



The Confluence of Biological, Rational and Unconscious Substrates: The Witness Metaphor in the Etiology of Power

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Abstract: To comprehend the intricate power relations that shape intrapsychic and interindividual levels, a multifaceted approach is imperative, as these relations have been extensively contemplated and researched, yet they cannot be confined within a single theoretical framework. Consequently, no single field of enquiry possesses the capacity to comprehensively articulate a phenomenon and its attendant implications. With all these insights from these broad domains in mind, this article proposes the addition of a fourth scenario to Ivan Chase's categorisation, which can also become an intrapsychic metaphor as an attitude towards self and a crucial function in shaping identity. The primary objective of this article is not to delineate a predetermined form of power, but rather to elucidate its developmental processes, its etiology, and the manifold external and internal factors that contribute to its manifestation. In this regard, it can be conceptualised as a narrative rather than a mere noun or verb.

Keywords: power; relations of domination; ethology; psychoanalysis; analytic philosophy; vulnerability

1. Introduction

Relations of power are inherent to the daily traffic of human interaction, a constant manifesting across various levels of social organisation—both macroscopically, in the political and institutional environment, and microscopically, in interpersonal and family relations. We cannot exclude “power” from interactions and communication

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between people. Nor can we exclude it at the level of internal representation in the organisation of the psychic structure. If it cannot be excluded, then its inclusion in a dialectical rather than a monological approach is desirable. The preoccupation with “power” has aroused the interest of all fields, and the exploration of power configurations is of crucial relevance to comprehending the ways in which individuals influence each other, the maintenance of relationships of influence and hierarchy, and, most significantly, the mitigation of the destructive effects that can arise from the abuse of power.

The present article aims to delineate the etiology of power relations by bringing together contributions from psychoanalysis, ethology, analytic political philosophy, and linguistics in a productive and integrative dialogue. In particular, it traces how hierarchies of power are established in the ethological view as a representation of a universally determined biological background; how psychoanalysis has identified primordial helplessness, vulnerability, and early relations of authority with their specific complications; how analytic political philosophy distinguishes between “power to” and “power over,” between freedom and domination; and the role of language in organising them, both psychically and extrinsically. In conclusion, this article proposes an additional perspective with the aim of balancing the scales by introducing a new position in the dynamics of power relations, through the instrument of language, as in the vision of Eugenio Coseriu, which has the function of integrating perspectives and contributing to the understanding of the concept of power and the way we understand this dynamic, so as to acquire “sense” and “meaning” and reveal new meanings.

2. Representation of Concepts

To comprehend the concept of power, it is imperative to differentiate between the notions of power as strategy and power as property. The term ‘power as property’ refers to the unconscious pattern exhibited by an individual in the establishment of their power strategy, thereby establishing a relationship of cause and effect. Albeit, to comprehend the intricacies of power relationships, it is imperative to adopt a dualistic approach, examining them from an “inside-out” perspective, which unveils the unconscious dynamics, and an “outside-in” perspective, which illuminates the relationality of power in the interaction. This dualistic approach facilitates the comprehension of power as a configuration rather than a mere set of components. The main objective is not to delineate an immutable form of power, but rather to

determine its internal and external modes of operation, including their effects. This approach enables a more nuanced understanding of power as a verb rather than a noun.

The phenomenon of power and influence is characterised by a twofold relationship in a dyadic configuration, which can be perceived from a dual perspective: the behaviour of the individual who exercises power, and the reaction of the agent who receives that behaviour. Both agents occupy the roles of receiver and transmitter, though one possesses more deontic rights than the other. The subjects of power expressions may also have an important part in the mechanism by which the power operates upon them; there is a reciprocity of passive and active stances in the configuration of power. Power as a constellation is bidirectional and can be treated as a constraint on both sides, so that there is no rhetoric of blame. Power relations, especially during interpersonal engagement with someone of deontic authority, shape both the intrapsychic organization and, thus, the interaction.

The term “power” is approached from a wide range of perspectives and is used to refer to a broad spectrum of meanings. Etymologically, it comes from the Latin *posse*, meaning “to be able.” It defines the possession of control, authority, influence, the ability to act in one way or another, the ability to direct or influence the course of events or behaviours, the physical force or the force exerted by someone or something. However, it also used to denote the energy that is produced mechanically, electrically, or by some other means. In both spoken and written language, the word *power* is synonymous with ability, capacity, competence, influence, dominance, energy, potency, strength, and is considered the opposite of inability, impotence, incapacity, and weakness. Within the realms of biology, philosophy, sociology, psychology, a plethora of distinctions can be discerned among the manifold types of power and qualitatively disparate processes of influence. These disparate forms of power can be comparatively analysed and differentiated, with consideration given to the effects and changes they engender. Each distinct form of power is characterised by its own unique source, specific laws and rules, manner of exertion, and a range of consequences, effects, or changes.

French and Raven (1959, p. 251) define “power in terms of influence and influence in terms of psychological change as a change in behaviour, opinions, attitudes, goals, needs, values and all other aspects of a person’s psychological field”. The authors identified five underlying premises of power: “reward power”, which is derived from the view that individuals can intermediate compensations; “coercive power”, which is derived from the individual’s ability to arbitrate sanctions; and “legitimate power”,

based on the understanding that a person has a right to impose behaviour; “referent power”, resulting from identification with another; and “expert power”, based on specialized competence or proficiency.

Peräkylä and Stevanovic (2012, p. 3) propose the notion of “deontic authority” to refer to empirical investigation of interaction and define it as someone’s “right to determine others’ future actions”. Authority “involves the exercise of power that the subject of authority understands as legitimate”, as Wild (1974) says that is based on someone’s free will to obey.

Hook (2010, p. 65) defines power as “it may be, above all, a relation of force, manoeuvring in multiple and often less than predictable ways. Second, rather than being held, possessed, exchanged, given – existing as a potentially static entity – power may find form only as something that is exercised. Power possibly exists only in action, enacted in frequently indeterminate yet over-determined relations of force.”

3. Theories of Power Dynamics

Ethologically grounded researchers observing social groups have focused on vertical power interactions. These analyses have examined preschool children collectives (McGrew, 1972; Missakian, 1976; Strayer & Strayer, 1976) and adolescent communities (Savin-Williams, 1977; 1979; 1980). Some ethologists’ findings suggest that human hierarchy can range from linear, at one extreme, to the other extreme, where each person in the group dominates an equal number of other people. In these studies, the data indicate that only a few interactions deviate from those expected in a linear hierarchy. According to Ivan Chase (1974), ethologically, when a group of unfamiliar beings comes together, they will engage in competition for dominance. The competitions can result in violent fights, less violent actions, and passive recognition of superiors and subordinates. In smaller groups, relationships usually settle within a day or two, while in larger groups, it may take several weeks. Positions in a hierarchy tend to remain unchanged for relatively long periods of time after dominance-submission relationships have been established. Rebellions by subordinates against superiors are relatively rare, and most of those that do occur are unsuccessful. Chase (1980) reviews the theory, methods and findings of animal behaviourists and social scientists studying dominance hierarchies. To alleviate the problems of hierarchy research, he developed a general explanation of how hierarchical structures arise in both humans and animals and serves as a model of

how cumulative patterns of interaction between individuals produce group social structures. Despite the significant differences between humans and animals in social behaviour, the dominance hierarchies of both are remarkably similar (Brown, 1975; Wilson, 1975) for general background information on dominance hierarchies). By developing a new approach to the study of hierarchical structures, this study explains this similarity. The hierarchical structure of the group is described as an outcome of interactions between group members rather than as a result of differences between individuals. The development of hierarchies is viewed as a continuing process in which the results of previous interactions influence the direction of subsequent interactions. It also explains how patterns of interaction work together to shape the types of hierarchies associated with dominance. When two individuals display agonistic (a category that includes both aggressive and submissive behaviour) behaviour toward each other, asymmetries typically determine the direction of the dominance relationship. As an example, the dominant person is the one who initiates most of the aggressions between two partners, while the subordinate person is the one who receives the acts or initiates most of the submissive behaviour between the partners. Thus, the hierarchical matrix comprises all the dominance relationships among members of a group.

In his study, Chase (1980) presents three scenarios of hierarchy formation, which result from his hypotheses, as follows:

- a) First scenario: one individual in the group wins successive dominance contests with the other members of the group, and each loser withdraws from aggressive activity. Subsequently, a subordinate initiates contests against all other subordinates and wins, determining the losing contestants to once again withdraw from aggressive behaviour temporarily. As a result, a second subordinate becomes dominant overall, but the first and second become dominant. This behaviour continues until a complete linear hierarchy is established, ensuring transitive dominance relationships.
- b) Second scenario: A dominance encounter occurs between two individuals who have each won contests with other group members in the past. If there are any remaining members of the group who have not yet been dominated by the winner, the winner will dominate them, while the loser will temporarily withdraw from aggressive behavior and the linear hierarchy will be established.
- c) Third scenario: In the event that the initial configuration does not follow the first or second scenario, then the previously established dominance relationships are reversed to re-establish a linear hierarchy and facilitate transitive structures.

Hallinan (1974) and Holland and Leinhardt (1971) also postulate that humans have a strong tendency to transform initially intransitive configurations of preference relations to transitive ones which are more stable than the other. Broom (2002) describes a unified model of dominance hierarchy formation and maintenance in groups. He explains that such groups must split available resources amongst the members they contain, and this is realised through a dominance hierarchy. These hierarchies are steady for long periods and new members that come into the group are assigned predetermined positions. This can be observable in many human competitions such as the Wimbledon Lawn Tennis Championships where at the start of the contest more groups of two individuals engage in pairwise contests according to a pre-ordained structure in which there is a winner. Players receive a reward according to which round they were eliminated from the competition and depending on which strategies were played in each round; they may also receive costs. The contests go on until the players are ordered into a dominance structure with a unique dominant individual.

In psychoanalysis, the concept of “primary helplessness” (Freud, 1950 [1985]) can be used to examine how power relationships are established at the unconscious level. It is Freud’s belief that the human being’s vulnerability and helplessness is an innate trait. As newborns, we are entirely vulnerable, and in order to survive, we need the assistance of a capable adult. Therefore, adults automatically exert power over infants.

It is noteworthy that Alizade (1995) explains how our primary helplessness is an early lesson on the importance of helping and being helped. In one sense, this is the stage at which the ethical values underlying the idea of helping in later social life are developed. The helplessness of the infant in the hands of the caregiver, however, points to primal ways of amplifying dominance by encouraging helplessness over a helpless person. Castration anxieties and the sense of painful limitations may be eased if a child can be delegated that primitive illusion of being a godlike child, “His (or Her) Majesty the Baby” (Freud, 1930, p. 91). Thus, the painful knowledge of the impermanence of the human condition can be temporarily suppressed, and the fantasy of being powerful and eternal, can be partially fulfilled. By identifying with the infant, this wishful fantasy allows one to temporarily deny mortality, whose vulnerability is repressed, allowing a grandiose and ideal image of oneself as an indestructible and immortal emergent baby-king.

Power negatively manifests itself in excessive selfishness, unbounded self-love, and sadistic pleasure (Freud, 1919, p. 242). Symptomatic of pathological narcissism, a

destructive egoism ignores the fellow-being. Whether disguised or not, cruelty in communication is another harmful expression of power. The moral motives of human love are destroyed when cruelty is perpetrated. Embracing destructive narcissistic power may lead to a desire for omnipotence and eventual attainment of unrestricted power, which is a hidden monster. Freud (1915) notes all human beings are potential assassins and cautions that, “there is no instinctive rejection to blood-shedding. We descend from many offspring of assassins. The will to kill is in our blood” (Freud, 1930, p. 242). Murderous instincts are inherent in human beings. In the case of severe narcissistic perturbations, destructive impulses are predominant, and unlimited phallic power is sought. The killing of another epitomizes a desire for mastery over life and death, for absolute power. Killing someone, whether directly or indirectly, produces a powerful sense of having absolute power in primitive minds. In such individuals, tumescent phallic satisfaction can override the sense of reality. The manifestation of destructive power is accompanied by boundless self-interest and sadistic pleasure on the part of the assassin. It is during these pathological situations that power becomes a stronghold for the veiling of biological dependency and mortality. The purpose of it is to alleviate the angst of death and to compensate for the primary sense of helplessness associated with it.

Human limitations may be denied through the fantasy of becoming a god. However, this fantasy can never be realized. My next consideration is Freud’s thoughts on the narcissistic wound (Freud, 1914) and the denial of mortality (Freud, 1919, p. 242): “At the touchiest point in the narcissistic system, the immortality of the ego, which is so hard-pressed by reality. ‘All men are mortal’ is frequently used as an example of a general proposition in logic texts. However, no human being is capable of grasping this concept, and our unconscious continues to have little use for the idea of its own mortality” (Freud, 1914, p. 91). A sense of dissatisfaction, depression, and psychosomatic disorders may result from the inability to attain such grandiose goals.

As a result of the omnipotent phallic phantasy, grandiosity is almost unavoidable among people who have attained high power. The illusion of unlimited power and a triumphant environment is easy for them to fall into. However, even the powerful may suffer from “godlike discontent” (Freud, 1930): “Man has, as it were, become a kind of prosthetic God when he puts on all his auxiliary organs, he is truly magnificent, but those organs have not grown on to him, and they still give him much trouble at times. ... In the interest of our investigations, we will not forget that present-day man does not feel happy in his Godlike character.” (Freud, 1930, p. 91).

The work of S. L. Hockenberry (1995) acknowledges a growing consensus that chronic exposure to shame is the prerogative to narcissistic pathologies (Broucek, 1982); (Lewis, 1987); (Morrison, 1989); (O'Leary & Wright, 1986). According to Hockenberry (1995), narcissistic structures emerge from the reciprocal interaction between shame and grandiosity. In response to chronic feelings of shame, grandiosity is a natural reaction to inflating one's sense of omnipotence (power) and importance. Psychoanalysts have referred to this response to underlying self-perceptions of inferiority as pathological "pride" (Sullivan, 1953), "superiority complex" (Adler, 1935), "search for glory" (Horney, 1945), and "false self" (Winnicott, 1965).

During the process of "narcissistic transformation" (Alizade, 1995), the structure of the psychic apparatus changes. Decentralization of the subject is the beginning of re-ordering the narcissistic system. This mental change establishes what Alizade (1995) calls "tertiary narcissism", which permits acceptance of the human condition's perishability. An external projection of narcissism takes place. The libido does not return to the ego, but rather puts itself to work in the community, assisting people not only close to the individual but also those unrelated and never to be known. The act of caring for a "distant object," as Alizade (1995) describes it, is a mental process that assists the individual and society. An individual who has successfully transformed their narcissism is more protected from the entrapment of self-idealization.

Erich Fromm differentiates between two poles of a possible attitude of a person concerning power: if an individual can only obey or be submissive, then he is a slave; if an individual can only disobey and not follow, then he acts out of anger, disappointment, resentment and is a rebel (Fromm, 1960, p. 5).

Fromm defines obedience or submission (heteronomous obedience) as the relinquishment of personal autonomy and the acceptance of an external will or judgement in lieu of one's own. Conversely, loyalty to oneself, reason, or conviction (autonomous obedience) is an affirmation of one's own convictions and not a submission to an external authority. An authentic conviction becomes an integral part of one's personality. An individual acting authentically is one who follows their own convictions rather than the opinions of others. It is necessary to elucidate the concepts of conscience and authority in light of this distinction.

The term "consciousness" is employed to denote two discrete phenomena: firstly, the "authoritarian conscience," defined as the internalised voice of an authority

figure that is eager to obey and fearful of displeasure; and secondly, the “coercive conscience,” which manifests when individuals obey their conscience, resulting in submissive behaviour. This is the conscience to which Freud refers as the “Super-Ego.” The concept of the Super-Ego can be understood as the internalised demands and prohibitions of the authoritarian parental figure, accepted by the child out of fear. The Super-Ego can thus be defined as obedience to power external to the individual, despite its internalisation. While individuals may consciously believe they are abiding by their moral compass, in effect, they have “swallowed” the principles of power.

The other concept of “consciousness” is that of “humanistic consciousness,” which is inherent to every human being regardless of their outer punishments and compensations. According to humanistic consciousness, humans possess an innate understanding of what is humane and inhumane, what is life enhancing and what is life destroying. The purpose of this consciousness is to guide and direct human behaviour in a manner consistent with human dignity and values (Fromm, 2010, p. 6).

Furthermore, Fromm distinguishes between rational and irrational authority. A student-teacher relationship illustrates rational authority, whereas a master-slave relationship illustrates irrational authority. Despite their distinct dynamics, both relationships are based on the acceptance of the authority of the individual in charge. The relationship based on rational authority assumes that both parties have interests that are aligned. In the case of the former, the teacher’s satisfaction is conditioned on the student’s progress, while the student’s failure is the teacher’s fault. Conversely, the master’s objective is to exploit the slave to the greatest extent possible, while the slave endeavours to defend their personal claims to a minimum level of happiness. Their interests are in direct opposition, and what is beneficial to one is detrimental to the other.

In contrast, within the paradigm of rational authority, the individual in a position of authority acts in the name of reason, which the individual lacking authority can accept without submission. In this scenario, the superior’s authority represents the condition for the advancement of the subordinate. In contrast, within the paradigm of irrational authority, the individual in a position of command must resort to the use of force or persuasion, given that no individual would willingly submit to exploitation if such a course of action is feasible.

Butler (1997) explains, primary attachment, dependency, and subordination all lead to the same outcome. In her view, this accounts in part for adult humiliation when

confronted with childhood objects of affection, such as parents, guardians, siblings, or other close family members (Butler, 1997). The trauma of these formative familial relations, of the original subordination, is the essential feature that sets up the possibility of subjectivity and may be repeated by all performances of subjectivity: "It is not simply that one requires the recognition of the other and that a form of recognition is conferred through subordination, but rather that one is dependent on power for one's very formation, and that formation is impossible without dependency, and that the posture of the adult subject consists precisely in the denial and re-enactment of this dependency" (Oliver, 2001, p. 65). The standard and consistent ground between the theory of attachment and the theory of sexuality as sites of engagement and elaboration in early experience are asymmetry and vulnerability.

The Fundamental Anthropological Situation, as Laplanche (1989) calls it, describes the power of messages transmitted by an adult with an unconscious and elaborated psychic apparatus that are encountered by a dependent and vulnerable infant. Fear is at the heart of the contradictory helplessness that is inherent in the human condition, which is addressed by the attachment system. The safety figures a child needs are also the originators of unconscious messages that inevitably exceed the child's translation capacities as the receiver.

According to analytical political philosophy (plus implicit assessment), power can be defined as the ability of an individual or group to achieve its own goals, even against opposition or resistance (Weber, 1992, p. 53; Russell, 1938, pp. 25-34; Aron, 1986, p. 257). Analytic traditions typically ignore the fact that power of "man over man" is a function of acceptable relations of power, dominance, and submission. Possessing power does not guarantee the desired outcome, as some people may succeed regardless of their power, or through luck rather than ability (Barry, 1991).

Weber (1964, p. 325) differentiates between "authority" (*Herrschaft*) and "power" (*Macht*) by the attribute of legitimacy that the first concept has. Still, he mentions that they both share a common core in the fact that they both produce consequences (Lukes, 1978, pp. 634-635; Weber, 1964, p. 152).

By introducing indirect methods of exercising power, Lukes (1986, 2005) discusses the shaping of opinions, attitudes, desires, and interests, either through the pursuit of "natural" practices, institutions, and beliefs, or through influence, persuasion, coercion, or manipulation.

Alternatively, Foucault argues that power is both repressive and fruitful, that confession, for example, produces sexuality narratives even as it attempts to suppress them. As Foucault illustrates in his concept of subjection (*assujettissement*), individuals are bound by social relations of power and subject to a power exerted on them. However, through these constraints or operations of power, they are simultaneously enabled to assume the position of a subject (Foucault, 1991, pp. 97-98). The author suggests that, to understand the constellation of power relations, it is crucial to stop describing power in a negative manner: it “excludes,” it “represses,” it “censors,” it “abstracts,” it “masks,” it “conceals.” Power “produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truths.” (Foucault, 1991, p. 194).

According to Allen (1999), power is characterised by its ability to incite, provoke and induce, as opposed to prohibiting, censoring and restricting. Consequently, power facilitates the constitution of subjects while concomitantly constraining their options, choices and preferences. According to Foucault’s genealogy of disciplinary power, individuals undergo normalising disciplinary practices that transform them into a certain type of subject—the docile body (Foucault, 1991, p. 171). The constraint of disciplinary power enables, and enables only insofar as it constrains (Allen, 1999, p. 36). As Foucault notes, power relations occupy a continuum between those that facilitate freedom and those that establish domination (Foucault, 2000, p. 299).

Morriss (2002) analyses the difference between a power to determine something and a power over it, due to the interrelationship between dominance and submission.

According to Hamilton (2013), human needs and interests determine the degree to which power relations engender states of dominance across a spectrum of varying forms and intensities. The concepts of freedom and domination are intertwined components of this theoretical framework, exhibiting an inverse relationship to one another. As an example of the extreme end of this continuum, we could consider the situation of slaves and women in ancient Greece, over whom dominance was so widespread that they hardly could be described as “subjects.” Dominance is defined here in terms of the totality of, or close to the totality of determination (Flathman, 2003, p. 13). Those under such dominion are seldom capable or inclined to resist, and they are often unaware of the possibility of doing so. As a result, they become almost inextricably linked to the actions and agencies of others, as well as to the laws and institutions of their societies. At a certain point along the continuum, Hamilton argues that this is the situation of women in the West under conditions of patriarchy. Even though women have full formal freedom, existing social mores often subject them to continued domination. While women may be dominated directly by specific

men, in general, they experience dominance through practices that mould their actions and subjectivity according to their circumstances.

Hamilton (2013) describes domination as “the result of a situation in which power relations are skewed in such a way that some individual or group cannot identify, express or satisfy their needs or interests.”

He combines the perspectives of Foucault and Lukes and identifies power as:

- a) pertaining to general concepts like capability;
- b) a relationship between agents rather than a resource or a property of persons;
- c) the socially-determined ability of agents to achieve significant results, whether they further their own interests or affect the interests of others (Lukes, 2005: pp. 63, 65, 109).

He concludes that intersubjective determination of needs and interests is the only manner in which to achieve objectivity concerning needs and interests under these terms (to identify the level of dominance in power relations).

To reinforce the importance of language and politics of needs, and to explore how it may be used to overcome dominant power relations, the author proposes that clear distinctions be drawn out of three types of needs:

- a) *vital needs*, or required conditions for humans to function on a daily basis, such as food, shelter, safety, rest, social interaction, and so on.
- b) *agency needs*, or required conditions for political agency, such as the prerequisites for agents to have the ‘causal power’ to form and execute intended actions, as well as take part in various political institutions (particularly those outlined below), such as intersubjectivity, active and creative expression, and autonomy.
- c) *specific social needs*, or the largely unequivocal quotidian needs. These can be tangible instances of vital and agency needs, subsets thereof, wants becoming needs, or wants disguised as needs. Due to their rootedness in social contexts, they are social, and some may fall under social policies. It is possible, however, for some to originate from and be based on the desires, aspirations, and concerns of an individual or group.

According to Hamilton (2013), the capacity for democratic participation does not necessitate the presence of individuals who are fully autonomous, “independent” of

others' influence—a practically inconceivable scenario. In a sense, it is the intersubjective ability to discern, articulate, and assess needs, interests, and their forming practices and institutions that is the “power to determine needs.” A person's predilection to domination depends on the nature and magnitude of the power he or she wields to determine his or her own needs.

Hamilton further elaborates on the various forms that domination can assume:

- a) Individuals may be persistently beguiled in their pursuit to identify their needs due to existing power relations, either through direct coercion (leading them to deny their needs), deliberate manipulation (educating them to believe that others' needs are their own) or because of fixed, traditional norms and practices. Patriarchy and the continued subordination of women are excellent examples of this.
- b) An individual lives within an institutional framework that undermines their ability to articulate their needs, as demonstrated by the apartheid regime in South Africa, where political rights were reserved for whites exclusively, as well as the institutional mechanisms that enforced them.
- c) The person lives in a political system that prevents them from identifying and expressing their needs and interests, even when they have access to formal means and freedoms. These two freedoms may also lend legitimacy to this kind of regime. Economic customs and institutions, however, do not facilitate the appraisals of needs and interests. An economy based on revealed preferences for consumer goods in a polity founded on human rights falls short in this regard.

The dynamics of power relations, therefore, have a biological basis within the human being, upon which unconscious principles of power relations are built, established from the very first relationship with caregivers. As human beings evolve and develop in culture, these unconscious predispositions and patterns are reinforced, diminished, refined and nuanced in interaction with the wider social and political environment, as analytical political philosophy reveals.

4. Proposal for New Configuration of Power

With all these insights from these broad domains in mind, we would like to propose the addition of a fourth scenario to Ivan Chase's categorisation. This scenario involves a member of a group who does not participate in the struggles for dominance, but who observes and comments on what other members are doing in these struggles for power, namely the function and narrative role of the observing

witness who, through the power of language or its absence, can influence the dynamics of power relations. Language, through its absence, presence and form, has the power to change or maintain the dynamics of the power relations established between group members. The observing witness chooses whether to use language about what he or she can directly perceive. Language by default, silence, can mean acceptance of the relationships that have been formed, or it can be complicit in an abuse of power. The use of language, language by presence, leads to the construction of a meaningful narrative that has the power to both recognise and challenge the relationships that have been formed, with an impact on the psychic configuration of the participants in power struggles as well as on the environment. The witness, through language, has the power to regulate power relations and the affects involved, as well as to influence the internal structure and perception of reality, thus having the expressive function and control over the distribution of meaningful knowledge. The external world as a metaphor for the internal world and vice versa, without a participatory observer, remains prey to persecution scenarios with dominant-dominated, oppressor-oppressed configuration and dynamics. It is as if the witness of existence, of reality, or as psychoanalysis says about the internal psychic structure, the observing ego, is missing.

Therefore, the witness becomes a source of validation that is liberated from the complementary “doer–done-to” dynamic. Whether understood externally (as an observer of the struggle) or internally (as an internal position in the psyche), the witness can create a new narrative that recognises the tension between destruction and acknowledgment and, in doing so, opens a path toward reparation.

Within a clinical context, the psychoanalyst in the consulting room adopts the stance of a witness to the patient’s life. Over time, as the patient internalises the analytic function, the analyst’s role is mentally “taken in” by the patient; in metaphorical terms, the patient becomes their own witness, learning to observe and reflect upon personal experience.

The adoption of the witness position in relation to one’s own life represents a means of stepping outside complementary power dynamics. By recounting one’s story from this “third position,” the individual gains the power to detach and observe events more objectively. This shift is facilitated by a mode of communication about reality that either tolerates or embraces difference, allowing the individual the freedom to think about, name, and comment on what is happening. This creative use of language has been shown to help reshape the narrative of reality.

The role of language in this process is particularly significant in influencing power dynamics between the dominator and the dominated. By articulating experiences, naming conflicts, and framing them in a communicative space that welcomes multiple perspectives, language transforms silent or implicit patterns of power into spoken narratives. This process disrupts polarised roles – dominator versus dominated – and fosters recognition, mutual understanding, and the potential for genuine change. The process of positioning oneself (or another) as a witness, and harnessing language to articulate the struggle, ultimately reconfigures the power relationship and supports the development of more equitable and reparative interactions.

5. Conclusions

In Eugenio Coseriu's conception, man is a creator of meanings, a signifying being, both at the level of the text and at the level of discourse, which through language can simultaneously include the designation, the signified and the sense of reality. The witness interprets through language what he observes and communicates about what he observes, symbolizing his own understanding of what he perceives, starting from a real experience that he organizes, thus facilitating the organisation of power relations in a different order. The function of the witness internalised in the psychic structure has the function, by means of language, of reshaping the identity narrative and to mediate the relation with external reality. In conclusion, the concept of the witness – understood as an internal object within the intrapsychic domain – functions as a metaphorical representation of an attitude towards oneself. It maintains a capacity for detachment, even while engaging in the recollection of experiences, thereby enabling the construction of a narrative through language that refines one's sense of identity, invests it with meaning, and allows for insightful learning from those experiences.

Cristinel Munteanu asserts (starting from Hegel's words, "All our knowledge must become recognition. Who knows me, will recognize me here") that "any recognition is a mental reconstruction" (Munteanu, 2022, p. 123). In light of this statement, we can also conclude that a mechanism of such nature is also capable of operating through the witness function, both on an intrapsychic and interpersonal level, in which the act of symbolizing a power dynamic observed can help to reconfigure and re-signify it.

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