomist or neo-Calvinist. Classical political science asked the question "what is the best regime?" To be able to answer that question, one needed an account of human flourishing, so as to investigate which political arrangements furthered human flourishing and which political arrangements hindered it. In this perspective, political theory and political science are very similar, if not the same thing. Augustine's political thought pays little attention to the question of the best regime—they were all quite imperfect—and focuses more on the character of citizens and rulers. This is useful, but one would not want to eliminate reflection on political structures and how they further the common good. The work of scholars such as Yves Simon ([1951] 1993) and Jacques Maritain (1951) are helpful in this regard.

A second point I should discuss is that I have become increasingly suspicious of the idea of a "biblical politics," that is, a political theory or program that can be extracted from the Bible. While a Christian political science would certainly seek to be consonant with biblical teaching, in point of fact there is very little in the way of specific discussion of politics in the Bible, despite the fact that its events take place against a political background. If this is true then a Christian political science will have to be developed from reflection on the political order itself.[13] There are the traditional passages of *Romans* 13 and *1 Peter* 2 (the governing authorities as God's ministers) which are juxtaposed against *Revelation* 13 (the beast with the blasphemous names). More recent studies have attempted to draw out a fuller picture, the most successful of which is O'Donovan's *The Desire of the Nations*. In that work, O'Donovan examines not only the political concepts present in scripture, but how they have been developed in the history of political thought. This gets us into the broader realm of practical reason, rather than simple biblical exegesis.

What then would a Christian approach to political science look like? My current inclinations are that constructing a Christian political theory would be an exercise of practical reason which would take into account the teaching of scripture. It would attempt to develop an account of human flourishing or shalom. Regarding this, I am inclined toward some sort of basic goods account as taking into account human diversity without collapsing into relativism.[14] Certainly Christian political science would address the traditional points of examining the scope, capability, and abuse of political power. It would also investigate the role of the Church in the political order. This is an extension of

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[13] For discussions of this point, see Budziszewski 2006 and Schall 2004.
[14] I am most familiar with the accounts of Finnis 1980 and Nussbaum 1992.

the question about the relationship of political life to eternal things. A difficulty any political theory must face is how it can be convincing to others who do not share its assumptions. This is particularly true of Christian political thought, which incorporates or at least takes account of revelation.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have tried to argue the following. Power does not only include overt examples such as A getting to B to do something, but includes the shaping of preferences. Reflection on power leads one to think about whether power is used as an instrument of emancipation or an instrument of domination. In other words, is power used for the advancement of human flourishing or for its hindrance? But to know what constitutes emancipation or domination, one needs to have an account of human flourishing, which gets us into the realm of political theory or political science. Such a political science would attempt to discern how political institutions and processes contribute to, or detract from, human flourishing. Thus, one's evaluation of a particular use of power is bound up in one's political theory. A Christian political scientist would wish to develop a political theory consonant with Christian belief about human flourishing. Classical political science asked the question of what constitutes the best regime, and so a Christian approach to this kind of political science would incorporate Christian conceptions of human flourishing. Political science thus conceived includes both the empirical and normative study of politics, and these are inextricable. Perhaps a better way of conceiving it is that political science must make room for both the humanistic and scientific approaches to the study of politics. Absent the humanistic

approach, the scientific approach could degenerate into an uncritical affirmation of the status quo.

This paper has only been a sketch of a Christian approach to political science, at least as I attempt to pursue that discipline. Many aspects could be developed much further and perhaps need to be rethought. But this is my mind as is now stands.[15]

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