

Ours Is the Power

By DR. ALEXANDER F. SKUTCH of Costa Rica

MAN is a social animal and can hardly survive without the support of his fellows. Yet, since the beginning, those fellows have caused him more suffering than anything else in his whole experience. It would probably not be too great an exaggeration to say—as did Aristotle's contemporary, Dicaearchus—that men themselves have been responsible for more human misery than flood, earthquake, volcanic eruption, or depredation of savage animals.

A chief cause has been man's inordinate craving for power. Cities and empires have been destroyed, battlefields strewn with dead, sorrowing captives torn from ancestral homes, prisoners entombed in the dungeons of secular and ecclesiastical despots, countless burned, beheaded, or shot—all to satisfy somebody's lust for power.

Since men desire wealth chiefly to command and dominate others, we must add to the misery which power-craving has caused, the sufferings of slaves, of sweated labor, and the distress of industrious men who fail in the competition. To complete the reckoning, we must include the countless pricks and scratches which people daily inflict upon their associates in an effort to proclaim their fancied superiority.

Thirst for power appears to be inherited from pre-human ancestors: The urge to dominate seems to be widespread in flock and herd. Among domestic fowl there is caste where each pecks those below it in the scale. The one at the top pecks all below him, and the one at the bottom is pecked by all above.

This impulse to dominate may not be harmful so long as it is confined to procedures which natural selection would eliminate when they proved deleterious to the species. It does cause immense havoc when, in man, an active imagination devises countless new ways to satisfy it.

It would be wrong to suppose that the exercise of power is always mischievous, and the urge to display it invariably wicked. Power, in the widest sense, is the capacity to cause changes

in surrounding objects; and it is only by such means that anything reveals its existence. If a speck of dust did not deflect a ray of light to our eyes, we should never suspect its presence. Magnets bring themselves to our attention because they move bodies of many kinds.

Living things differ from lifeless in the more varied powers they display: they grow, they move, they respond to stimuli, they alter their environment in manifold ways. Power, then, is a measure of existence, and the man who exercises no power is as good as dead.

Two Kinds of Power

Power is of two kinds: coercive and persuasive. Coercive power is exemplified by the hurricane, the landslide, the tidal wave, which level obstacles regardless of their nature. Among men, coercive power is exercised by the military conqueror, the slave-driver, the political or domestic despot—everyone who imposes his will on others without regard for character and feelings.

Persuasive power, in the physical realm, is resonance, witnessed when a vibrating object, such as a piano string, sets up in a neighboring object vibrations whose natural periodicity is the same. We persuade our fellows by discovering their natural tendencies and setting them in motion as resonance is set up in material bodies.

We must convince their sentiments or their reason; and if perchance we can persuade both together, our appeal will be irresistible. As Bertrand Russell has pointed out in his book on *Power*, Buddha, Christ, Pythagoras, and Galileo owed their vast influence over mankind to persuasive power alone.

Most of us want power in one form or another; if we did not, we should hardly be alive. Although our natural impulse to influence or dominate our fellows has been a principal cause of woes, it has also brought many benefits to mankind. When power is desired for its own sake, for the mere satisfaction of imposing one's will on others of

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commanding them, even oppressing or destroying them, it is detrimental and dangerous.

Anyone who desires to increase his power (perhaps because he feels himself insignificant), would do well to take stock of the power he already has, and the responsibilities it imposes. There are certain by no means inconsiderable forms of power which might be called a human birthright.

They naturally accompany the status as human beings, and are unassociated with scheming and trying to overcome one's fellows. For example, the power to brighten or sadden another's day; to help neighbors be contented with circumstances which they cannot easily change; to foment discontent by magnifying every defect, inconvenience, and shortcoming to be found in any human situation—perhaps even in heaven.

Conduct and moral standards, however, can be influenced by the judicious use of praise and blame, for most form their notions of right and wrong in accordance with the general sentiment prevailing in their society. At a certain stage of life, there is the power to create new beings, and influence their whole future—making them cheerful and effective, or warped and miserable; honorable citizens, or enemies of society.

Citizens and voters might consider this power to determine community and national policies—a power exercised in too small a measure because of the prevailing tendency toward the centralization of government. In an electorate of millions, single votes count for little; and we may feel our power too slight to exercise.

A higher degree of local autonomy, which gives to each greater responsibility and more influence in governmental decisions, is to be desired. Even if our political power is negligible, our conduct as private citizens can raise or lower the moral tone of the community in which we dwell.

Our most important power is wielded over the natural world—the earth and its living creatures. If we dwell in the country, we have the power to preserve or destroy the animals and plants which surround us. If we farm, we

have the power to impoverish the soil or to husband carefully its fertility.

Even city-dwellers by their choice of foods, garments, and the like, indirectly exercise considerable power over the earth and its inhabitants. In many instances, innocent-appearing products neatly packaged contain ingredients procured by means which we would indignantly condemn if we knew about them. Thus, there is urgent need for publicity and enlightenment in this matter, to help us use our power as purchasers and consumers wisely.

Most important of all is the power of our inmost self to moderate and subdue the passions imposed upon us by our forebears in their long struggle to survive in a crowded, competitive world. Unless we can govern passions like anger, hatred, avarice, jealousy, lust, and the like, any power we have is likely to prove injurious rather than beneficent.

Alexander the Great

Ancient philosophers pointed to Alexander the Great as the unfortunate example of a man whose unparalleled military power was unmatched by self-control. In a rage he slew his friend Cleitus, then grieved immoderately over what he had done. Excessive drinking apparently was largely responsible for his death at the early age of 32. His history is proof that strength of body, noble blood, and success in war can never make a man happy unless he can win the victory over himself.

Those who crave power over others have, it would seem, never tasted the sweetness of fellowship, nor known the joy of sharing interests and aspirations with equals—their nature is too coarse. What man of feeling would not in a common endeavor prefer participating with friends and equals to commanding sullen inferiors?

We, who rightly estimate the power we wield, may feel the responsibility involved, and doubt our ability to use it wisely; yet, it is already ours because we are human beings. We must decide whether our use will be coercive or persuasive. The results will show the wisdom of our choice.

