

Introduction: power, luck and freedom

Conceptual analysis

There are many different accounts of the nature of social or political power, and almost as many of the concept of freedom. I have published two books and many articles on power, and quite a few articles on freedom. By no means all of these articles are published in this collection. This introduction does not provide an overview of each article; the reader can read them for themselves. But I am going to discuss some of the major issues they raise and chronicle the role each essay plays in the more general account of freedom and power I have tried to develop over the years.

I begin with why we should care about developing concepts of power and freedom. Both are concepts that many claim are essentially contestable (Connolly 1983; Lukes 2005; Haugaard 2010). I have always taken that to mean that such concepts are necessarily contestable. We might ask wherein lies that necessity. For Gallie (1956), who invented the phrase ‘essentially contestable’, it seems to lie in the fact that any account of such terms needs to look back to the original exemplar; but historically different trajectories have emanated from that original exemplar and we have no way of claiming which is correct. If the original conceptualization was not perfectly coherent and consistent, there might be multiple ways of bringing about coherence and consistency, none of which can claim historical, or logical, superiority over the others. Add in the fact that we might also be critical of the original exemplar for missing aspects of the concept that the original author and/or we would think important, and perhaps also new knowledge of the way the world works, and we will, of necessity, never be able to agree on which extension of the original exemplar truly is that concept, because logically there is more than one way of extending it consistently with that first use.

For scientific concepts, however, the original connection to first usage is less important. That is not to say that scientific concepts, which are types,

have no causal connection to their first usage. The meaning of ‘hydrogen’ is tied to the token hydrogen that served as the chemist’s evidence when it was first identified, so words used to denote modern scientific concepts do not bear some referential causal connection to aspects of earlier uses of those same words. But that history is less important. We can trace a history of the use of the term ‘atom’ – but the referential correlation to past use is not important to judgements of the correct meaning and reference of current usage. Where, for example, science goes beyond the original term H_2O for water, what matters is the nature of the chemical bonds and what it means for our understanding of water, rather than some historical connection to the first use of the term ‘water’ – which might have included H_2O as its essential constituent, but also included many other impurities. As scientists, we do not care about the historical antecedents. We only care to the extent we are historians. So whilst scientific language is connected to historical antecedents, scientists need not care too much about what those antecedents are. Scientific concepts are not essentially contestable, since there are criteria for judging applications, namely the systematic role they play in a predictive scientific theory or model. For the religions, or traditions more generally, there are no such criteria beyond claims made about historical antecedents.

It seems to me that social science concepts occupy a linguistic space between concepts in the natural sciences and concepts referring to bodies of belief or ways of behaving within religions and traditions. Some social scientific concepts play the same role as natural scientific ones. Others come close to being the types of proper names that denote traditions such as Christianity or Republicanism. Some terms in the social sciences are technical ones. In game theory ‘veto player’ and ‘agenda setter’ are examples of terms whose reference applies to theoretical agents in systems. They are explanatory in the same way that concepts are in the sciences. The error sometimes made in the social sciences is to try to find a token biological individual in an actual political system who corresponds one-to-one with a veto player in a theoretical model. Scientists applying theoretical models of gas expansion or explosion do not try to identify particular gas molecules that trigger such events. They merely develop predictions based on the characteristics of the system as a whole. Social science has theoretical models based on the structural features of systems where the number of veto players varies, which generate predictions over policy stability. The predictions hold at the system level, not for the individual behaviour of actual token agents at any given time (Ross 2005; 2014).

Other terms in the social sciences are much closer to religions or traditions. Obvious examples are ‘isms’ such as ‘Marxism’, that clearly have a historical basis and, in this case, a figure, Karl Marx, for whom historical

reference must be given. Marxism, like Christianity, attracted important later disciples, such as Lenin, Trotsky and Gramsci, or even G. A. Cohen and Jon Elster, all of whom interpret and may explicitly depart from the original texts. Discussion of the 'true' path is directly analogous to such debates in religious dispute. However, some self-identified Marxists are completely uninterested in such discussion. They happily take on the 'ism' for what they identify within it, rather than because they wish to follow it (this is a line I take for myself, self-identifying with many 'rival' isms: see Dowding 2016: ch. 2).

Terms like 'democracy' also have some original exemplar, by which they might be thought to be essentially contestable. However, they also bear a descriptive technical meaning, causing problems of a different nature: one that does not lead to essential contestability in the same manner. Democracy (originally) means rule by the people. This leads to the question 'who are the people?'. We can answer in different ways, but then we can see, given those responses, different versions of democracy. Then we can apply what Chalmers (2011) calls the subscript strategy. Each version can be demarcated by a subscript and there need be no confusion. Only sectarians need believe that a single subscripted democracy is the 'true democracy', just as only sectarians need believe that only one Christian sect is true Christianity. I adopt the subscript strategy in Chapter 5 with regard to the concept of power, as I have previously done (Dowding 1991: ch. 8) with regard to the concept of interests, in order to avoid some claims of essential contestability of these concepts.

Democracy is an interesting case in another sense. For once we have decided who the people are, we need to decide by what mechanisms they can rule. Representative democracy is one general form; but then we ask what is being represented. If we want to answer the will of the people, we find via Arrow's theorem (Arrow 1951/63) that the meaning of the will of the people has no definite referent. Rather, the meaning is tied to the decision mechanism itself, so different decision mechanisms will (at best) give different referents to what that will consists of. And, further, any decision mechanism is manipulable (Gibbard 1973; Satterthwaite 1975), so we might have to judge representativeness by the probability of and the moral nature of that manipulation (Riker 1982; Dowding 2006a; Dowding and van Hees 2008a). Thus again, whilst we can have clear definitions of democracy, none will track directly to the original referent, and there need be no single definition that is obviously superior to all others. (Again, that is not to say that some might not be obviously superior to some others.)

These ramifications do not, however, as I see it, mean that 'democracy' is essentially contestable. Or rather it is only essentially contestable if what is being contested is the definition which best represents the spirit of the

original definition. And that might have no determinate answer. Instead we have competing notions of decision mechanisms and dispute over which is preferable, usually based on issues concerning the normative weight to be placed on different Arrovian conditions or types of manipulability. So the different definitions are rival in 'bestness' by some criteria, but not conceptually rival. In other words, it is not the concept that is essentially contested, but which of the different concepts is best applied scientifically (to explain what is happening) or normatively (for our judgements of socially just society).

When it comes to terms such as power and more particularly freedom, the referent is more problematic, since 'bestness' is itself implicated in defining the concept. The subscript strategy can still be usefully adopted, but the debate over the use of the term is in part over the normative elements contained within that definition. And to the extent that those normative elements follow from the tradition (the language) in which one writes, the referent might be open to some necessary dispute. Writers who prefer to start from first principles, so to speak (and I guess I am one of them), are less concerned with historical precedents; hence they are less moved by the claims of essential contestability as Gallie develops them. We tend not to care very much about how far our conceptualization fits with previous ones. We care about logical consistency and the utility of the term in its application to the normative arguments we are developing. And these are developed within general normative theories (liberal egalitarianism in my case), with a close eye on their explanatory value in helping us understand the social and political processes of the actual world (again, at least in my case).

Of course, one cannot completely ignore what others have said about a concept, and indeed the very fact that we each speak in a language shared by others means that in fact we never can, really, start from first principles. Indeed, most analytic conceptual analysis begins by critiquing some versions of a concept on the grounds of inconsistency, before drawing out a new version that avoids that inconsistency. That is what is analytic about analytic philosophy. (It is not always logical inconsistency, of course: it often also involves appeals to our moral intuitions or judgements. More on that below.) Writers in this tradition might be aware that agreement over concepts is unlikely, but do not see that it is necessary, since their very method presumes that the debate is about reaching agreement lest persisting logical inconsistency.

There are a number of ways in which there can be different accounts of power and freedom without, necessarily, any substantial disagreement existing. Some disagreements can be merely verbal (Chalmers 2011). There might be many different ways of conceptually partitioning reality,

without any substantive disagreement about the way the world is. The subscript strategy helps deal with that. For example, it can help us in the dispute between defenders of the republican and the negative versions of liberty. As I discuss in Chapter 11, Carter (2008) suggests that referentially there is little that differs between his and Pettit's accounts of liberty. They will agree in all cases (with an important caveat) over when liberty is gained and lost. We might assume therefore that there is nothing of substance that differs between Carter and Pettit, or at least nothing that has to be packed into a debate about the meaning of the word 'freedom'.

Using the subscript strategy, some of what Pettit believes is important when maximizing freedom_p, something missing from freedom_c, can be handled by Carter using freedom_c and rights_c. They might both broadly agree about what should happen over a range of cases, or on what the good society looks like (and in fact I think they do), but want to describe that normative situation by different conceptual partitioning of the world. There might still be some further substantial disagreement between them about what should happen in some cases (their moral intuitions or judgements do marginally differ), but it needs to be demonstrated that these differences can only emerge because of conceptual disagreement. I believe that some disagreements do hinge on the way we look at concepts, but this fact needs to be demonstrated and not merely assumed (again, more on that below).

The fact that we can partition reality in multiple ways without there being substantial disagreement does not mean all partitions are equal. We have criteria for preferring some partitions to others. Empirically, partitions that are more predictive (which I take to mean identifying real patterns in the universe) are preferable (Dowding 2016). I believe that moral and political theory also needs to be constrained or anchored by such real patterns. Simpler theories, all things equal, are preferable to more complex ones. We should not overpopulate our moral language with too many concepts. On the other hand, we do not want to ignore important distinctions. One simple rule of conceptual analysis is: make distinctions when they perform some role, and ignore them when they have no work to do. In social science generally, not only in moral and political philosophy, we need to remember what the theorist was trying to do with their concepts. We might want to extend a concept, or make some finer distinctions, because our question is rather different. This does not mean the concept might not have been fine for the job its originator was doing (see Dowding 2016: ch. 8, for the criteria of good conceptual analysis).

It is also usually held that our concepts should match up somehow to our moral language. If moral philosophers want to affect public policy, then that is indeed the case. However, I am becoming less convinced that this is a necessary requirement of moral and political theory. I am not persuaded

it matters whether non-philosophers understand the technical aspects of some debate. If those technical details matter to public policy, then they need to be explained, though not necessarily in full technical detail, any more than scientists need to explain the technical aspects of what they do as it bears on society. (Scientists are not very good at engaging with public policy, though, so perhaps we should not follow their practice too closely.) The important point, however, is that whilst conceptual debate might at times be merely verbal, we might have reasons for preferring one verbalization to another, one of which may be how well it helps us engage with public policy.

Some debates in moral and political philosophy I consider to be petty squabbles that are not worth spending much time on. In power analysis there has been some debate over whether the most important (or even the only proper use) of 'power' is 'power to' or 'power over'. It seems fairly clear to me that 'power over' is a subset of 'power to'. Whilst, normatively speaking, it might be the more important, it is not worth trying to demand that 'power' in social analysis should only mean 'power over'. We can, of course, use the subscript strategy here, but the important point is that we are interested in the power of agents, even when that power is not straightforwardly analysable in terms of 'power over'. If someone only wants to analyse society in terms of the power of some over others, I am content to let them get on with it.

Some of my dispute with Brian Barry is of this nature (Chapter 5). He wants to define power in a certain manner (Barry 2002). OK, he can do that. But he then tries to use that definition to critique some of the things I say. That is not acceptable. Of course some of the things I say about power in society do not follow from his definition. However, they do follow from mine! That dispute is merely verbal. In Chapter 5, I defend my conception, and what follows from it. I think those implications are substantial, and provide a good way (better than others) to analyse the power structure and to examine the roles and responsibilities different groups have in the injustices and problems we face. The important issue is whether the conceptual demarcations I make – my way of partitioning reality – helps us in our explanatory and normative quests. I believe it helps us see why the collective action problem is an important aspect of power in society (see below).

Importantly, part of what underlies my dispute with Barry (and others: Lukes and Haglund 2005; Hindmoor and McGeechan 2013) is a question of whether a particular concept, 'systematic luck', helps us here. Part of the dispute is ideological, or at least normative. Barry believes that calling capitalists 'systematically lucky' lets them off the hook for their responsibility for social injustice. I do not think so. First, because there is nothing in my argument that means they are not also powerful and can bear the relevant

responsibilities for that power and how they use it. Second, to the extent they are lucky due to their creating their own luck they do bear responsibility (which is the point of Hindmoor and McGeechan 2013). In Chapter 6, I make this point that agents can shape future luck (in that sense it was a response to Hindmoor and McGeechan *avant la lettre*). More pertinently, however, I think the distinction between power and systematic luck is important precisely because it allows us to see how the power structure operates and thus what we might need to change in order for it to operate differently. One can change injustice in capitalist society without lining the capitalists up against the wall (though sometimes that might help).

Indeed, seeking blame often gets in the way of reforming a system. We can see this in a small way all the time, when court cases or judicial reviews pin the blame for some tragedy on a particular biological agent who made a mistake. We would be better off recognizing the distribution of mistakes across any class of agents and designing systems to reduce the occurrence or the importance of those mistakes. Furthermore, when it comes to blame we need to look at the incentives different systems create for people. The logic of finance capital, for example, leads finance capitalists to behave in certain sorts of ways. Rather than blaming them for their behaviour, we would be better off concentrating upon setting up incentives for them to behave in ways we consider morally superior. That is, design systems to reduce the occurrence of such agent-types.

Nevertheless, the normative baggage that terms carry is important, as I discuss in Chapter 1. There I point out that ‘systematic luck’ is not so different from terms such as ‘hegemony’ and ‘soft power’, but these are associated with rather different normative implications. I argue there that we should make concepts as ‘non-normative as possible’ (which is one reason why I like the term ‘systematic luck’: its technical nature, developed from Barry’s concept of ‘luck’, carries less, though not, of course, no normative baggage). All terms are normative to some degree, but by defining them as non-normatively as possible, we open up debate between rival moral or political theories. If every concept is defined only in terms that make sense by the theory in which it is encapsulated, debate between those who hold rival theories of what is good or right is more problematic. This is just to say that it is easier to communicate if we all speak the same language, rather than having to translate every term of one theory into a different set of terms in another. Throughout these chapters my accounts of power, freedom and luck are designed to be as non-normative as possible.

I will briefly run through a set of issues that tends to demarcate accounts of power. These are discussed at more length in the chapters in Part I. I do so, however, simply to set up an argument that is missing from all the chapters on the nature of power in this book. And that is that the concept

of power I define is static. I think any static account will always disappoint, because when we witness power it is dynamic. There is an important role for comparative statics that I will defend, but then I will discuss why power is dynamic, and why 'luck' is so important in that dynamic analysis. That will take us to Part II of this book. I will then run briefly through aspects of luck and how this bears on responsibility. Our notion of responsibility is closely linked, I argue in Chapter 7, to the range of our choices. Choice is also connected with freedom, the subject of Part III. My introduction then ties up the elements of choice, power, luck and responsibility with my discussion of freedom and rights.

The concept of power

There are many different ways of analysing the concept of power (see Dowding 2011). I am not going to try to discuss any, let alone all, of them. I shall instead discuss some of the lines of disputation. I shall start, however, by explaining why one particularly well-known account of power is not discussed in this book.

Steven Lukes wrote a little book on power that has probably attracted as many citations as any book on the subject (Lukes 2005 (first edition 1973)). I felt it was horribly mistaken in two regards. First, it placed normative dispute at the heart of the power debate. For reasons mentioned above, I think this is the wrong way to go about conceptual analysis. Rather than celebrating normative dispute, one should try to define concepts as non-normatively as possible and then examine the normative dispute. Second, I thought the entire argument about the different dimensions of power and what we could conclude from their failures was based upon ignoring the collective action problem (popularized earlier by Mancur Olson (1971)). In short, often one does not need to impute social power or 'power over' to an agent to explain others' lack of outcome power or 'power to'. Because of the collective action problem, people can be powerless all on their own. Once we have understood that, then we can examine how agents can make mobilization more difficult for others. That argument was given in my first book on power (Dowding 1991). I have only once, by invitation, returned to it again (Dowding 2006b). The interesting aspects of Lukes's argument, in my view, are the structural aspects to which I now turn to (and see Chapter 2).

The first important distinction in power debates is whether power is best seen as a predicate of agents or of structures. Clearly, there is a power structure – nobody denies that – but should we see power as all-pervasive or should we concentrate upon power as held and exercised by agents? For me, one problem with seeing power as all-pervasive, like Foucault

(1980, 1982) or Lukes (2005, chs. 4 and 5) is that it means power loses its critical facility. It simply becomes a term that denotes the fact that we respond to our environment. To be sure, the state of the world creates incentives for us to act in one manner or another. I am interested in how it does so, how we respond and how we can alter the incentives.

I had two arguments against viewing power as structural (Dowding 1991). The redundancy argument concludes that adding the predicate 'power' to structure is redundant. We can say everything we want about environmental, institutional and cultural influences without adding 'power' to our claim. Second, the conceptual argument concludes that power is a dispositional concept. Agents have power given their relative resources, but can choose not to wield it. Having power and exercising power are different things. Structures are not like that. They cannot choose not to influence our behaviour. What is important about power is that holding it and exercising it are two different things. Peter Morriss (2002) explains carefully the exercise fallacy in his outstanding book on power. In Chapter 2, I make some important concessions to structural accounts from my initial claims.

Structures affect us not simply by giving us incentives to behave one way or another given our preferences, but also by helping create and form those preferences. This is what I call deep structure. However, the important aspect of structural versus agential accounts of power depends on the questions that are being asked. Where the dependent variable, or what is being explained, is a token event – such as a policy outcome or an institution – then the independent variables will include agents as well as structural factors. However, when it is the behaviour of or effects upon a set of people that is being analysed, the independent variables will be structural. It is the question posed that determines whether the answer is given in terms of one side or other of the agency–structure divide.

Structures are denoted by description. When we are theoretically discussing the power structure, their type denotes the agents. The agents are 'capitalists', 'the prime minister', 'immigrants', 'bureaucrats', 'the firm', and so on. To perform their theoretical role, they rigidly designate across different systems and then we can consider these descriptions within theoretical models, especially analytic or formal models, to be theoretical terms, akin to the theoretical terms in the natural sciences. And, as in the natural sciences, the theoretical models' usefulness derives from how well they predict the patterns we find in society. The agents in the models, both in their description and in the detail of their behaviour, need not correspond directly to any biological individual or token collective agent in any actual society. Just as theoretical terms such as atom, or molecule in natural science do not correspond one-to-one but describe statistical properties of

such items in the actual world. So the utility of theoretical concepts comes from how the system gives incentives for these types of agents to behave. Actual firms do not all optimize their behaviour to maximize profit, but the capitalist system operates, as a capitalist system, to the extent that, as types, firms do so (Ross 2005, 2014).

In my account of power (summarized in Chapters 3, 5 and 6; and see Dowding 1991, 1996), we examine the resources available to different types of agents in different sets of institutional and social circumstances. The resources agents have vary across systems, and the best way of identifying systems is by those resources. So we compare the powers of prime ministers in different countries based on the institutional resources they have. We compare the powers of prime ministers and presidents across the different sets of resources and expectations that they have. In all these cases, power is a function of relative resources. And these resources in these models are institutional rather than personal. The method is one of comparative statics that give the general outline of the relative powers of different agent-types. I think that is the right way to go for comparative static analysis. But it is inherently unsatisfactory in another sense. When we see power in action, it is not static. It is dynamic.

I argue that we estimate the power of agents by their relative resources, and I break these resources down into five general categories (see Chapters 3, 5 and 6); but for particular analyses we might want to concentrate upon just a subset, and only a few within that subset. When comparing prime ministerial power across systems or time, for example, we usually concentrate upon prime ministers' institutional resources (Dowding 2013). More generally, we can measure resources in different ways, depending on the precise system or element type-comparisons we are making. However, when we come to measure two actual token prime ministers, we look beyond the merely institutional to their personal characteristics (Dowding 2013). Those personal characteristics are formed through deep structure, including how others have treated them and perceive them now. This is the topic of Chapter 8.

The obvious problem with the comparative statics of the first four sets of resources in my account is that actual token agents do not always use those resources equally effectively. In comparative statics across systems, that might not matter – effectiveness gets lost in the residual – however, the reaction of others to that effectiveness can multiply the effects. This matters. I tried to build that in conceptually in comparative statics by packing it into a fifth category of 'reputation'. We can see this structurally. Sometimes the preferences of agent-types are satisfied within the system in which they operate more often than their resources (under my first four categories) dictate. There may be two reasons for this.

First, an agent can have a power reputation that goes beyond the relative resources that agent could in fact command. Second, that agent might simply be lucky. In Dowding (1991) I explained the success of agricultural interests in the UK by such systematic luck. The luck is systematic, since satisfying these preferences was built into the guiding principles of public policy. I also suggested capitalists are systematically lucky in that sense, though here they are lucky since their preferences are satisfied as a by-product of the preferences of rulers. The governments of the world consider the banks too important to our way of life to fail (Bell and Hindmoor 2015). That knowledge gives finance capital the ability to behave as it does. It is systematically lucky, and that luck gives it greater powers in other ways. Having said that, my fifth category of reputation probably tries to hide too many sins, even for comparative statics, but the real problem for definitions of power – and not only my own – are their comparative statics status. In order to move beyond comparative statics to a dynamic account, we need to look at the interaction of relative resources, perceptions and preferences (or interests).

Dynamic accounts and the role of luck

The most overt exercises of power can be seen in competitive battles. Here we can often see the marshalling of resources – indeed, battles often begin and end with a display of resources. In the animal kingdom males strut to show their strength, and often what might be costly bruising battles are avoided as the smaller specimens slink off. Similar strutting occurs in the social and political world, most obviously in leadership battles, as challengers estimate their likely support before deciding whether to enter the fray.

Yet perceptions can be seriously misleading. What appears to be muscle might be fluffed feathers, and in the subtle linguistic world what is cheap talk is not always obvious. How do agents in the political world increase their resources? Political battles are about coalitions. If we think about the Hobbesian metaphor of a war of all against all, where even the strongest can be stabbed in the back, having an ally at your back provides protection. We are familiar with the idea that political parties are coalitions of interests, governments are often coalitions of parties and electoral support is a coalition of voters. But dictatorships are equally the product of coalitions. That is the logic of political survival (Bueno de Mesquita et al. 2003). Dictators rely upon their supporters being bought off with side-payments; long-lasting dictators depend on shifting coalitions of support, marshalled to ensure the supporters compete with each other so that they do not challenge the dictator's overall control. In fact, as I point out in Chapter 11, we can model human freedom or outcome power as a coalition. What