

Politics & Society: How much do we need Power and how much do we need Theory?

The Philosophy Cafe Meet Up,
Brisbane, Australia

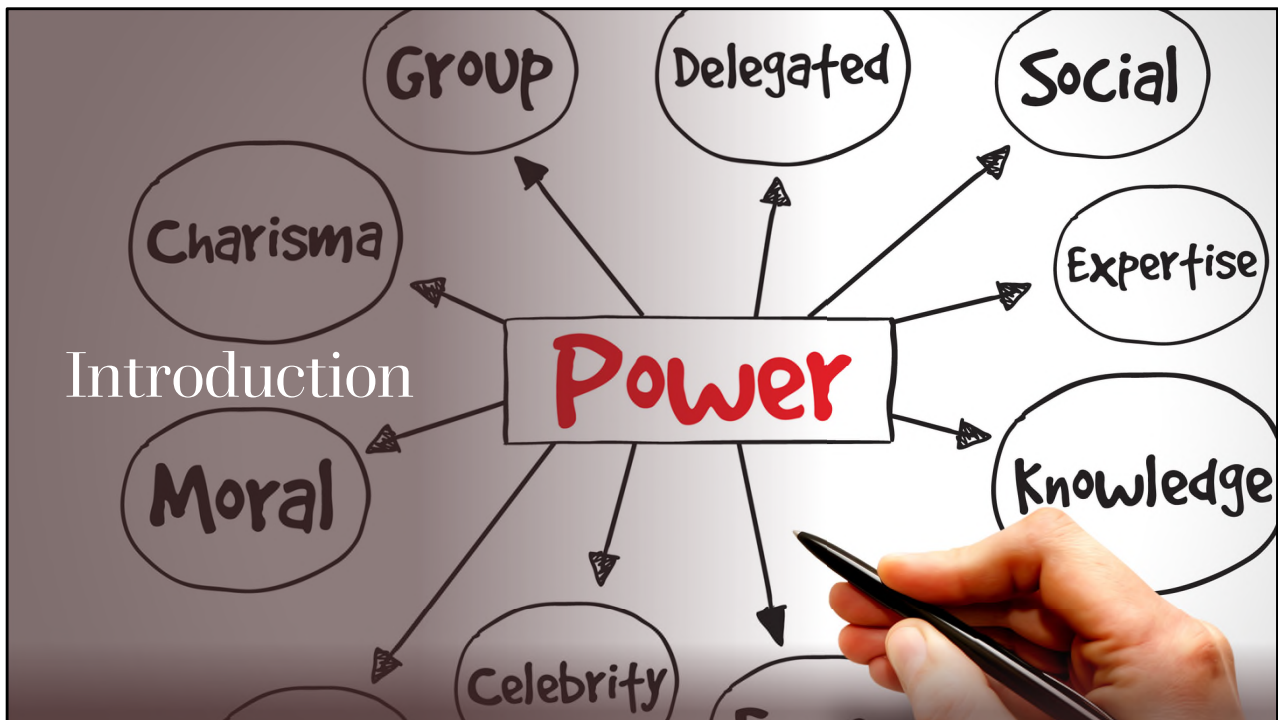
Sunday, 9 August 2020

Dr Neville Buch, MPHA (Qld)

This is a presentation called, Politics & Society: How much do we need Power and how much do we need Theory?

It is presented by Dr Neville Buch.

For The Philosophy Cafe Meet Up, Brisbane, Australia



There cannot be a wrong answer except for two responses. The question of how much Power and/or Theory is required, is contextual; depended on the exact question. However, if it was said that only power or only theory was required then a fallacy of some type has been performed in such an argument. The reason is simply one cannot conceptually divide the two applications. To perform theory is to have cognitive power; to have power is to possess some understanding that has been shaped in theory, albeit in considerable misunderstanding on a larger scoping.

The teaching essay will examine the broad literature to explore a model of the relationships in Power & Theory. The literature comes from two key disciplines, the Sociology of Knowledge, and the History of Knowledge. The former provides models on what occurs, and the latter describes the application of the model and the contextual practice over time. Both are informed in several sub-disciplines of Philosophy, and particularly, the sub-discipline of Epistemology (including its alleged rejection and substitution in other forms of thought). We start with main theories of power, and then look at power relations in theory by considering the 'theory of theory'. In conclusion, a diagram will be presented of the model of the relationships in Power & Theory.

The history of sociology provides an understanding of how the main theories of power came about.

Main Theories of Power: Positivism



Émile Durkheim (1858–1917)

A suitable starting point in thinking about power is in Positivism, which says that 'positive' knowledge (knowledge of anything which is not true by definition) is exclusively derived from experience of natural phenomena and their properties and relations. It is a rejection of 'negative knowledge' as being able to be, ultimately, truth-bearing, as in the methods of intuition, metaphysics, and theology. Auguste Comte (1798-1857) began this intellectual journey; ironically to modern ears, it was a 'Religion of Humanity' for Comte – a total and closed system.

Émile Durkheim (1858–1917) rejected Comte's dogmatic approach and reformulated a new sociological positivism. He combined the naturalism of the rationalist approach with the basic beliefs of the intuitionist approach (G. E. Moore, 1873-1958). Durkheim developed the notion of objective *sui generis* 'social facts' to delineate a unique empirical object for the science of sociology to study. In opposition to Comte's harder positivism, and led by Max Weber (1864-1920), German sociologists at the turn of the 20th century formally introduced methodological Antipositivism; proposing that research should concentrate on human cultural norms, values, symbols, and social processes viewed from a subjective perspective. Power relations could then be seen in the study of social action, using critical analysis and *verstehen* (the interpretive or participatory) techniques.

Main Theories of Power: Conflict Theory



C. Wright Mills (1916-1962)

C. Wright Mills (1916-1962) has been identified as the founder of modern conflict theory, but much of the theory originates in the thinking of Karl Marx (1818-1883) and his view that capitalism, like previous socioeconomic systems, would inevitably produce internal tensions leading to its own destruction. Non-Marxist theories of conflict were not bounded to the thinking on power as Marx's economic sub-structure of economic relations. The thinking of Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) and his often misunderstood 'Will-to-Power' had been embedded in the social power of the aristocracy. Émile Durkheim (1858-1917) saw society as a functioning organism and highlighted the chief form of social conflict as crime – the power to breakdown society's cohesion. Crime was also an important element in the reformation of society through the evolution of law and morality. C. Wright Mills theorized that the policies of the power elite would result in increased escalation of conflict, production of weapons of mass destruction, and possibly the annihilation of humanity. Critics of different conflict theories have argued that the concept of power is too politicised and that the cohesion and harmony in society is too downplayed in these theories. It is exceedingly difficult, however, to maintain these neo-conservative counter-arguments in these years of Donald Trump's American Presidency, Authoritarian Russia's and China's power plays, and the general alienation from global establishment politics.

Main Theories of Power: Structural Functionalism



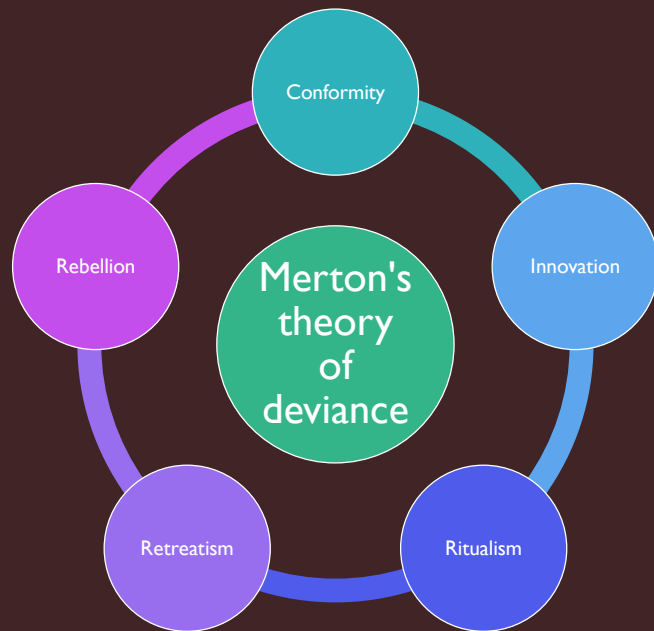
Robert K. Merton (1910-2003)

Alternative to the focus on power as conflict, is to address the functions of society, such as norms, customs, traditions, and institutions, to explain the complex system. These parts promote solidarity and stability. There are two, opposite, problems in this approach. The first is the conservative outlook arrived in the functionalism of Herbert Spencer (1820-1903), who saw society as a body or organism where all parts plays a submissive role to the hierarchical structure, driven by the providential process of evolution (an atheistic analogy of God and his Kingdom). Thus, a conservative outlook can flip then to a rationalist stance in a contradictory fashion (the rationalism opposed by conservative Michael Oakeshott, 1901-1990). Furthermore, the social change of evolution is rationally shutout of the conservative body-politick. This was the criticism of Karl Popper (1902-1994) in arguing for the Open Society and against closed systems of rationality.

Similar criticism has been made of the Structural Functionalism from Talcott Parsons (1902-1979). It is said that Parsons had underemphasized political and monetary struggle, the basics of social change, and the manipulative conduct unregulated by qualities and standards. Structural Functionalism was perceived as insufficient in its definitions concerning the connections amongst institutionalized and non-institutionalized conduct, and the procedures by which institutionalization happens.

Robert K. Merton (1910-2003) helped to resolve the problem by criticizing the concept of functional unity, saying that not all parts of a modern complex society work for the functional unity of society. Merton tended to emphasize a middle range theory rather than a grand theory, meaning that he was able to deal specifically with the limitations in Parsons' thinking.

Main Theories of Power: Merton's Structural Functionalism



Of importance is Merton's theory of deviance which utilises Durkheim's idea of anomie. In the theory there are five power-plays of an actor in the society:

Conformity occurs when an individual has the means and desire to achieve the cultural goals socialized into them.

Innovation occurs when an individual strives to attain the accepted cultural goals but chooses to do so in novel or unaccepted method.

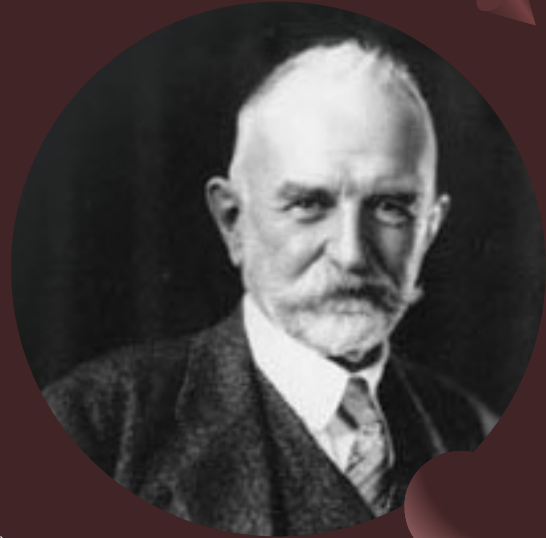
Ritualism occurs when an individual continues to do things as prescribed by society but forfeits the achievement of the goals.

Retreatism is the rejection of both the means and the goals of society.

Rebellion is a combination of the rejection of societal goals and means and a substitution of other goals and means.

Change can occur in society through either innovation or rebellion. The innovation or rebellion of each actor builds towards momentum, and the society will eventually adapt or face dissolution.

Main Theories of Power: Symbolic Interactionism



George Herbert Mead (1861-1931)

In thinking on power, George Herbert Mead (1861-1931) transformed the inner structure of the theory, moving it to a higher level of theoretical complexity. Mead argued that people's selves are social products, but that these selves are also purposive and creative. These qualities are the individual's ability to use symbols to create meanings for the world around the individual. The concept of Self is an individual's capacity to reflect on the way that the individual is perceived by others. The key insight in the theory is how external social structures, classes, and power affect the advancement of self or personality. Often the power relationship is abusive.

Main Theories of Power: Critical Theory



With foundations in the thinking of both Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) and Karl Marx, Critical Theory was established as a school of thought primarily by the Frankfurt School theoreticians: Herbert Marcuse (1898-1979), Theodor Adorno (1903-1969), Walter Benjamin (1892-1940), Erich Fromm (1900-1980), and Max Horkheimer (1895-1973). Much of that literature was considered surpassed in the postmodernist turn of the 1980s, but the tradition of critical theory has been significantly carried into the 21st century by Jürgen Habermas (1929-). To look at the long list of thinkers, it is quite clear that critical theory is flexible in application and has itself a large scope in the semantics. The most open approach to what is critical theory, is the capacity to describe, structurally, criticism of power relations. In the postmodern turn of Michel Foucault (1926-1984) and Jean Baudrillard (1929-2007) the fluidity in the language, symbolism, communication, and social construction, is emphasized in a vague or utopian idea of the postmodern society. Foucault is the postmodernist who has the theory of power, but his series of other postmodern theories – body & sexuality, subjectivity, freedom, and knowledge – overcomplicates matters. Foucault described three types of power in his empirical analyses: sovereign power, disciplinary power, and biopower. He rejects liberal, psychoanalytical, and feminist or orthodox Marxist definitions of power. This understanding of Foucault has, in the last decade, become very troubling for those in the Anglo-American Left traditions.

Main Theories of Power: The Political Problem of Anti-Realism

A red stamp with the words "PRIVACY POLICY" in a bold, sans-serif font. The stamp is tilted slightly to the right and has a distressed, ink-like texture. It is set against a white rectangular background that is itself on a dark red surface.

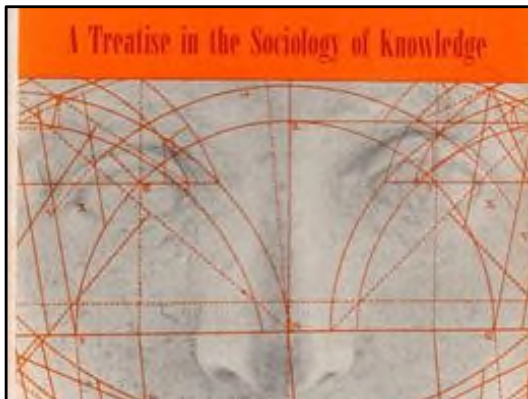
Once, in the 1980s-1990s, he was the lovechild of the Left, but it is becoming clearer that Foucault's concept of 'force relations' favours neo-liberal and harsh libertarian agendas. For Foucault, power is not something that a person or group holds, and power is a complex group of forces that comes from 'everything' and therefore exists everywhere. The relations of power always result from inequality, difference or unbalance. Inferred from Foucault's analysis, there is no cooperative and positive, commonly shared, power. Jean Baudrillard, similarly, has ended up confusing political matters for those on the Left. In *The Agony of Power* (2007), Baudrillard takes a cynical polemic against power per se. Power, in Baudrillard's view, is always hegemony. Baudrillard's stance has directly produced President Trump's world of 'fake news', from his conflated concepts of Simulacra ('copies that depict things that either had no original, or that no longer have an original') and Simulation ('imitation of the operation of a real-world process or system over time'). His hypo-anti-realism has led to that insane worldview where war is a television production and terrorism is legitimate.

Main Theories of Power: The Political Problem of Anti-Realism



Jürgen Habermas (1929-)

The different approaches of Foucault and Baudrillard, along with the metaphysician, Gilles Deleuze (1925-1995; a difficult thinker to place), work on the side of contemporary 'Critical Theory' known as 'postmodern critical social theory'. The other side of 'Critical Theory' is called, 'communication studies'. For over a century, the influences in communication studies were so wide – Ludwig Wittgenstein, Ferdinand de Saussure, George Herbert Mead, Noam Chomsky, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Roland Barthes, and Jacques Derrida – that there cannot be a general theory of power. However, in the 1970s and 1980s, Jürgen Habermas redefined critical social theory as a study of communication. He had a positivity in the concepts of communicative competence and communicative rationality which could counter the social reality of distorted communication. Here, was, at last, solid philosophical criticism where the postmodernism had failed.



Main Theories of Power: Social Constructionism

Peter L. Berger (1929-2017)

The idea of 'social reality' where individuals and their agency are subjected to limits of language and material & cognitive culture comes from Social Constructionism. Again, the thinking has foundations in Kant's conceptualism and Marx's idea of 'false consciousness'. However, in the modern era, the general doctrine comes from Peter L. Berger's (1929-2017) and Thomas Luckmann's (1927-2016) 1966 book, *The Social Construction of Reality*. The roles which are made available to members of society, to enter and play out, are the reciprocal interactions that become institutionalized. Persons and groups interact in a social system created over time, with concepts or mental representations of each other's actions. These concepts eventually become habituated into reciprocal roles played by the actors in relation to each other. In the process, meaning is embedded in society; specifically, knowledge and people's conceptions (and beliefs) of reality becomes embedded in the institutional fabric of society. In this sense, reality is therefore said to be socially constructed. There is no conflict here with Critical Realism that holds to a material reality.

Main Theories of Power: A Necessary Social Constructed Worldview

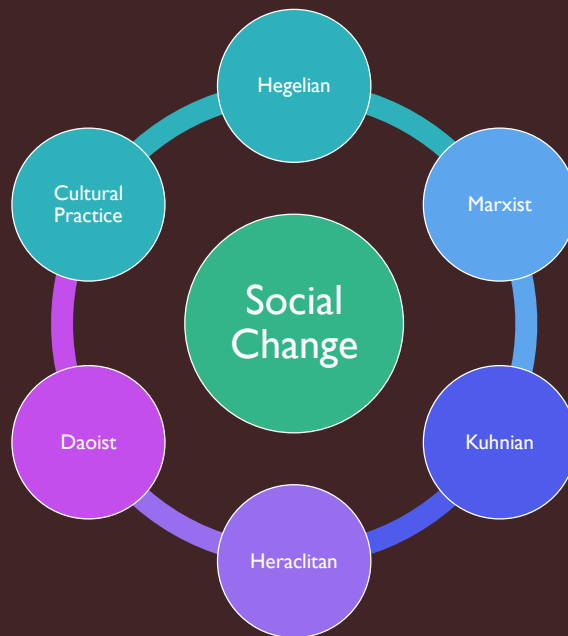
Bernard Williams (1929-2003)

Susan Haack (1945-)



Although controversial at the time, social constructionism has become mainstream, outside of dogmatists, on one hand, and radical postmodern relativists, on the other hand. Much of postmodernism has absorbed the social constructed worldview, but its anti-realist versions appear have lost it mooring in the analytical constructionism. Richard Rorty (1931-2007) and his neo-pragmatic criticism of power relations and representation started as the well-anchored Neurath's boat, but his argument in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979) leads to a too far (premature), wholesale, rejection of foundationalism, leaving all persons with the unrelatedness of a Socratic dialogue. A practice, yes, but an unpractical conversation that leads to silent decisions of the unadmitted power relations. It is for this very reason Susan Haack (1945-) introduced her stance of 'Foundherentism', combining the strengths of both foundationalism and coherentism. It allows power relations to retain strength in the combination of the vertical and the horizontal. Bernard Williams (1929-2003), in another completely different direction, Nietzsche's genealogy, also demonstrated that, contra to Rorty, truth cannot be irrelevant in a person's knowing.

Main Theories of Power: Social Change



The understanding of power relations has become confused in the last four decades with the 'postmodernist turn', with its 'narrative turn'. Certainly, a person constructs their power relationship in stories about social change, but truth remains in the capacity for empathy and accuracy. Theories of social change still hold truths, contra to the sophistry of a few radical postmodern thinkers. The theories are diverse, but, for that multiplies, there is a common agenda against the falsehoods that attempts to stifle social change or redirect to highly negative outcomes: Hegelian (dialectic model of change is based on the interaction of opposing forces); Marxist (dialectical and materialist concept of history); Kuhnian (wholesale paradigm shifts in scientific models); Heraclitan (theories of Chaos and Emergence); Daoist (Change as natural, harmonious and steady, albeit imperceptible); and Oppositional Cultural Practice Theory (an individual's voluntary acts, often in the face of violent resistance, to seek social changes that fulfill the demands for highly functioning social institutions and structures).

Power Relations in Theory of Theory



The previous section considered power in relation to systems of theory. But what of the nature or structure of theory itself? The view here comes from the history of knowledge where we can consider the power to know and the power of knowledge to bring action. The Theory of Theory speaks to the power of thinking. Francis Bacon (1561-1626) stated that *scientia potentia est*, meaning knowledge is power. The problem here is that 1) not all thinking comes to what is accepted as knowledge, and 2) even if we know that we know, the power of knowing is insufficient to other means of power; that is, we are faced with Aristotle's (384-322 BCE) challenge of *akrasia*, not doing what one knows is best to do, i.e. weakness of will. Aristotle's solution was acting in virtue, the development of good habits. Here is an example of how theory shapes the understanding of power, and thereby creates power. Indeed, much of Aristotle's work is the categorisation of theory. By naming and placing ideas into an order, particularly as described as a natural pattern (order), there is both power over an object and an internalised power, the subjective power. The categories in theory are achieved by the limitation imposed upon subjective power. In some features 'I' can be like another animal (or object) and in other features there is difference. This analysis from theory produces a categorisation that makes 'me' a human being, and something else, something else as so described and explained by the person. The thinking is a power, a limited power, to order the world.

Power Relations in Theory of Theory: What is Theory?



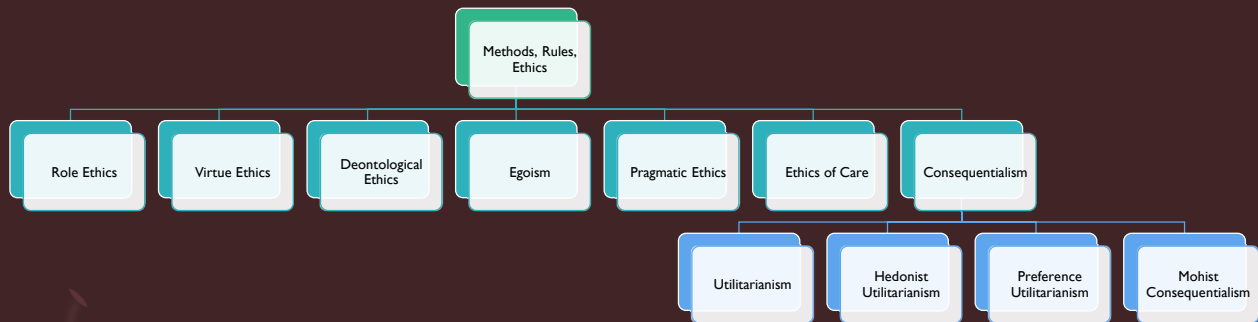
A theory is a contemplative and rational type of abstract or generalizing thinking about a phenomenon, or the results of such thinking. Theories are the links between the subject and the object, as the subject projects upon what is taken as a real world, a prior. Naturalism has its limits in the agent's thinking, just as much as every personal judgement is limited. The literature on theory is massive, and categorisation of theory can be 'cut' in many ways. However, a useful 'Theory of Theory' approach would be to consider three terms.

Power Relations in Theory of Theory: Descriptive Knowledge



Descriptive Knowledge is knowledge that can be expressed in a declarative sentence or an indicative proposition, and is also known as propositional knowledge, knowing-that, declarative knowledge, or constative knowledge. Since theory is generally about a transference of knowledge to action – via Aristotle’s view of cognitive habits – it is commonly thought that descriptive knowledge is opposite of theoretical knowledge. The popular misunderstanding of the relationship between theory and description, between explanation and description, can be impolitely called ‘behaviourist bullshit’. The misstep comes from the prominent epistemological argument by behaviourist philosopher, Gilbert Ryle, in his book, *The Concept of Mind* (1949). Ryle was first helpful in a basic distinction between knowing-how and knowing-that; the former refers to practical knowledge, whereas the latter goes to indicative or explanatory knowledge. As general principle it works upon the first reflection, but if that reflection is taken to a hard and fast separation between descriptive knowledge and theory, all is lost. Any description will not make sense unless the knower has in their mind a theory; that theoretical knowledge might be, in fact, unknown fully in the person’s present cognitive capacity, but there is sufficient inference to what the person thinks they ‘knowing-how’ as ‘knowing-that’. We can say descriptive knowledge is a sub-category of theory.

Power Relations in Theory of Theory: Prescriptive (normative) Knowledge



Much of the power in theory is about rules. This is called 'Linguistic Prescription', which is the method to establish rules, defining the preferred or 'correct' use of language. If you are the person who establishes the rules, you have power. In ethics the power to establish rules is called 'normative'.

Power Relations in Theory of Theory: Prescriptive (normative) Knowledge

- **Role Ethics:** Mostly likely the oldest way of thinking, which assigns a hierarchical order (and preference) in following the rules of the person above. We see such a normative set in the Confucian thinking on the hierarchical family roles.
- **Virtue Ethics:** Aristotelian cultivation of habit in virtue. Developed by Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas, but given modern meaning from G. E. M. Anscombe, Philippa Foot, Alasdair Macintyre, Mortimer J. Adler, Jacques Maritain, Yves Simon, and Rosalind Hursthouse.
- **Deontological Ethics:** Founded in Immanuel Kant's categorical imperative, an argument on morality as humanity's rational capacity, asserting certain inviolable moral laws. Quite simply, what ought to be is one's rational duty, irrespective of consequences, at least in the Kantian version. Modern versions seek to resolve the obvious problem. In the Contractualism of John Rawls, moral acts are those that we would all agree to if we were unbiased, behind a 'veil of ignorance'. In Robert Nozick's Natural Rights Theory, human beings have absolute and natural rights – a naturalisation of Kant's Reason.

Normative ethics (rules) are 'what ought to be', and the major sets of theoretical knowledge in normative ethics are:

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Power Relations in Theory of Theory: Prescriptive (normative) Knowledge

- **Consequentialism:** The opposing view to Kant's concept of reason – morality of an action is contingent on the action's outcome or result. That idea of contingency, however, is subject to rule-based theory. The measure of consequence is measured by axioms used in the theoretical sub-sets, consequentialisms:
- **Utilitarianism:** according to which an action is right if it leads to the most happiness for the greatest number of people. The term refers to all theories that promoted maximizing any form of utility, not just...
- **Hedonist Utilitarianism:** those that promoted maximizing happiness, pleasure principle as the axiom (the weight placed over the utility).
- **Preference Utilitarianism:** according to which the best action is the one that leads to the most overall preference satisfaction (personal preference as the axiom).
- **State Consequentialism, or Mohist Consequentialism:** according to which an action is right if it leads to state welfare, through order, material wealth, and population growth.

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Power Relations in Theory of Theory: Prescriptive (normative) Knowledge

- **Egoism:** according to which a moral person is the self-interested person, and an action is right if it maximizes good for the self.
- **Pragmatic Ethics:** The set of normative ethics which crosses over into the other sets, but removes any metaphysical argument for pragmatics, and thus, a moral stance is in what is judged to work as rule-setting. The normative ethic here is as obviously problematic as Kant's rational duty. Pragmaticism is more an explanation of an ethic, than it is an ethic. The ethic holds that moral correctness evolves socially over the course of many lifetimes—and that norms, principles, and moral criteria are likely to be improved as a result of inquiry. The thinking is found in the arguments of Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, John Dewey and, recently, James D. Wallace.
- **Ethics of Care:** The view that morality arises out of the experiences of empathy and compassion. The interdependence and relationships in achieving ethical goals holds high importance. Nel Noddings and Carol Gilligan are the leading thinkers in care ethics, and bring feminist valuing to what ought to be done. Noddings is particularly important as an educationalist, developing an ethic of care model that can be learnt in formal education settings.

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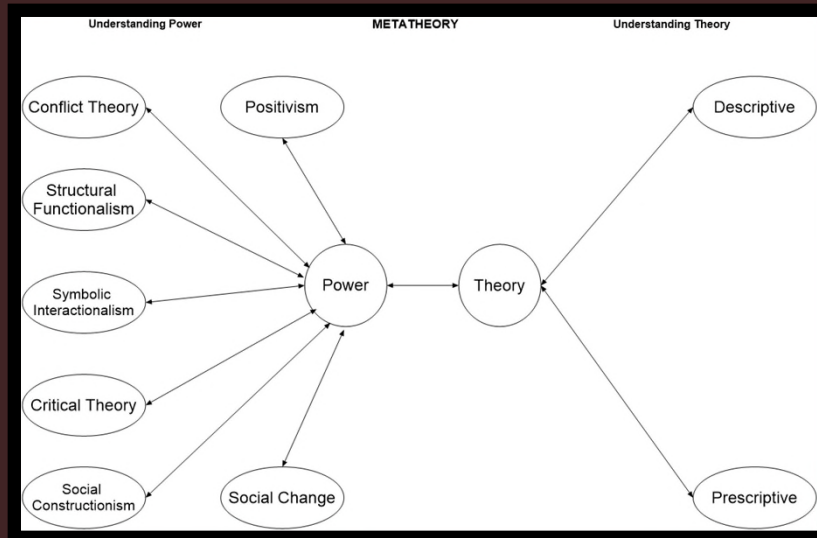


Power Relations in Theory of Theory: Take The Right Decision Metatheory

The articulation in this essay is an example of meta-theory. Metatheory makes the subject matter of theory a second or third order in the discussion or examination. The power is one over a narrower frame of thinking. The power here is cognitive, understanding the scope or worldview. It is not merely a taxonomy of theories, it makes available all the tools of all theories, without being instrumentalist, and, at the same time, resists the theoretical fragmentation. There is both analytical and comparative research that creates models to join the parts into a whole. No model is perfect, and is not reality as if wholly grasped, but in those modelled connections and networking there is coherence.

The coherence can be seen in the scoping between different levels of orders, contra to Foucault's thinking in his 'Order of Things' or order of knowledge. Knowledge and power can be cooperative and achieve mutual outcomes. A cynic might see such occasions as rare, but that is the cynic's problem. Where knowledge and power are not coherent, ordered, cooperative, and mutual, those ways of viewing the world are necessary for social change.

The Relationships in Power & Theory Model



We have a metatheory model in understanding the cognitive relationships in power and theory. It will not give a definite measure of how much power and theory is required, but it will provide the language to describe and explain that measure, according to the context of the specific question. That is, we have applications of different types of powers and theories.

The Relationships in Power & Theory Model

- Theory has the power to be
 - descriptive and
 - prescriptive.
- Power is limited and measured in:
 - positive and negative valuing; and
 - in the understanding –
 - of conflict and harmony;
 - of structure and function;
 - of symbols and relations of signs;
 - of criticism and common beliefs;
 - of society, and the ways we construct reality as a model, each in our own mind;
 - of, ultimately, that we/I can change for the better, together as a society.

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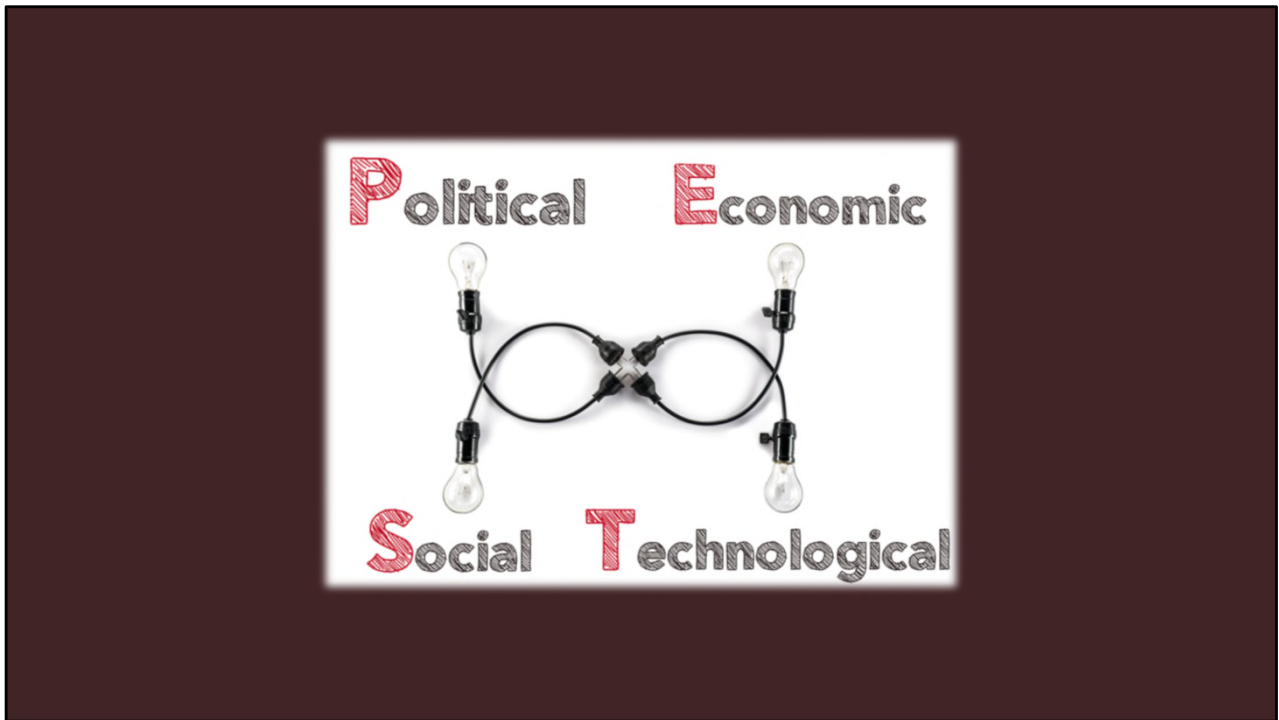
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Nothing fits perfectly, and there is conflation and mismatching in the thinking, on occasions, but it is not the worldview of those neo-liberal or libertarian thinkers, who argue in such a fallacious attempt at thinking. They abuse their own freedom by de-powering others in the absurd fragmented worldview.