

FROM THE EDITORS

POWER, OR SERVICE?

It would take a lot of time and space to list all the forms in which the issue of power and the problems related to it appear in everyday life. The experience gained by the humankind throughout history is obviously incomplete. There are also phenomena which seem, at first glance, unrelated to power; on a closer scrutiny, however, they turn out to be events or processes in which power plays a crucial role. To claim that such discoveries have been made by human beings since the dawn of time is to state the obvious. Tales of power have been recorded in narratives fundamental to human culture, in myths and in sacred books of different religions. The biblical account of the rebellion and fall of the angels, as well as that of original sin are, in fact, interpreted in terms of obedience being renounced and power (absolute power in the metaphysical sense) being questioned.

Human history seems to bear an indelible mark of its beginning: various forms of struggle for power or against power are present in the lives of individuals and their communities; power determines life, also in the sense of being capable of destroying it. The categories of power and struggle might be useful not only in explaining the political history of man, but also in providing its philosophical interpretation; one may also use these categories in an attempt to comprehend any relationship obtaining among human beings or even the one of an individual to her own self (Karol Wojtyła, for instance, describes personal freedom as self-determination grounded in self-possession and self-governance¹). Attempts of this kind have been undertaken by numerous thinkers and researchers representing different philosophical currents or disciplines of science; in view of all such efforts, searching for other, more fundamental ‘motors’ of human action might seem unjustified or even futile.

In *The Will to Power*, Friedrich Nietzsche claims that “it is part of the concept of the living that it must grow—that it must extend its power and consequently incorporate alien forces”² and that “aggressive and defensive

¹ See Karol Wojtyła, *The Acting Person*, trans. Andrzej Potocki (Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1979), 105–8.

² Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, Book III, no. 728, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingday (New York: Random House), 386.

egoism are not matters of choice, to say nothing of ‘free will,’ but the fatality of life itself.”³ However, in the following paragraph, in which his analysis proceeds from the consideration of the essence of life directly to the social and political planes, where the expansive nature of life is expressed in human institutions, the philosopher admits, while doubting the sincerity and constancy of such an attitude, that both individuals and societies are able to defy the expansiveness of life and renounce power: “The society that ... gives up war and conquest is in decline.... In most cases, to be sure, assurances of peace are merely narcotics.”⁴

The dramatic quality of Nietzsche’s description of the manner in which the essence of life is manifested in human actions and artifacts seems to aptly reflect human historical experience. One might say, ironically, that should the current condition of the humankind be measured against the value hierarchy ‘transvalued’ by the philosopher, the state of the world would be given high marks. The will to power, however, needs not manifest itself either in war in its literal sense or in other aggressive and expansive activities, but it may also assume the shape of law or order justified by apparently good intentions. Also, their intellect makes it possible for human beings to channel “the will to power” (or, better, to serve it) so that it can not only extend the range of its influence, but also reach ever deeper: not only embrace community life, but also insinuate itself into the most profound spheres of personal existence.

Such processes are depicted by Michel Foucault, among others, in his *Discipline and Punish*. The French thinker analyzes, for instance, “the measures to be taken when the plague appeared in a town”⁵ prescribed by “an order published at the end of the seventeenth century”⁶ and seeks for their deeper, concealed meaning. “The plague is met by order; its function is to sort out every possible confusion: that of the disease, which is transmitted when bodies are mixed together; that of the evil which is increased when fear and death overcome prohibitions. It lays down for each individual his place, his body, his disease and his death, his well-being, by means of an omnipresent and omniscient power that subdivides itself in a regular, uninterrupted way even to the ultimate determination of the individual, of what characterizes him, of what belongs to him, of what happens to him.”⁷ The plague is, according to Foucault, approached by the authors of the cited set of rules (as well as by those of other, similar ones, issued in response to similar events) as “a form, at once

³ Ibidem.

⁴ Ibidem.

⁵ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 195.

⁶ Ibidem.

⁷ Ibidem, 196.

real and imaginary, of disorder”⁸ and confusion, while the rules in question, as well as the process of imposing them (“the arrest of the plague”⁹), express dreams of a disciplined society dreamt by lawgivers of the time.¹⁰

Today, in a time of pandemic, Foucault’s descriptions of the plague may be particularly distressful to read, while the continuing experience of multiple forms of suffering seems to diminish the importance of philosophical speculation or even cast doubt on its appropriateness. Yet the questions many of us ask in private conversations and in public debates about our present situation are similar to the issues raised by the philosopher (much as we might reject the answers he proposed). Our questions address the justification for the decisions taken by people in power, their true motivations, as well as the acceptable range or limits of their power. We ask whether solutions imposed by the authorities actually serve the good they are supposed to protect (described sometimes as our ‘common health’), whether the good they have identified is truly our common good, and whether the means of protection have been well chosen. We argue over the veracity of political leaders and their competence, and also try to estimate the degree to which they manipulate us and the price we might pay for their decisions.

One may also ponder over the source of all those questions, that is, over the reasons for mistrusting a particular apparatus of power (regardless of its kind or level) and power as such. Pointing to the dramatic character of a given situation or to the painful historical experience (whether of humanity as a whole, of smaller communities or individuals) seems insufficient; nor would the fact that those who are subject to power may be motivated by *ressentiment*, helpless envy of privilege enjoyed by their superiors, lead to satisfactory answers.

The latter approach seems to be shown erroneous by the Roman emperor and philosopher, who admonished himself against psychological and moral threats related to power. “To escape imperialization—that indelible stain. It happens. Make sure you remain straightforward, upright, reverent, serious, unadorned, an ally of justice, pious, kind, affectionate, and doing your duty with a will. Fight to be the person philosophy tried to make you. Revere the gods; watch over human beings,”¹¹ wrote Marcus Aurelius while, at the same time, creating an image so well known from the history of his empire: the one of a ‘tainted’ ruler. Avoiding “imperialization” seems to have been particularly important to this thinker, who lived, as one of his twentieth-century

⁸ *Ibidem*, 197.

⁹ *Ibidem*, 198.

¹⁰ See *ibidem*.

¹¹ Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, book VI, 30, trans. Gregory Hays (New York: The Modern Library, 2003), 75.

commentators and admirers wrote, as if “enclosed in the prison of power”¹²; Marcus Aurelius addressed this issue several times in his *Meditations*, saying, for instance, “Love the discipline you know, and let it support you. Entrust everything willingly to the gods, and then make your way through life—no one’s master and no one’s slave.”¹³ To maintain such a balance and not to forget his condition of “a mortal,”¹⁴ he took special philosophical ‘exercises in perspective’ which may be said (by reversing Nietzsche’s metaphor) to have a sobering effect: “But look how soon we’re all forgotten. The abyss of endless time that swallows it all. The emptiness of all those applauding hands. The people who praise us—how capricious they are, how arbitrary. And the tiny region in which it all takes place. The whole earth a point in space.”¹⁵

Exercising power (but also being subjected to power, particularly if it is exercised poorly or in a morally wrong way) is so difficult for the human being because, as Marcus Aurelius seems to suggest, power alters one’s perception of oneself and of one’s relationships with others and the world; moreover, the process in question not only affects the human psyche, but reaches deeper, resulting in a metaphysical error.

One of the aspects of the described process and, at the same time, one of the causes of the error in question, is indicated by Søren Kierkegaard: “What was great about Socrates was that, even in the moment when he stood accused before the people’s assembly, his eye saw no crowd but only individuals. Spiritual superiority sees only individuals. Alas, but we humans in general, we are sensate and no sooner is there a gathering than the impression changes: we see an abstraction, the crowd—and we become different. But before God, the infinite spirit, for him all the millions who have lived and live now, form no crowd; he sees only single individuals.”¹⁶

Like Marcus Aurelius, Kierkegaard places his hopes in philosophy, which he considers the path towards a “spiritual superiority” in the sense of an ability to perceive other people always—also those in a crowd—as particular, unique individuals (in such a context, personalist thinkers would use the term ‘person’).

It seems that exercising power makes a human being particularly susceptible to the distorted perception to which the cited philosophers alerted themselves and their readers, that is, to seeing oneself as different from and better

¹² Pierre Hadot, *The Inner Citadel: The “Meditations” of Marcus Aurelius*, trans. by Michael Chase (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London: Harvard University Press, 1998), 290.

¹³ Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, book IV, 31, 44.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, book IV, 3, 38.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*.

¹⁶ Søren Kierkegaard, “Journal,” NB21, 34, 1850, in *Kierkegaard’s Journals and Notebooks*, vol. 8, *Journals NB21-NB25*, edited by Niels J. Cappeløem et al. (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2015), 28.

than others, who, as a result, begin to be perceived no longer as individuals (persons), but merely as members of a group, a mass, as ‘human resources’: individuals representing an abstract entity. Seeing people in such a way makes it easier also to yield to the illusion of ‘self-deification.’ Incidentally, to do this, one needs not go as far as to proclaim the ‘death of God’ or to declare the latter has now been replaced by man; nor is it necessary to support any autocratic authority which acts as if it were itself God or legitimizes itself by invoking the divine. The illusion of God-like power usually takes the ‘quantitatively’ restricted forms of authority over a small group of people in a limited space and time. The attitude of Shakespeare’s Prospero who, to achieve his own goals (none of which is actually evil), controls, by means of magic, the few creatures living on a certain island, seems a relatively ‘noble’ example of the illusion in question.

Even if limited and apparently mild, misconceptions about our ontological status are not unimportant as they frequently lead to absolute evil or, to use more practical while still general terms, to suffering and death and, by creating specific circumstances, to the multiplication of wrongdoing.

Perhaps it is the actual gravity of these misconceptions that prompted the well-known severe speech on power recorded in the Gospel according to Matthew. Jesus speaks these words after the mother of the sons of Zebedee has asked him to “command that they sit, one at [his] right and the other at [his] left, in his kingdom” (Mt 20: 21). (Nota bene, the request of the woman confirms the highest authority of God rather than questions it.) Jesus does not answer her, but addresses all the disciples to make them aware that they are in fact ignorant of the true meaning of the request and explains the sense of the power they are supposed to exercise; his reply takes the form of an imperative: ““You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and the great ones make their authority over them felt. But it shall not be so among you. Rather, whoever wishes to be great among you shall be your servant; whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave. Just so, the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many”” (Mt 20: 25-28).

The answer of Jesus is disconcerting: not only does it change the common idea of power, but it also ‘deconstructs’ that idea, as well as the concepts of greatness and being first, by blurring the line between masters and slaves, or between the first and the last, thus making it impossible to distinguish the former from the latter; all the more so that ‘the last’ are said to include the Son of Man.

The understanding of power as service has probably provided inspiration (or become a source of healthy uneasiness) to some of those who are in charge of different communities. One might suppose, however, that we have grown

accustomed to those Biblical verses and are no longer able grasp their full meaning or cannot understand them at all. Moreover, the practice of justifying the conduct of the powerful, including their excesses or even crimes, with their service to the common good is widespread also outside theological contexts and older than the Gospel. Nietzsche would probably count this kind of justification among popular narcotics.

In contrast, the articles included in the present volume of *Ethos*, focusing on the concepts of power and authority, historical experiences of power (special attention is given to the lived experience of the communist regime in the Polish People's Republic) and its images recorded in culture, may have a rather 'sobering' effect and convince the reader of the necessity to stay vigilant about power, whether one exercises it or is subject to it. The papers contribute to the awareness similar to that acquired by Prospero, who decides to forgo magic (or give up manipulation) and draw on his own strength, "which is most faint,"¹⁷ as well as on the mercy of others.

It is worthwhile to keep in mind, in particular when we are to wield power, how 'faint' our strength essentially is; it is also worthwhile to recall the words spoken about another Shakespeare's character, Macbeth: "...his title / Hang loose about him, like a giant's robe / Upon a dwarfish thief,"¹⁸ and reflect that, perhaps, they describe also us—not because of anything we have done, but just because we are human.

Patrycja Mikulska

¹⁷ William Shakespeare, "The Tempest," Epilogue, in *The Illustrated Stratford Shakespeare* (London: Chancellor Press, 1982), 29.

¹⁸ William Shakespeare, "Macbeth," act 5, scene 2, in *The Illustrated Stratford Shakespeare*, 794; see Piotr Kamiński, "Wstęp: *Burza*, czyli tam i z powrotem," in William Shakespeare, *Burza*, trans. Piotr Kamiński (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo W.A.B., 2012), 36f.