Powerseeking and Ideology

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In the last chapter, we have seen that the universal moral imperative is to recognize
our universal humanness and to become thereby increasingly more perfect instruments for
altruistic (unconditional love). We demonstrate the degree to which we have responded
adequately to this moral imperative by the way we actually deal with ourselves and others.
Consistent kindness, encouragement, and acts of genuine service are impossible without
altruistic love, and cruelty, selfishness, and powerseeking cannot exist with altruistic love.
The "absoluteness" of the universal moral imperative derives from the stark
simplicity of these considerations. Either we are consistently kind towards others, or we are
not. If we are not, it is useless to consider that there is some other really kind person
existing underneath our selfish and cruel exterior. Selfishness and cruelty come from the
heart. They are not accidents of nature (except in the case of certain genuine mental
illnesses). Similarly, kindness and service come from the heart, and if they are the rule
rather than the exception, then we have a positive indication that they are motivated by
love. Moreover, it is impossible for the truly loving person to be unhappy, and it is similarly
impossible for the selfish and cruel person to maintain any lasting well-being.
Yet, human history is replete with acts of cruelty and oppression. All through
history, people have actively sought power and thereby sought their own
unhappiness.
Why?

The Logic of Powerseeking

To proceed systematically in our discussion of these issues, we need to pause and gain a bit of conceptual clarity about the notion of power. What exactly do we mean by power?

On the most abstract level, power is more or less equivalent to energy, i.e., the ability or capacity to do work. The inner power or autonomy of an individual human is proportional to the degree of development of his essential, intrinsic capacities of consciousness, mind, heart, and will. We all have these capacities, but we all begin life as totally helpless and dependent beings: our inherent capacities exist but have not yet been developed. As this initial configuration of our being interacts with the social and material environment, our capacities (potential for autonomy) became gradually actualized as abilities (the achievement of autonomy). We acquire physical, emotional, mental, and voluntary powers.

Power is the capacity to do work, but it is not an imperative to do work in general, or any kind of work in particular. The fact that I can (am able) to accomplish a given task does not mean that I will necessarily chose to do the task. I can deliberately refrain from doing the task, or I can be prevented from doing so by outside forces that overcome my abilities. I can also choose to do something else, so my choice is not necessarily passive either. Thus, good and evil arise from the choices we make of how we use our power, not from the mere fact of having power. Power itself is morally neutral; it is, in itself, neither good nor evil.

But, to possess power is to have the possibility of doing evil, as well as good. The helpless infant is morally innocent precisely because he lacks the ability both of conscious choice and of effective action. He is literally not responsible for his

actions. So, the process
of self-development is a process of actualizing our capacities as abilities and thereby
gradually increasing our responsibility for our actions and attitudes: power, or the ability to
do work, implies responsibility for how we use our power __ for what tasks (work) we
choose to do (or not do). Responsibility implies that we have become active, localized
centers of power, and that we generally have several choices of how to use the power (the
binary choice to use it or to refrain from using it, if nothing else).
Universal morality says that there are relatively good ways and relatively bad ways
to use our power. Whether we do good or evil will depend, first, on our knowledge of moral
principles (in particular the universal principle of altruistic love discussed above) and,
second, on our desire (motivation) to implement what we perceive as the good. This
desire, or purity of intention, is the most important component of moral action, for if we
have it, then we can learn from our mistakes made in ignorance. We can correct our faulty
knowledge of moral principles and realities and thereby overcome any evil done out of
ignorance alone. But if our intention is weak or (worse) consciously misdirected, then no
amount of knowledge will, in itself, transform us into doers of good. Either we will lack the
intensity of motivation (moral courage) to implement good in the face of opposition or
resistance, or else we will actively intend evil.
We sum up this truth by the slogan: good and evil is a potential that lies within the
heart of each individual. There are no identifiably "evil people" who are alone responsible
for all human misdeeds. If there were such an identifiably evil segment of humanity, then
really there would be no problem of morality at all. We could simply organize society so

that the evildoers are identified and eliminated or restrained from action,

thereby
permanently eliminating all evil (or at least all evil actions) from humanity.
Thus, the fundamental problem of morality is universal (shared by all humans) but
ultimately localized within the individual. It is the problem of how we each use the power
we have, whether with good intentions based on accurate moral knowledge, or with weak or
misdirected intentions based on inaccurate moral knowledge. This is the theme of all great
literature. It is the theme of every serious play of Shakespeare, of every parable of Jesus, of
the great novels by Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Victor Hugo, etc.
This raises the question as to whether there are objective consequences from
immoral actions. That is, are the only consequences of immorality the opprobrium of
society or subjective self-devaluation, or are there consequences that accrue independently
both of society and our self-perceptions? In the light of our universal moral principle of
altruistic love, the answer is a resounding "yes." There are indeed objective consequences to
immorality.
Let us recall that the love principle is based on the knowledge that the human being
is the highest value in creation. Good actions are thus those which enhance the value of
universal humanness, which properly develop our intrinsic capacities of mind, heart, and
will. Such actions will inevitably result in an increase in autonomy (inner development) and
an increase in well-being (stable and durable happiness). In contrast, immoral actions will
decrease our autonomy, replacing it by unnatural (because artificially provoked)
dependencies and unhappiness (because we will no longer be living in harmony with the
principle of love which is the only source of genuine well-being).
For the truly wise man, these objective consequences are enough to deter him from
all intentional wrongdoing. The problem is time: these consequences cannot always be
immediately detected. We may gradually slip into the vise of a vicious dependency (drug
addiction, for example) without even realizing it until it is too late. Also, immoral actions
can give us a temporary or immediate happiness of ego gratification. What is

the big deal?
Again, when the unhappy, long-term consequences set in, it is often too late to undo their
causes. For example, we may now have lost forever the possibility of a love relationship
with a wife or husband we have unjustly abused over a period of time, or the respect of a
beautiful and sensitive child whom we have mistreated. Grief over such loses can last a
lifetime, and yet how difficult it can be for us to see the direction in which our daily actions
are taking us.
Since increased autonomy is one of the results of acting in accordance with the love
principle of universal morality, autonomy must itself be a moral good. In particular, moral
autonomy __ an increase in our ability to act responsibly __ is the highest form of
autonomy. Thus, we achieve moral autonomy by practicing autonomy, by consciously
striving to increase our understanding of the good and our desire to implement this
understanding. Autonomy begets autonomy (a virtuous cycle) whereas dependency begets
dependency (a vicious cycle).
In other words, it is by exercising our spiritual capacities of mind, heart, and will
that we develop these very capacities. We develop ourselves by learning the process of
development and then by implementing the knowledge of that process. This "process
knowledge" derives from an application of our spiritual capacities to our spiritual
capacities: we apply our mind, heart, and will to our mind, heart, and will. Thus,
autonomous moral functioning is both a first-order process of the proper use of our mind,

heart, and will, and a second-order process by which we learn to continually increase the
level of our first-order functioning.2
In the whole process of self-development, our abilities (powers) increase, but it is

never an increase in power itself that is sought. Rather, what we seek is an increase in autonomy (self-mastery), authenticity, and well-being. As we pursue this process successfully, our powers will, as a consequence of this very success, increase in fact.

But, at every moment, we stand in danger of misusing our powers, leading to a (hopefully temporary) regression represented by a certain loss of autonomy and a consequent decrease in our powers. To misuse our powers is to lose our powers.

The notion of power we have so far discussed in the present section might be called "internal power," because it arises from the development of our inherent (inner) capacities.

However, this is a second connotation of the word "power," which we might designate as "outer power" or "external power." The external power of an individual is the degree of control he or she has over the material and human resources of society. It is a social power which derives wholly from the social role (whether formal or informal) played by the given individual. A person has external power to the extent that society and its members allow that person to make decisions concerning the use and allocation of human and material resources.

External power is what is most commonly meant when we say that someone is "powerful." Politicians, administrators, successful business men have external power, which may have hardly anything to do with whether they have developed internal power and self-mastery. Such power derives purely from the role they play in society. Similarly, charismatic, manipulative, aggressive, or physically strong individuals may have de facto external power, which is accorded them through fear, naiveté, or excessive deference.

Roughly speaking, external power is power over others, whereas internal power is power over self. The internal power of a morally autonomous individual enables him to compel himself to choose what he desires to choose or feels morally obliged to choose.

External power enables the individual to compel others to choose what he (the powerful

individual) wants them to choose. Such power is generally exercised either by the promise
of reward or else by the threat of punishment or of the withholding of reward. In order for
such promises and threats to be effective, the individual has to have control (and to be seen
to have control) over those social resources which will clearly enable him either to execute
the promised threat or deliver the promised reward.
We speak of compelling other individuals to make choices. Looked at from the point
of view of these individuals, there is always free choice, and so no one is literally
"compelled" against their will. However, refusal to capitulate to a powerful individual can
have such socially or personally disastrous consequences (e.g., death, torture,
imprisonment, widespread public humiliation) that, in normal circumstances, only a
negligible few will have the inner strength or power to resist. Nevertheless, it is extremely
important to realize that the degree of real external power over others is inversely
proportional to the degree of internal power possessed by the others.
The confrontation between my external power over you and your internal power to choose freely is not a zero-sum game. You can increase your inner freedom independently
of whether my external power increases, decreases, or remains unchanged, because your

2 I owe certain of these insights to the therapist and author Mary K. Radpour.

moral autonomy is achieved by a process of self-development which is largely in your own
hands and largely independent of external conditions. As we have already noted above, this
self-development process results from the pursuit of authenticity not the pursuit of power.
Thus, the confrontation between my external power and your internal power is not really a
power struggle, but only a measure of how much moral autonomy you have attained relative
to a given degree of external power.
A true power struggle is a competition between two people for an increase in

their
respective external power, and such a struggle is precisely a zero-sum game. I can increase
my power over you only if your power over me is correspondingly decreased, because it is
logically impossible for me to hold power over you and you to hold power over me at the
same time and in the same way. Moreover, as we have already noted in Chapter 1, the
competitive struggle for external power is antithetical to the internal struggle for
authenticity (and a consequent increase in internal power).

Our internal power or autonomy is the only power we truly possess, because its achievement depends only on us. External power can be taken from us at any time, for
example by an unexpected encounter with a more powerful person. External power is
largely in the hands of others, whereas internal power is, for the most part, in our own
hands.

Like all power, external power is morally neutral. The doctor has (external) power
over his patient, the teacher over the student, the parent over the child. Again, the fact of
power is neither good nor evil, but the way we choose to use external power does indeed
have a moral dimension. The doctor can use his power humbly to uplift and heal his patient
or else arrogantly to celebrate his superiority over the patient. The teacher can serve and
facilitate the mental development of his students, or crush (perhaps forever) their desire or
ability to learn. The parent can consciously and lovingly foster the autonomy and self-
development of his child or seek to maintain the child in a continual state of fear,
dependence, and submission.

Let us sum up. Power is energy, the capacity to do work. But it is not a moral imperative. Moral imperatives arise from the motivations of the heart, which are actualized
whenever our free will makes use of available energy (power) to accomplish (or strive to
accomplish) a given goal. Without power we can do neither good nor evil, while the
availability of power (whether internal or external) allows for the possibility of doing evil as
well as good. When we understand the universality of the love principle and the

value
supremacy of essential human nature, and when we act upon that knowledge, we use our
power for good ends. Otherwise, we misuse power and suffer objective, negative consequences from such abuse.
We are now in a position to gain deeper insight into the logic of powerseeking. In
the first place is the fact that we do not face reality as self-sufficient beings but as needful
creatures. When we were helpless infants, our needs were satisfied (or not at all) by our
mother and other powerful caregivers. As adults, we must make efficient use of the law of
cause and effect to satisfy our needs. Whether or not we identify happiness with need-
satisfaction, we perceive clearly that we cannot be happy if our essential needs are
continually unmet. It then appears logical that the more power we have, the more efficiently
we can act to satisfy our needs. In particular, the more external power we have, the more we
can compel others to act in a way that satisfies our needs and desires (thereby reproducing a
simulacrum of the blissful mother-child relationship, of which we carry a primal memory).

It thus appears reasonable to pursue (an increase in) power as a means to efficient need-
satisfaction and thus to happiness.
The fault in this otherwise flawless logic lies in the existential fact that no increase
in external power can help satisfy our most basic and universal need, which is to love and
be loved, since love cannot be compelled. At the same time, an increase in internal power
(e.g., our very power to love altruistically) cannot itself be pursued but results rather from
the pursuit of authenticity. Thus, the pursuit of power (not the moral use of power) is
wholly antithetical to the pursuit of authenticity which, alone, leads to genuine well-being
and autonomy (and an increase in internal power!)
Thus, the essential and unavoidable truth of authentic morality is that the

pursuit of
the good (self-development leading to autonomy and well-being) involves that we treat
power as a means not an end. To pursue power as an end reverses this relationship, leading
us to sacrifice universal and essential human nature for an increase in external power.

Ideology: the Attempt to Legitimize Powerseeking

Henceforth, whenever we use the term "power" without modification, we will understand what we have now called external power. Our use of the term "power" in
Chapter 1 is also consistent with this usage, even though we had not, at that point, made the
distinction between external and internal power. Thus, when we speak of powerseeking
behavior, we mean the individual's attempt to increase his external power (dominance over
others).

In most (though perhaps not all) cultures, to be seen as a blatant seeker of raw power
is to be perceived negatively. If I am openly seeking power, others will begin to deploy
strategies of resistance to my attempts, thereby making it even harder for me to succeed.
Furthermore, the competitiveness and jealousy of other powerseekers will be aroused,
mobilizing them to engage in power struggles with me. The chances are that, sooner or
later, I will meet an opponent who is more efficient (or willing to go to further lengths) at
seeking power than I, and I may then lose whatever power I have gained, or else face the
unpleasant choice between such loss, on one hand, and extreme moral compromise (say
murder or sabotage), on the other. The powerseeking game is fragile and dangerous, and we
stand to lose everything from one moment to the next.

Thus, for an inveterate seeker of power, the ideal configuration is to be efficient
(even ruthless) in seeking power, but not to be perceived as such by others. Indeed, what if I
could seek power over others and not only avoid their resistance but have their

active
cooperation in the process?
When stated in bald terms, such a configuration seems impossible of attainment. Yet
it is precisely what successful powerseekers of history have done. We want to understand
how they have accomplished this. In one word, the answer is: ideology.
Again, as with power, we need to proceed carefully in order to maintain conceptual
clarity. By an idea we mean a thought or mental conception. Ideas can usually be expressed
or articulated as propositions, i.e., statements that affirm or assert that reality is configured
in some particular, given way. By a belief we mean an idea plus a value given to the idea: a
belief is a valued idea. An ideal is a belief that expresses how we think reality should be
configured. A collection of ideas is a theory and a collection of beliefs is a belief system.
Finally, by an ideology we will mean any belief system that contains some belief whose
value is considered greater than the value of universal, essential human nature. An ideology
thus asserts, in some manner or another, that human beings are not the highest value in
creation, because it considers at least one of its beliefs or doctrines as higher than humans.
It is important to notice that many people use the term "ideology" in a slightly more
general sense __ a sense which corresponds rather to what we have called a belief system.
To be an ideology in our restrictive use of the term, a belief system most contain at least
one proposition (idea, doctrine, thesis) which is accorded higher value than universal and
essential human nature.
As we have defined the notion, an ideology necessarily contravenes the universal
love principle that holds human beings to be the highest value in creation. Since most
people presumably accept the value supremacy of humans, one might be tempted to think
that ideologies as we have defined them are, in fact, very rare. We will see that, on the
contrary, most historical belief systems have either begun as ideologies or been transformed
into ideologies in the course of their social evolution and development.

Now, any rational system of values adheres to the purely logical principle that higher values are ends and lower values are means. The essence of immorality, according to
any moral system whatever, is (would be) to sacrifice higher values to lower values __ to
make higher values mere means for the obtention of what are recognized and acknowledged
by the moral system as lower values.
Let us take the case of Christianity as an historical example. According to the New
Testament, the only historical record we have of what Jesus said and taught, the basis of
Christianity is the very principle of universal love (agape) which we have put forward in
Chapter 1 as the only possible supreme value, when once we have accepted the Platonic
assumption that universal, essential human nature exists. In the whole New Testament,
Jesus gives no doctrinal criterion of believership. He says only that his true followers are
those who love others even as he (Jesus) has loved them.
To make sure that people understood the implications of the love principle, Jesus
told truly shocking stories and parables. If struck on one cheek, a person should not only
refrain from seeking revenge but should offer the other cheek. If forced by a powerful
person to accomplish some burdensome task, one should "go the second mile" and voluntarily offer to do more than was required. We should love even our enemies (after all,
points out the ever-rational Jesus, there is no particular virtue in loving your good friends;
even murders, thieves, and other powerseekers do that).
During the three-hundred years following Christ's death, his followers endured torture and martyrdom for the privilege of participating in a community based on the
practice of agape. In fact, this love principle conquered the Roman empire, which was
wholly and frankly based on the power principle (that power is the greatest value in
creation). However, after the Roman Emperor Constantine's conversion to Christianity in

315, the new Christian Emperor convened the Council of Nicea (325 A.D.), where a number of basic doctrines were woven into a creed. It was then held that whosoever refused to accept any part of this creed was an infidel and, as such, subject to sanction, including death. Historians tell us that there were more Christians killed (in doctrinal disputes) by fellow Christians in the first generation after Nicea than all of the Christian martyrs during the three-hundred years of Roman persecution.

From Nicea onward, to be a Christian meant, first of all, to be doctrinally correct, and only secondarily to practice the love principle. Christianity, as taught by Jesus Christ, had been transformed into an ideology, which held that certain doctrines about Jesus (so-called Christological doctrines) were more important than human beings. It then become morally legitimate, even for Christians, to sacrifice human beings for the propagation (or "protection") of these doctrines. The Crusades, the Inquisition, the Catholic-Protestant clashes, the first and second world wars when Christian nation arose against Christian nation __ all of these slaughters were done by people who considered themselves good Christians because they firmly believed all of the Christological doctrines of their church.

The case of Christianity is far from unique, but it is particularly striking because the principle of altruistic love was so clearly articulated as the basic teaching of Christ. The spectacle of human beings killing each other in the very name of a religion based on universal love shows the capacity of ideology to give moral legitimacy to virtually any cruelty whatever. If we humans can rationalize murder and torture in the name of love, then we are capable of rationalizing anything.

Every one of the major historical religions has taught, in one form or another, the

supreme value of the human being in creation, and every one of these faiths has, sooner or later, justified cruelty to others (and even to fellow believers) in the name of its conception of the truth (its ideology). These religions did not begin as ideologies, but they were ideologized __ transformed into ideologies. Other social movements, such as communism and fascism, were born as ideologies and so never had to be transformed into something else.

From the standpoint of theism, ideology is idolatry __ the worship of certain ideas instead of the worship of God. Many theologians and religious thinkers of history have pointed out that people often consider they are worshipping God when they are, in fact, worshipping their own idea or conception of God __ another thing entirely.

One point is extremely important for a clear assessment of these issues of power and ideology. Any religion, moral system, philosophical system, social movement (or branch of science, for that matter) has to be founded on principles that its followers regard as true.

Our own system, based on the value supremacy of the human being, supposes the truth of the principle that there is a universal, essential human nature. We need true beliefs. But, if we accept the truth of the universal love principle, then other true beliefs must be regarded as subservient to the fact of the value supremacy of the human being. Belief systems derive from human value choices. They should serve not enslave human beings. Applied to our own system, this means that belief in the value supremacy of humans is less important than are human beings themselves.

Any (true) belief system can be transformed into an ideology simply by adding to it the metabelief that one (or some) of its principles have greater value than human beings. Let us illustrate with a simple example:

We can accept as true than some people are much kinder than others. We can also accept as true that the world would be better (more ideal) if all humans were supremely kind. We now conceive of a simple plan to achieve this ideal: we kill all of the unkind

people. Once we have done this, our ideal will be achieved because there will be only kind
people left.
What is wrong with this logic? The only thing wrong is that we have used an unkind
(unjust) means in an attempt to obtain what we perceived to be a just end. In reality, we
have sacrificed the universal love principle for a lesser thing, i.e., perpetrating unkindness
on the whole of humanity. When we accepted as a true ideal that all humans should be kind,
what we really meant was that kindness should spread from the already kind to the presently
unkind, thereby becoming universal. But, instead we tried to spread kindness by spreading
unkindness, a logical impossibility.
Thus, any belief system, no matter how valid, can be transformed into an ideology
by the simple adjunction of the false metabelief that some doctrine or other is superior in
value to the human being. No matter how humanitarian or altruistic the belief system
originally was, it now becomes morally justified to kill or mistreat humans if it is deemed
necessary for the defense or the propagation of the system. In fact, the more humanitarian
the original belief system, the easier it is for people to feel justified in acting with cruelty in
its name. One could hardly feel more justified than when one kills in the name of a high
humanitarian ideal.

It is now known that Joseph Stalin killed thirty million of his own subjects in the
name of protecting holy communism against counterrevolutionaries and of preserving the
purity of its doctrine for the sake of all humankind. It is physically impossible for one man
to execute thirty million people. Stalin had help __ help from millions who believed that it
was legitimate to kill innocent human beings if it was necessary to preserve their precious
ideology.

We can now draw certain direct conclusions. (1) Ideology (which holds certain doctrines superior to human beings) gives moral justification to cruelty towards human beings. (2) Ideology generates complicity in the power principle rather than resistance to it.

Thus, ideology has been the method of choice by which powerseekers have gained the cooperation of masses of people __ people who were themselves victims of the very power. By means of ideology, a charismatic leader enables his followers to identify with him and his power, rather than with themselves as victims of the power. People vicariously participate in the leader's power and gain thereby the illusion that they themselves are powerful.3 Notice also that capitulation to an ideology implies the complete loss of moral autonomy. As Nazi war criminals claimed, they were only "following orders," that is, acting not in their own name but in the name of their ideology, which was alone responsible for their acts. They literally had no sense of individual moral responsibility, they were utterly bereft of inner freedom and inner power __ all sacrificed on the altar of the pursuit of external power.

3 When asked why they had continued to love and support Stalin in spite of his massive

cruelty, many Russians responded that they took great satisfaction in the fact that Stalin "made the West tremble." It seems not to have occurred to them they, and not the West, were the first and greatest victims of Stalin's powerseeking.

Conclusions

Good and evil is a potential that lies within the heart of each individual. Under normal circumstances, and in the absence of ideology, most people are "good people" in that they will shrink from committing acts of gross cruelty towards other human beings.

However, a believer in an ideology can feel morally justified in perpetrating cruelty towards

others, because he sees himself as defending a higher value against an infidel, an enemy, or
a traitor. Truly, an ideology enables good people to do bad things.
History certainly confirms this analysis. Most of the evil committed in history was
done by good people __ good people who felt morally justified in committing cruelties
which, in other circumstances, they would have considered possible only by the most
degraded of human beings. We are not here considering the moral dilemma of committing
cruelty under duress (as when one's life or family is physically threatened). It is a perceived
threat to the ideology itself which, in the eyes of the ideologue, legitimizes his behavior.
In the last analysis, evil is the product of two things: an evil act and the justification
given by the perpetrator of the evil act. Until now, our moral systems have concentrated on
the evil acts themselves, examining them in detail, classifying them, assigning degrees of
seriousness to them. The causes for such evil acts are usually sought in the personal history
of the perpetrator. What in his life experience has led him to do this act? But if our current
analysis is correct, we should begin to focus rather on the socially diffuse values systems __
the prevalent and often unstated ideologies __ which allow individuals to justify their
cruelty.
We might be inclined to think that such ideologies are not present in our modern
Western democratic societies __ that such ideologies are peculiar to the Balkans, or the
Middle East, or Afghanistan, or Africa, or Northern Ireland. In the next Chapter, we will see
that this is far from the case __ that indeed most of us justify our daily injustices to each
other with reference to one or another (usually unstated) ideology. Obtaining a clear
perspective on these strategies of inauthenticity is the first step towards self-responsibility
and moral autonomy.

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