
A Broader, Subtler View of Power

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Professor Gottfried's response¹ to my article on power is useful in that it clarifies his position and confirms the philosophical differences between us. I am glad to know that he does not think that I have distorted his position. What is more disappointing is that I seem not to have gotten the gist of my own argument about power across, though a certain evasiveness on Professor Gottfried's part makes me wonder if he has grasped more of it than he lets on. His text appears to me not really responsive to my central thesis. It also simplifies or distorts my meaning.

Professor Gottfried presents me as criticizing him for "a preoccupation with power-relations" (PIC, 96). This is not the case. My own article is called "Dimensions of Power" and deals with power-relations.² What I argue is that Professor Gottfried and others who think along similar lines should be *more* attentive to power-relations—but as they are in real life rather than as they appear in reductionistic theory. I advocate more realism and nuance in the study of power and in identifying the central problems of American and Western society. Gottfried's government-oriented conception of power is too narrow and vague, which blocks a better understanding of the existing political and cultural situation and of what might bring real change. What he is correct about is that I object to the overly abstract, ahistorical nature of his key

¹ Paul Gottfried, "Power is Coercion: a Response to Claes Ryn," *Humanitas*, XIV, no. 1 (2001), 96-99; references to this article hereinafter cited in the text as "PIC."

² Claes G. Ryn, "Dimensions of Power: The Transformation of Liberalism and the Limits of 'Politics,'" *Humanitas* XIII, no. 2 (2000), 4-27; references to this article hereinafter cited in the text as "DP."

terms, including “power” and “managerial elite,” a weakness that I relate to his naturalistic propensities.

Professor Gottfried contends that instead of raising moral and cultural questions and drawing attention to the element of give-and-take in power-relationships I should be asking “why the populations of Western democracies submit to having their lives and morals reconstructed for them by the managerial-therapeutic state” (PIC, 97). But that is precisely the kind of question I do ask and try to answer, only I find Gottfried’s particular answer insufficient. He is content to think that populations are the way they are because they are under the thumb of managerial elites who are also buying them off with “entitlements” (PIC, 97-98). What he misses is that this type of government is symptomatic of broad moral and cultural changes in America and the West that have affected all and that have made such government seem appropriate. The problems he bemoans therefore could not be solved by pinning the blame on the present political elites and kicking them out, which is in any event a highly unlikely prospect for the foreseeable future. Real and lasting political change would require a change in the moral, intellectual, aesthetical life of the West, causing new elites to form, first of all outside of politics, so that eventually different political arrangements will start to seem preferable.

*Managerial
state symp-
tomatic.*

My own approach to power pays close attention to the moral and cultural constituents of power-relations and to the corresponding element of mutuality between leaders and followers. Professor Gottfried’s disinterest in these factors is exemplified by the following statement: It is not important, he writes, “to attribute [the] managerial process of control to the defective imaginations or wills of those who endorsed it in the beginning. They were, after all, people of little learning” (PIC, 98). That is to say, Gottfried rejects my broader interpretation of power-relations because of what he takes to be the limited moral and cultural resources of those who supported the rise of the managerial regime. I argue, in contrast, that to study the moral, imaginative and intellectual inclinations of a people and its elites is to study their general outlook and preferences. It is to explore what shapes also their political attitudes and what makes them attracted to one type of government and power rather than another. Studying these origins of modern government helps us understand both past and

present political reality. It establishes that the managerial regime is a manifestation of the larger moral and cultural trends of Western society. Professor Gottfried dismisses these considerations because those who “endorsed” managerial control were people of “little learning.” Leaving aside whether all these supporters were in fact poorly educated, it says a great deal about Gottfried’s political thinking that for him the moral sensibilities, minds and imaginations of people of little learning have no real impact on power-relations. These people can presumably be regarded as merely passive recipients of governance. I am the first to argue that elites of various types, particularly non-governmental ones, decisively shape the larger trends of society, but people of all kinds eventually absorb those trends in some form and interact with elites accordingly.

*New culture
empowered
new elites.*

Persons of little learning may in fact, sometimes precisely because of their limited learning, have minds and imaginations especially prone to extravagant speculations and dreams loaded with political import. Students of political history who are not narrowly focused on government find abundant evidence of how new desires, ideas and dreams contributed to the transformation of liberalism, the emergence of socialism and the corresponding empowerment of new political elites. Even among the learned, dreams were often almost childish in their utopian view of human nature and society, but they were no less fervently held. Whether particular leaders or followers were “learned” is here beside the point. Many who were both brilliant and learned—poets, novelists, preachers, philosophers, orators, composers, etc.—directly or indirectly fed the minds and imaginations of numerous others. One thinks of the writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, which read in part as children’s tales for adults. They profoundly affected Western cultural elites, including leading artists and intellectuals, and from such individuals ever new impulses towards the transformation of the West spread throughout society in more or less sophisticated variants. Rousseau’s type of imagination and moral sensibility are among the most important factors shaping the larger currents that made people, learned and unlearned, think that the crux of human happiness is not inner moral struggle and individual responsibility but a complete remaking of sociopolitical institutions. Without the spread of such attitudes, governments dedicated to the “just” reconstruction and administration of soci-

ety would not have evolved and would not have seemed to wield legitimate power.

In another place Professor Gottfried gives as an excuse for not paying attention to the intellectual and imaginative dimensions of power-relations that the “enablers of managerial rule” “were not equipped to think about the questions Professor Ryn raises” (PIC, 98). But whether they were so equipped is irrelevant. What is relevant, and highly so, is that they had minds and imaginations and were strongly influenced by them—as are we all.

Professor Gottfried’s way of presenting the philosophical difference between us is evasive and indicative of his not wanting to give my general argument a real hearing. A common but unsatisfactory way of trying to refute an intellectual position is to select its seemingly weakest points, simplify those points and treat them as if the entire weight of the position rested on them. Gottfried thus describes the difference between us as being between his own robust conception of power, which centers plausibly on government elites and coercion, and a conception which, in his very selective and one-sided depiction, attends to “other sources of influence, e.g., the persuasiveness of beautiful language” (PIC, 97). Nowhere do I say or imply that the dimensions of power to which I draw attention in my article should be considered to the exclusion of other factors. Neither does it convey my meaning to state that among the factors bearing on power I would single out “beautiful language.” A person unfamiliar with my general argument might smile at such an idea, but any point that is taken out of context and then further twisted can be made to appear whimsical or silly. Another of Gottfried’s renditions of my stance is similarly selective and slanted. As part of my effort to set forth a deeper, more nuanced view of power and to show that power is no single, uniform thing, I gave a varied list of examples in which I deliberately included one or two that might, at first blush, appear not very relevant to a discussion of politics. The seemingly most far-fetched example was the power of a beautiful woman (DP, 16). Gottfried seizes upon that example to assert that rather than pay attention to government power I would have him consider “female symmetry” (PIC, 99). In this manner, mere fragments of my argument that are also presented in a misleading way are made to stand in for my entire thesis. It is hardly suggestive of confidence in his own

*The
aesthetical
integral to
power.*

position that Professor Gottfried should defend it by distorting mine.

But how weak are my putatively weakest points? What about the relevance of “beautiful language,” to use Professor Gottfried’s strained and condescending characterization of my meaning, and the relevance of female beauty? Are they quite so extraneous to a discussion of political power as Gottfried assumes? Going along for the moment with his portrayal of me as concerned with pretty language—although what I actually stress is the much broader role of the imagination—I should like to ask, for example, if rhetoric is a negligible aspect of power? Are those historians deluded who point to the political impact of the oratory of, say, Winston Churchill and Demosthenes? Moving closer to what I emphasize in my article, what about “the beautiful language” of great poets, dramatists, and novelists? The language carrying their imagery tends to enter the collective consciousness of a people and to affect how it thinks and speaks about the world. Artistic visions color a people’s outlook in ways that directly influence whether individuals and regimes will appear legitimate and authoritative. But, surely, Gottfried may say, the allure of a woman is out of place in a discussion of political power? Oh yes? Julius Caesar and Mark Antony might have offered a different opinion.

In defense of his own notion of power and in criticism of my pointing to imagination as both helping to set the stage for and constituting effective exercise of power, Professor Gottfried writes that “aesthetic and coercive powers are essentially different phenomena” (PIC, 99). If he were here making a philosophical distinction between modes of human consciousness rather than looking at how they interact, I would agree with him. “Aesthetic and coercive powers” are indeed different. Writing or absorbing a compelling drama is very different from twisting somebody’s arm. The aesthetical mode is “contemplative,” not practical. A poetical image is a transmutation or sublimation of desire, not an enactment of desire. Conceptual cogitation is a third form of human consciousness. But these are philosophical distinctions among forms of human activity that together form our humanity and that are continuously interacting and influencing each other. Gottfried’s context is politics, and there, as in all other human pursuits, individuals are simultaneously will, imagination and reason. There can be no such thing as “coercion” that is purely practical, isolated

from the “contemplative” forms of our humanity. What I was trying to explain in my article is that power is always exercised in a context constituted by the moral, imaginative and intellectual inclinations that have made individuals view life and other human beings in a certain way. An ancient Athenian saw the world and reacted to its challenges under the influence of Homer and other shapers of the Greek ethos. Has the exercise of power in England been untouched by the dramas of Shakespeare echoing in the minds of political and other actors? That Christianity deeply influenced the sources and opportunities of power should be obvious. Because of certain traditions a threat of ostracism could instill more fear in an ancient Greek—be more coercive—than physical intimidation, and, as I mentioned in my article, on occasion the threat of excommunication proved as compelling in the Christian West as military pressure (DP, 17). Today, does not the power of American government rest less on threats of government intimidation than on the happy self-enforcement of PC attitudes and other views by large numbers of Americans?

Professor Gottfried’s emphasizing political power as “coercion” and vaguely associating it with “physical force” (PIC, 99) is another example of abstract terms concealing that all power-relations involve some kind of consensus and reciprocity, however limited, between “rulers” and “ruled,” the latter distinction being less sharp than may appear even in a dictatorship. To move within or in the vicinity of a people’s predominant imaginative mind-set and to draw upon it to gain influence, e.g., by articulating or distorting traditional symbols, is an integral part of all successful politics. Hitler and Stalin are only sinister examples of politicians routinely turning politics into a kind of theatre, making use of well-orchestrated mass-meetings, banners, flags, slogans, spotlights and music to mobilize support. These are but striking and obvious examples of what politicians continually do: adapting to and using the imaginative currents that shape a people’s worldview. The exercise of power, to reiterate, has many facets. Coercion is rarely, if ever, a simple case of physical intimidation.

Discussing the coerciveness of government Gottfried uses twentieth-century totalitarianism as his example, probably because he believes that this example will make it easier to persuade his readers to associate power with “physical force” and to think of power as one-directional, rulers being all-powerful, subjects be-

*“Physical force”
inadequate
description
of power.*

ing passive and listless. If the context had been a general discussion of the brutality of totalitarianism, who would disagree with Professor Gottfried's statement that "the political victims of twentieth-century totalitarian regimes suffered and died as a result of physical force they did little, for the most part, to justify or bring about" (PIC, 99)? But the context of this statement is an attempt to refute my argument that we need to deepen and broaden the way in which we think about power, and so I have to point out that "physical force" is an inadequate description of power even in a totalitarian regime. In totalitarian states, too, power involves some give-and-take between rulers and ruled, which includes rulers calculating what they can get away with and subjects wondering how much they can take before breaking out in desperate protest—an observation that is in no way meant to minimize the inhumanity inflicted by these regimes on people who could protest only by risking their lives. Strictly speaking, *totalitarian* power, in the sense of comprehensive and complete control, is a contradiction in terms, although the word can be used to advantage nevertheless, provided those employing it are not deceived by their own terminology.

Totalitarianism preceded by new sensibility.

It is equally important to keep in mind that totalitarianism grew out of a profound change in the moral and cultural life of Western man, first of all within its elites. Communism carried certain large moral and cultural trends in the West to an extreme. Totalitarianism cannot be blamed solely on particular ruthless political actors suddenly and unexpectedly instituting a new type of government. The ground had to be prepared for this kind of regime, morally, intellectually, and aesthetically. The notion of all-encompassing government in behalf of the downtrodden was preceded by intellectuals, artists and others developing a new moral and aesthetic sensibility and conceiving the possibility of a world completely transformed for the happiness of mankind. Such totalist vision soon made totalist political action seem desirable to many. Though particular communists may have been just cynics and opportunists, communism could not have taken and kept power without having gained some credibility in widening circles—and without earlier regimes having lost much of their credibility. National Socialism was similarly preceded by marked changes within German thought and imagination over many decades, changes that created doubts about existing political ar-

rangements and created opportunities for a different type of leadership. Emphasizing power as “physical force” draws attention away from the fact that even the establishment and maintenance of totalitarian regimes owe much to large numbers of people, not just a few political leaders, having become disgruntled with the old order and having been drawn to some extent into the visions, desires and hatreds of the new political leaders.

If we turn to the society that most occupies Professor Gottfried’s attention in the book on the managerial state, the United States, the element of mutuality between “rulers” and “ruled” should be more easily seen. That America’s managerial elites autonomously generate their own power is a simplistic notion. Gottfried’s conception of power does not take account of the fact that political elites are largely symptomatic of the general moral and cultural trends of society or of the fact that, for that reason, there is an ever-present give-and-take between these elites and those whom they govern. Thinking of political power as originating and residing in government leaves unexplained why particular forms of government come into being in the first place and greatly simplifies the source of their power. Such vague and abstract thinking may be ubiquitous among political journalists and deemed satisfactory even by many political theorists, but this situation shows the need for political thought becoming better grounded in philosophical-historical observation and reflection.

*Relation of
give-and-take
between
“rulers” and
“ruled.”*

Professor Gottfried may actually be more receptive to my general argument than appears from his explicit comments on my article. In his next book he intends to explore the relationship between the transformation of religious consciousness in America and the kind of “therapeutic” state that he is studying. He would hardly undertake this much-needed work, did he not sense some substantial connection between the evolution of ostensibly non-political, moral-spiritual attitudes and the evolution of political power.