

What Pure Power Means You Will Understand Presently

Robert Tilden, January 15, 2017

Note: blue quotation from other source; gray indicates parts skipped in the oral presentation, included here for completeness

This month's theme of Power is, as most themes of the month are, very broad. I remember when Cal brought with him his very large dictionary this inspired me to consult Merriam Webster's dictionary definition of Power and found 19 definitions among them:

- 1-b legal or official authority, capacity or right
- 2-a possession of control, authority, or influence over others
- 2-b one having such power specifically a sovereign state
- 3-c political control or influence
- 4- Celestial hierarchy: plural, an order of angels

While I would love to present to you on nothing other than the order of the angels, I will focus on the other definitions, the definitions that again and again mention control and authority and right.

I will tell you my personal philosophy upfront. In the end this aspect of power boils down to individuals agreeing to acknowledge and recognize, to cede to grant to waive over control to the sovereign or to the powerful.

For a brief time, in a former life, I was a soldier. I learned two things in the army. First, I was very reluctant and ultimately failed to cede authority to the higher-ups, resulting in my early discharge. Second, everything divides into three: three squadrons make a platoon; three platoons make a company and so on. In a presentation I gave last year I presented Authority under Max Weber's three-partite classification: Legal Authority, Traditional Authority and Charismatic Authority. So in that trinity-like tradition let us begin.

Part I- Thomas Hobbes - 'Leviathan'

Hobbes wrote his book Leviathan during the English Civil War 1642-1651. The book was published in that final year of the war. The English Civil war was fought between royalists supporting King Charles I's claim to have 'Divine Right of Kings' i.e. absolute power. While parliament referred to the Magna Carta, the rule of law, the limitations of power.

Hobbes claimed that in theory each person has an equal amount of power. This situation though leads to endless war and strife as each person is busy promoting their own will. Hobbes' solution was to have power centralized in a one body, in his case that of the monarch. Hobbes has monarchs utilize their authority, charismatic and legal in nature to bend the will of the subjects to follow his own. The

monarch takes the power from the subjects. This is how a great king is one with more followers and more power. While the royalist cause claimed authority from on high, Hobbes, agreeing with the ends, but credits the monarch with the initiative of assuming power from those below him, the subjects. Hobbes finds the stability and order found in the shadow of the monarch to be preferable to the chaos of an all against all power game.

The name Leviathan refers to Job 41.

So first, allow me a brief synopsis of Job. Job is a good man who lived in the Land of Uz. God was good to him but God and his minion satan tested Job to see if Job was good because he was rewarded or if he was good by nature. Job is left with nothing but leprosy and a nagging wife. For 36 chapters he converses with four friends and the nagging wife who try to make some sense of what happened but Job is adamant that he did no wrong and his is a case of awful injustice. At the end of the book Gods rebuke Job for wanting answers of God. Chapter 41 is perhaps the climax of this speech. The chapter is put in the mouth of God by the authors of Job. Alternatively, it is God's word. I'll now read about two thirds of the chapter. It may as well be titled 'Ode to Power'.

41 "Can you pull in Leviathan with a fishhook
or tie down its tongue with a rope?

² Can you put a cord through its nose
or pierce its jaw with a hook?

³ Will it keep begging you for mercy?
Will it speak to you with gentle words?

⁴ Will it make an agreement with you
for you to take it as your slave for life?

⁵ Can you make a pet of it like a bird or put it on a
leash for the young women in your house?

⁶ Will traders barter for it?
Will they divide it up among the merchants?

⁷ Can you fill its hide with harpoons
or its head with fishing spears?

⁸ If you lay a hand on it, you will remember the
struggle and never do it again!

⁹ Any hope of subduing it is false;
the mere sight of it is overpowering.

¹⁰ No one is fierce enough to rouse it.
Who then is able to stand against me?

¹¹ Who has a claim against me that I must pay?
Everything under heaven belongs to me.

¹² "I will not fail to speak of Leviathan's limbs,
its strength and its graceful form.

¹³ Who can strip off its outer coat?
Who can penetrate its double coat of armor?

¹⁴ Who dares open the doors of its mouth,
ringed about with fearsome teeth?

¹⁵ Its back has rows of shields
tightly sealed together;

¹⁶ each is so close to the next
that no air can pass between.

¹⁷ They are joined fast to one another;
they cling together and cannot be parted.

¹⁸ Its snorting throws out flashes of light;
its eyes are like the rays of dawn.

¹⁹ Flames stream from its mouth;
sparks of fire shoot out.

²⁰ Smoke pours from its nostrils
as from a boiling pot over burning reeds.

²¹ Its breath sets coals ablaze,
and flames dart from its mouth.

²² Strength resides in its neck;
dismay goes before it.

²³ The folds of its flesh are tightly joined;
they are firm and immovable.
²⁴ Its chest is hard as rock,
hard as a lower millstone.
²⁵ When it rises up, the mighty are terrified;
they retreat before its thrashing.
²⁶ The sword that reaches it has no effect,
nor does the spear or the dart or the javelin.
²⁷ Iron it treats like straw
and bronze like rotten wood.
²⁸ Arrows do not make it flee;
slingstones are like chaff to it.

²⁹ A club seems to it but a piece of straw;
it laughs at the rattling of the lance.
³⁰ Its undersides are jagged potsherds,
leaving a trail in the mud like a threshing sledge.
³¹ It makes the depths churn like a boiling caldron
and stirs up the sea like a pot of ointment.
³² It leaves a glistening wake behind it;
one would think the deep had white hair.
³³ Nothing on earth is its equal—
a creature without fear.
³⁴ It looks down on all that are haughty;
it is king over all that are proud.

Hobbes finds shelter in this monster, better to submit your will to it than the chaos of ‘every man to himself’. The term Leviathan appears three other times in the bible, twice in Psalms (74:14, 104:26) and once in Isaiah (27:1) in two of these instances God kills the Leviathan. In Job too, the point is that this is only a creation of God, and God is untimely more awesome than the Leviathan.

But who is speaking in verse 11? God directly or God quoting the Leviathan?

¹¹ Who has a claim against me that I must pay?
Everything under heaven belongs to me.

Karen Armstrong in her book ‘The Great Transformation’ claims that in the pre-biblical religions of the Near East sea monsters represent chaos while God/Gods bring forth Order. This is also true of Nordic religions. It is ironic therefore, that Hobbes chose the archetypal chaotic monster Leviathan to represent the monarch and the forces of order.

Part I and a half- David Hume ‘An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals’

‘An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals’ was published in 1751, exactly one hundred years after Leviathan, and was thought by Hume to be the best of his writings. A short composition, he presents in it his alternative to the Hobbesian world view. Power in the form of legal authority is bestowed willingly by ‘The People’ to a larger cause such as a legal code. President Barak Obama in his farewell speech on Tuesday alluded to this when he stated “Our Constitution is a remarkable beautiful gift. But it’s really just a piece of parchment. It has no power on its own. We, the people, give it power”

Hume writes that a strict observance of equality is a very strict form of tyranny. “Perfect equality of possessions, destroying all subordination, weakens extremely the authority of magistracy, and must reduce all power nearly to a level, as well as property.” (Section III Part II).

Part II- Herman Melville 'The Whale' or 'Moby Dick'

Now think of the quotes from Job 41 and you will immediately see the whale. In Modern Hebrew whale is leviathan. A close reading of Chapter 41 would hint of a crocodile, never the less we will continue with the whale imagery. Melville in an unusual way forces the reader to read encyclopedic chapters, without narrative about whales which in a way remind me of Job 41.

Power in Moby Dick is complicated. Exactly 200 years have passed since Leviathan was published, and Melville is quintessentially American. Absolute Monarchs dyed in the cast of Charles I by 1851 may be found in Russia or the Ottoman Empire but not here. Moby Dick refers to the Bible in another obvious way Captain Ahab referring to King Ahab. A king of the Israelite Kingdom, the book of Kings devotes four chapters to Ahab, in the end it sums up his rule as '[more evil than all the kings before him](#)' (1Kings 16:30).

Captain Ahab is the powerful charismatic leader who knows how to stir up the crews emotions and to bend them to his will. Even the narrator, the outsider, admits that he has taken up the Captains mania as his own. The comparison of Captain Ahab to the dictators of the 1930's is pretty well established. I couldn't say it any better than Nathaniel Phibrick did a Vanity Fair article in 2011. [In every age, there will be a threat to the principle of "divine equality," and his name is Ahab. In Melville's view, it doesn't take much to become a demagogue as long as you learn a few simple tricks. Dictators such as Hitler, Saddam Hussein, and Muammar Qaddafi are not geniuses; they are paranoid despots and expert manipulators of men. If you want to understand how these and other megalomaniacs pull it off, read the last third of Moby-Dick and watch as Ahab tightens his stranglehold on the Pequod's crew in his increasingly horrifying quest for the White Whale.](#)

King Ahab's most egregious act, the theft of Naboth's vineyard is a case-study in despotism. Ahab covets a vineyard owned by Naboth. He is reasonable and offers to pay him market value for this vineyard or trade his vineyard for a better one. Naboth refuses both offers citing the patrimonial inheritance, where God himself has divvied up the land as described in the book of Joshua. King Ahab then, thru his wife Jessabelle stages a miscarriage of justice by orchestrating false witnesses resulting in confiscation of the vineyard.

Ahab, both King and Captain exemplify Hobbes' Leviathan. Naboth exemplifies a utopia, of 'divine equality' which Hobbes' takes to be the natural state where each man has his own power/land. This utopia was enforced further by the Jubilee concept. On the Jubilee, the 50th year, there was reset button when all land reverted to its lawful owners according to paternal lines of inheritance traced back to Joshua's day, along with forgiveness of any debts. This principle is exactly what Hume objected to, calling it tyranny. Incidentally, Talmudic rabbis canceled the egalitarian functionality of the Jubilee because as the Jubilee approached no one would lend money and this caused general hardship, proving that Hume was correct.

The hero of the King Ahab saga is Elijah, an early example of a superhero who stands up to 'the man' and speaks truth to power.

Part III George Orwell, Nineteen Eight-Four

Eric Arthur Blair (1903 – 1950), lived through the demonstration of extreme power: WWI was the war to end all wars and it was followed by the even worse sequel featuring the Holocaust and nuclear warfare for punctuation, the cold war was already evident as well by 1949 when Blair, better known as George Orwell published Nineteen Eighty-Four. This book was ahead of its time, not only because it was published two years before Moby-Dick's centennial but also because of the dark predictions which might be coming to us soon, had not materialize by 1984. Perhaps it should have been named Twenty-Four-Eight.

In the book, Big Brother represents the State and is the embodiment of the power of the state. This is an all-powerful, all watching totalitarian power. Big Brother may or may not be a real flesh and blood person. He could easily be compared to Hobbes' Leviathan; less so to Ahab, King or Captain who are human characters. The novel is famous for its doublethink where everything is a euphemism for something else, for example 'Ministry of Peace' is in fact 'Ministry of War'. Incidentally we no longer have a Department of War in our country; it, in 1949 was renamed Department of Defense, perhaps not entirely Orwellian, maybe only half way, maybe just Orw then. Also in recent years we have seen more and more cameras following our every move, Big Data documenting our actions. Hobbes wrote in his book that 'Knowledge is Power' and in that respect our modern state is indeed all powerful. Orwell might have described a future more totalitarian than our present, but parts of it are materializing. The miscarriage of Justice as practiced by King Ahab is not necessary in Orwell's world. The Laws are made to serve the state. If Big Brother wishes 2 plus 2 to be 5 then it is so. What I see in our own reality is that with so much data and so much evidence, and so many laws, we are at the mercy of a capricious state should it choose to prosecute. The phenomenon where defendants choose plea deals rather than have the system function as designed is a symptom of the inability of justice to keep up under the demands of the bloated legal code. The legal code has overruled The People.

In each century the idea of power is reshaped according to its own time. And yet there remain the same characters arguing the same concepts of divine right, natural law, rule of law, divine law vs civil law, ebbing and flowing between confinements of order and the freedom of chaos.

'What pure power means you will understand presently', the title of this talk, is what the Big Brother's representative says to Orwell's hero before the hero broken by the power of the state. God tells Job a poem about power and humans' limitations. Hobbes granted his Leviathan, his monarch, all the power he could imagine, human capacities are after all limited. Moby-Dick as Leviathan wrecks the Pequod and its crew, Captain Ahab, as powerful as he is, is still subdued by a greater power. But with the development of the modern world Big Brother is not quite human. Our state has grown beyond human proportions. Orwell thru Big Brother tells us that "the object of power is power. Now do you begin to understand me?"

Next Time I will choose to speak of a power of angles, I promise.