**A Broad Definition of Agential Power**

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**1. Introduction**

Power is surely one of the most important concepts in social and political theory (and practice).[[1]](#footnote-1) But what is the best way to define it? In particular, can we develop a definition that is sufficiently determinate while at the same time enabling rather than foreclosing important substantive debates about how power relations proceed and should proceed in social and political life? In this essay, I present a broad definition of agential power that meets these desiderata. On this account, agents have power with respect to a certain outcome (including, inter alia, the shaping of certain social relations) to the extent that they can voluntarily determine whether that outcome occurs. This simple definition is quite fruitful for both descriptive and normative purposes—or so I will argue.

My discussion in this paper will proceed in two steps. The first is to analyze and discuss a recent proposal by Rainer Forst, which promises to give us a fairly ecumenical account of power. In his recent work, Forst makes a very valuable contribution to our understanding of power.[[2]](#footnote-2) He proposes a novel account according to which (roughly put) power is the capacity of some agents to intentionally influence other agents’ thought an action by shaping the reasons that move them to think and act as they do. Forst calls power as characterized in this account “noumenal power.” After briefly reconstructing the idea of noumenal power (in section 2.1), I will identify four important strengths of Forst’s proposal (section 2.2). I will then note some limitations and suggest some improvements (section 2.3). Power is indeed a key concept for social and political theory and practice. We need to continue ploughing the conceptual territory to distill a notion that is both broadly sharable and illuminating for our descriptive and normative inquiries about how we shape our social and political life. To cater for these objectives, my second step in this essay is to propose an alternative candidate for a broad definition of agential power and to show how it indeed enables us to articulate important substantive questions (section 3). This alternative definition (briefly stated in the previous paragraph) builds on the strengths of Forst’s definition but is broader in ways that enable us to capture the full range of phenomena concerning agential power.[[3]](#footnote-3)

**2. Discussion of the Noumenal Power Account**

**2.1. The account**

To develop his noumenal power account (hereafter “NPA”), Forst explores its similarities and differences with other important philosophical accounts of power proposed by Amy Allen, Hannah Arendt, Pierre Bourdieu, Robert Dahl, Michel Foucault, Juergen Habermas, and Steven Lukes, amongst others. For reasons of space, I will not discuss here these contrasts. I will concentrate on Forst’s own positive proposal about how to understand power. Forst states this proposal as follows:

Power is “*the capacity of A to motivate B to think or do something that B would otherwise not have thought or done*”.[[4]](#footnote-4)

We call “*power* generally the capacity of A to influence the space of reasons of B and/or C (etc.) such that they think and act in ways they would not have done without the interference by A; moreover, the move by A must have a motivating force for B and/or C (etc.) that corresponds to A’s intentions and is not just a side effect”.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Forst sees power as a relational phenomenon, consisting in the capacity of an agent to affect another agent in certain ways. That capacity is “noumenal” in the sense that the way in which an agent can affect another agent operates within the “space of reasons” (a phrase Forst takes from Wilfred Sellars). A has power over B when A can intentionally get B to think and act in certain ways intended by A. This means that A can affect the cognitive process through which B forms certain intentions and choices, i.e., the justifications that B relies on to proceed as B does.

It is important that NPA focuses on justifications in a descriptive sense. The focus is on what B *sees as* reasons to proceed in certain ways. Those reasons and justifications need not be (from a critical perspective) good ones. It is enough that they are in fact at work in B’s own actual reasoning. I think that we can capture this point well by using T. M. Scanlon’s distinction between reasonsin the normative sense and reasons in the operative sense.[[6]](#footnote-6) The latter are the reasons which agents *take* to be valid, whereas the former are the reasons that agents *should take* to be valid. When A exercises power over B, A affects B’s operative reasons. Thus, Forst tells us that noumenal power captures a spectrum of procedures and contents. The procedures may involve normatively sound forms of reciprocal and general discursive justification or suspicious mechanisms of rhetorical manipulation, ideology, and coercion. And the contents, the reasons that agents accept and act on, may also be good or bad. What is key to NPA is that agents act and think on the basis of operative reasons, and that other agents can have power over them by influencing how they come to accept those reasons. The procedures of influence may be good or bad, and so may be the reasons that turn out to be accepted. NPA is an evaluatively neutral account of power.

**2.2. Strengths**

NPA has many strengths. The first is that it is quite a broad account that facilitates rather than block substantive debates about how power relations unfold in social life. Narrower conceptions of power which only focus on “positive,” respectful forms of joint agency, or which only focus on “negative,” domineering impositions of the will of some over the will of others, capture only part of the range of phenomena. If we use such narrow definitions, we will often talk past each other. A broader, more ecumenical definition, like that of NPA, helps us chart the domain of power together, and formulate and assess various explanatory hypotheses about what mechanisms of power exist and what are their causes and effects. To rule out some of those hypotheses by definitional fiat, by saying that they are not really about “power,” does not advance our substantive debates.

NPA is not universally accommodating, however. So, second, NPA is a determinate view which excludes some accounts of the concept of power. This exclusion is potentially contentious, but to be useful a concept must be determinate, and there might be good reasons to exclude some alternative conceptual proposals. NPA does not, for example, take power to be wielded by entities that cannot operate as intentional agents. So, for example, social structures (such as a system of property rights) do not have power. Forst does, however, try to accommodate some of the intuitions of those who assign power to social structures by arguing that NPA can be used to illuminate how those structures arise within, affect, and are changed, in the social space of reasons.[[7]](#footnote-7) Thus, although a capitalist system of property rights cannot itself have power over capitalists or workers, it can feature in the explanation of the relations of power between capitalist and workers. When people accept capitalist relations of production they place themselves in contexts in which certain forms of bargaining, including asymmetric bargaining power, will arise. Capitalists will use their conventional entitlement to control means of production to persuade property-less workers to toil for a wage, under their direction, to produce goods or services they can sell for a profit. And workers can use their conventional entitlement to choose whether they deploy their labor power to negotiate with capitalists a labor contract. When they can engage in this negotiation collectively, workers’ bargaining power increases. This is why the legal right to unionization and other forms of workers’ political organization and activity become both a resource and a focus of conflict. The space of reasons is continually reshaped from within by exercises of noumenal power. These exercises can take previous results of noumenal power for granted or make them themes for contestation. They can sometimes be quite subversive, generating deep changes in the fabric of the space itself. This links to the next point.

A third advantage of NPA is that it is quite fruitful for critical theory. A critical theory in the Frankfurt School tradition is supposed to provide us with resources for assessing the justice or injustice of our social practices and institutions *and* to explore the causes of existing injustices and the feasibility prospects for overcoming them. Now, these normative and descriptive activities (which arise in moral and political philosophy, social science, and in day to day practical reasoning) cannot be lucidly conducted unless we pay attention to power relations. NPA is fruitful for understanding those relations. A notable advantage of NPA is that it zeroes in on a dimension that is simultaneously significant for describing and assessing our social life. The space of reasons is crucial for both. When we try to explain why people act as they do, we must figure out what justifications they *do* give to themselves and to each other to proceed in that way. And when we try to develop a view about how they ought to act, we must figure out what justifications they *should* accept to either sustain their current forms of life or to change them. Interestingly, there is a link between these two operations, as partaking in relations of justification often involves some openness to critical interventions. Agents are open to criticism (inter alia) because it matters to them that what they do is justified. Forst explores this line further in his own normative theory, which claims that the primary move of a critical theory is to demand that the space of justification be shaped in such a way that engagement in discursive critical assessment is always available.[[8]](#footnote-8)

A final strength of NPA that I want to highlight is that NPA captures important Kantian points while avoiding some problematic commitments sometimes associated with them. Thus, like Kant, Forst holds that human beings’ reason is not an inert faculty, but an active and dynamic capacity shaping human action. Human beings are noumenal beings in the sense that they shape their behavior on the basis of reasons. However, Forst does not endorse the dualism between noumenon and phenomenon. He does not take human beings, insofar as they are rational beings, to somehow be outside the natural world. Since the noumenon/phenomenon dualism has proved quite controversial, and is arguably independent from the picture of human beings as dynamic rational agents, it is a benefit of NPA that it enables us to endorse the picture without having to endorse the dualism. This is important for a materialist critical theory that recognizes that rational nature can tragically be destroyed when human beings are physically crushed in the course of social injustice, as arguably was the case in the extermination camps of Nazi Germany and is the case today with the malnourishment of children in the slums of a wealthy but deeply inegalitarian planet. I would add that NPA’s endorsement of Kantian insights about practical reason can be developed further to also retain Kant’s view of reason as a source of hope. Kant emphasizes that thanks to their capacity to reason, human beings can always challenge the norms and conventions that others (or even themselves when in the grip of subservience) say they must follow. Reason is a continuous source of resistance, resilience, and initiative in the face of injustice. So long as their rational capacities are not themselves extinguished, human beings can question and reject unjust orders and imagine and pursue just ones.

**2.3. Limitations and suggestions for revision**

Despite its great strengths, there are some limitations to NPA in its current form. The first is that it still provides too narrow an account of power. For example, it arguably misclassifies physical force and violence when construing them as lying beyond power. Forst does consider cases in which an agent affects another agent through the use of physical force.[[9]](#footnote-9) But he denies that this phenomenon constitutes a case of exercise of power. Real power, according to Forst, is “human, normative power”.[[10]](#footnote-10) Power is exercised only by affecting other agents’ practical reasoning. Sheer force (unlike, say, threats of use of force) bypasses reasoning altogether. Forst acknowledges that force might enter a description of power but when it does so it does it *only* *indirectly*, as when the threat to kill you or imprison you might make you choose to stop voicing your opposition to the dictator that rules you. But when you are in fact killed or imprisoned, this does not exhibit power but, more likely, its breakdown.[[11]](#footnote-11) Even if others may thereby be deterred from acting and thinking in certain ways (and so *they* are the subjects of power) you are no longer affected by someone else as an agent. You are instead pushed around as a “mere object”.[[12]](#footnote-12)

But why can’t physical force be a direct form of power? In ordinary language we certainly do make utterances using “power” to describe situations in which an agent is able, through sheer physical force, to kill, or imprison, another. Furthermore, the indirect significance of physical force and violence which Forst’s account allows for arguably holds only if the direct significance it denies also holds. Your threat to kill me or imprison me can dissuade me from acting in a certain way only if I am convinced that you are actually capable of (i.e. have the power to) carry out your threats (by killing me or imprisoning me). Finally, although dominating agents provide themselves with weaponry and other instruments of violence to deter their subjects, they sometimes also acquire them precisely to have the power to simply suppress some of them altogether. The intention behind dictators’ acquisition and use of resources for violence is sometimes to actually murder dissidents, or to physically limit their capacity to meet others and communicate their subversive thoughts. Rifles and prison cells are used to kill people or isolate them. This use may have a deterrent effect on others, but need not be, and is not in every case, engaged in with the deterring effect in view. And in any case the immediate subject of power (the dissident who is shot or thrown into prison) is affected primarily not via noumenal mechanisms, but by brute plain causal power. When A deters B from protesting further by shooting C, A exercises noumenal power over B, but the killing of C is not noumenal; it is an exercise of sheer physical power (or “firepower”).

It is true that when a dominating agent affects another agent in this way the latter is reduced to a mere object. But why conclude that this means that power as such, as opposed to a specific form of power, has broken down? When we are pushed around as mere objects we may not be affected qua rational agents. But being the fragile physical entities that we are, when we are killed or imprisoned we are still destined by another agent, intentionally, to be in a condition we would not have placed ourselves into. There is power here, even if it is not of the noumenal sort. So there must be more to power than noumenal power. Or so the intuitively plausible scenarios just depicted seem to me to suggest.

How would Forst respond to this challenge that NPA presents an unduly narrow, or intellectualistic, account of power?[[13]](#footnote-13) It is not easy to answer this question because a second limitation of NPA as developed so far is that no explicit statement of the rationale for deciding what makes an account of power acceptable is provided. Appeals to actual usages and linguistic intuitions would surely not do as these would yield contradicting results. Forst acknowledges that NPA is at variance with the definitions offered by many other philosophers. And the examples given in previous paragraphs should suffice to show that “power” is meaningfully used in senses not captured by NPA. So why accept NPA, really? The worry here is that in its current presentation, NPA risks appearing question-begging, a mere exercise of assertion or stipulation. We need some sense of what are the desiderata for a good definition of power, and an explanation of how NPA fulfills them. In the absence of such a justification, it is for example not obvious that we should not take noumenal power as covering only a part (albeit a very important part) of the conceptual territory of power.

Where should we look for a rationale for selecting or constructing a good definition of power? A natural step to take here is to consider the role of an account of power in the development of a critical theory. This is surely not the only rationale for judging the appropriateness of a conceptual account of power. There may be other accounts that are appropriate given other, alternative roles and purposes. This is typical when it comes to terminological and conceptual regimentation. But focusing on critical theory, what should we think about NPA? I already suggested above (in 2.2) some reasons for thinking that NPA is in fact useful as a moving part within a critical theory. I now add, however, that NPA should be revised in at least two ways.

The first revision that I suggest is that we see noumenal power as only a proper subset of power. This seems fitting for a critical theory if that theory is to fully capture the normative and descriptive importance of sheer physical force and violence in social life. The wrongness of some uses of force is independent of their manipulatory deployments (although those are important as well). Independently of deterrence effects, it is simply wrong to kill and imprison innocent human beings. We should worry about some people having the power (including the physical power) to do that. Furthermore, we should illuminate the explanatory significance of physical force within scientific explanations of social orders and social change. Domination, and resistance to it, surely operate within the space of reasons. They also often operate, unfortunately, in the battlefield. That field is also partly a noumenal field involving communicative devises such as threats, commands, propaganda, and personal psychological processes involving fear, resolve, and hope. But sheer, physical force is still an irreducible part of it. A materialist critical theory should make room for this point. Another example concerns the importance of technology, or the sheer causal power of human beings over their surrounding natural environment. Although technological determinism may not be compelling, there is a kernel of truth in historical materialism’s view that the level of technological development available in a historical context constrains what social structures can be stably generated by agents in it.[[14]](#footnote-14)

The revision just proposed calls for detachment from some overly intellectualist elements in NPA. I suggested that even if power always involves intentional agency on the part of the power-holder, it need not always involve intentional agency on the part of the subject of power. This means that we need a broader account of power which includes physical force and violence as possible dimensions of it. There are cases in which B is subject to A’s power in a way that does not operate through B’s cognitive processes. A may impose a condition on B (like death or imprisonment) through sheer causal power rather than by moving B to think or act in some way.

The second revision I suggest calls for addressing the phenomenon of power in relation to oneself. This phenomenon is significant for a critical theory which, like Kant’s, holds the view that in addition to duties to others we have duties to ourselves.[[15]](#footnote-15) I find Kant’s view on this score quite appealing, and thus recommend that we develop an even broader account of power that captures the phenomenon of power over oneself which this view presupposes. A key dimension of power, including noumenal power, concerns how we treat ourselves. To understand our tendencies to surrender in the face of injustice, or to fight it, we must explore our powers to both delude ourselves and to reason and steer ourselves autonomously. A critical theory must illuminate this reflexive element.

Forst should find this suggestion congenial. He does not deny that we may have power over ourselves. He chooses to leave this topic “undiscussed”.[[16]](#footnote-16) But its development is in tune with the reflexive nature of his Kantian approach to critique.[[17]](#footnote-17) It would also help to defend his account of noumenal power from some criticisms, including the recent one according to which NPA, “when applied to situations of oppression, tends toward the old cliché that ‘no one can oppress you without your permission,’ a view that puts too much responsibility on the victims of domination and not enough on those who are doing the dominating”.[[18]](#footnote-18) It can indeed be quite odious to insist on blaming someone whose face is under the boot of a more powerful agent for being in that position, instead of blaming the more powerful agent for the pressure they are applying with their foot. But someone who uses NPA need not do that when they explore the cognitive processes that go on in the subject of power. What is key is to notice whatever power there is, wherever it lies (without inaccurate exaggerations). Now, it is important to notice that from their own perspective, the oppressed can often ask themselves whether, how, and when they might resist their oppression. Even if they can reasonably conclude that in a particular juncture the odds are not in their favor and should not (yet) rise up, they owe it to themselves to entertain questions of this kind. It would be condescending to talk about them as if it were not appropriate for them to engage in self-critical examination as to whether they are capitulating when they should fight. Respect for the oppressed starts with recognizing their agency. Similarly, self-respect starts with recognizing one’s own agency.

**3. An alternative, broader definition of agential power**

As we develop a concept of power, it is useful to distinguish between an *elucidation*, a *stipulation*, and a *deliberative interpretive proposal*.[[19]](#footnote-19) An elucidation reconstructs, or reports, a concept as it is used or held by a certain set of agents in certain circumstances. It is merely descriptive. An anthropologist or a historian trying to understand how a particular group of people understand power would engage in an elucidation. A stipulation is the introduction of a convention about how to understand a concept, regardless of how it has been used so far. This is not uncommon in technical discussions in social science and philosophy. A deliberative interpretive proposal lies somewhere in between these intellectual procedures. Like a stipulation and unlike an elucidation, it is not primarily descriptive. It aims at suggesting how agents are *to* think, not at depicting what they already do think. But unlike a stipulation, and like an elucidation, a deliberative interpretive proposal seeks to some extent to connect with past or ongoing practices when that seems valuable. It tries to articulate what is significant and worth pursuing in them (although this exercise may yield negative results, and in fact recommend abandoning a practice altogether), and provides an articulation of a concept that captures key aims in these practices, or provides a suggestion as to what those aims should be. The exercise is in this way interpretive even if it is also deliberative or propositive (i.e. not descriptive). I think that the three intellectual devices might be valuable depending on what our aims are, but here I focus on the last.

Developing a deliberative interpretive proposal about how to understand the concept of power is particularly valuable if we have normative ambitions, i.e., if we want our beliefs about power to be part of a conception about how we ought to organize our social life. Assuming that this is our purpose now, we should identify some relevant desiderata for our proposed concept. Two important desiderata are the following. First, we have reason to work with a fairly broad, or ecumenical, definition of power. Using a broad conceptual account is preferable because it leaves specific options open for substantive debate instead of ruling them out by definition fiat. Philosophical and normative reflection and debate about power is in this way enhanced rather than short-circuited. It is obvious that this openness is valuable for theoretical reasons, as the search for truths thrives when competing substantive hypotheses can be voiced and discussed. But it is also morally and politically important. Having an inclusive discussion about power is desirable if we value (as we should) a democratic determination of the terms on which we live our social life. Part of the process that constitutes this determination is the inclusive debate about how to shape power relations. So having a broad definition would be in tune with valuable aspects of the practice of democratic politics.

But we also need a concept that is determinate. To introduce further determinacy, I add a second desideratum, which is that a concept of power should help us illuminate our critical reasoning about what we ought to do. To do this, the concept has to focus on the intentional agency of power-holders. The concept should help us make claims about what difference agents can, and should make, in practice. This desideratum operates in synergy with the previous one. We want to be able to explore the phenomena regarding power quite widely, to be able to know what are the prospects for individual and collective action, what obstacles and opportunities lie ahead as we pursue certain projects of social justice. A further synergy (which indirectly helps justify the broad view of agential power that I proceed to outline) will be mentioned at the end of this paper; it concerns the importance of power for the articulation of claims about human dignity.

With these considerations in mind, we can proceed to develop a new definition. We can say that an agent A has power with respect to a certain outcome or state of affairs O to the extent that A can voluntarily determine whether O occurs. Applied to social contexts, this definition leads to the view that A has power over another agent B to the extent that A can get B to be or to act in ways A intends. The general idea is simply that agents’ power is their ability to shape aspects of the world as they will. More formally, I propose the following definition:

*Broad definition of agential power* (BAP):In certain circumstances C, an agent A has power over a subject S (where S is either a thing or an agent, be it agent A or some other) with respect to whether some final outcome or state of affairs O occurs to the extent that A can voluntarily determine whether S exists or behaves in such a way as to generate O.[[20]](#footnote-20)

This characterization is indeed very open and allows for the articulation of, and debate about, various substantive claims about power. Let me highlight some (often related) features of this account that show its broad applicability:

* BAP allows for degrees of power. Two agents may have power to achieve a certain outcome, but one of them may have more power to achieve it than the other. For example, A and B may be able to win in a competitive game, but if both go for winning, A may be more likely to do so than B. And different outcomes may be accessible to different degrees to different agents, so that A may be more powerful than B with respect to O1 while B is more powerful than A with respect to O2.[[21]](#footnote-21)
* BAP includes power over oneself as well as power over others. One respect in which agents can be more or less powerful concerns their ability to get themselves to act in certain ways. For example, A may be more powerful than B due to having more self-discipline, or willpower. There is an intrapersonal dimension of power. So comparisons of power between two or more agents have to look at interpersonal power (if there are potential interactions between the relevant agents) but also at intrapersonal power. Interestingly, the comparative exercises might also have to look at the relations between the two cases. Sometimes A’s power over B has to be explained by the differences in self-directed power between them. B may grant a position of leadership to A because A is more self-disciplined. In reverse, sometimes interpersonal power shapes intrapersonal power. It is not uncommon for some people to lose self-command when they are systematically subjected to domineering command by others.[[22]](#footnote-22)
* BAP can apply to individuals acting alone, to individuals acting in concert, and to collective agents. As an individual, A may be more powerful than B, but the group to which A belongs may be less powerful than the group to which B belongs. A worker may be extremely weak when negotiating a labor contract with a capitalist, but if the worker is part of a union, their bargaining power shoots up. Individuals can form collectives with great power, such as trade unions, political parties, armies, and states.[[23]](#footnote-23)
* BAP includes a capacious notion of outcome that allows for process-focused considerations. Following Amartya Sen, we can distinguish between “comprehensive” and “culmination outcomes” and focus on the former, illuminating the process that leads to a final result in addition to that result itself.[[24]](#footnote-24) What agents have power to bring about can include the process through which the final results arises. This point is significant when we engage in normative discussions about social power, as in those debates we are often interested in procedural issues about how people treat each other as they go about producing certain final results. For example, collective agents (unions, parties, states, etc.) may be organized in more or less democratic ways, and it may be reasonable to prefer a more democratic organization even if decision-making would be less effective in terms of producing some desirable procedure-independent outcomes. In any case, process-related and process-independent (or culmination outcome focused) dimensions of power can be distinguished and their relative explanatory and normative significance explicitly explored.
* BAP allows for various mechanisms of exercise of power. The characterization of power proposed here is non-moralized in the sense that it captures forms of power that may be bad as well as those that might be good (both regarding procedures and what results from using them). A can lead B to do produce O by rationally convincing B that B has good reasons to do it which are independent from A’s saying so. Or A can get B to produce O through force, coercion, or manipulation.[[25]](#footnote-25)
* BAP can be used to account for the idea that social structures are significant for power. Without needing to reify social structures, i.e. without treating them as agent-like entities, we can use the broad account of agential power to understand why the power some people have over others depends on systemic or structural dimensions of their social life. Social structures simply are crystallizations of past social actions and relationships. They affect current actions and relationships, but they can also be changed within them depending on how people choose to construe the terms on which they live together. So, take the structural power of capitalists over workers as displayed in their unequal bargaining when setting up a labor contract and in their day to day interactions in the workplace. The relevant forms of structural power here concern the relative power that agents have in virtue of their class position within a class system.[[26]](#footnote-26) Workers have some power as owners of their labor force. They may not be put to work without their formal consent. Capitalists in turn have power as owners and controllers of the means of production. Capitalists can bargain with significant clout with workers. Since workers lack means of subsistence, they must seek employment under some capitalist, who normally seeks to maximize profits and minimize labor expenditures (i.e. wages). This structural power is the result of, and affects, the adoption and sustenance of certain conventions about private property rights in means of production and their application. Once accepted and deployed, these conventional rights become resources for agential power. As revolutions in history show, however, property regimes and class structures can change dramatically, and when agents make those changes, they alter the resources for agential power in specific social environments.
* BAP includes various possible targets in the subject of power. Thus, in the case of social power, A may have power over B regarding the production of O more or less directly. A may physically force B to bring about, or constitute, O (as when A uses B as a human shield), or get B to make choices that generate O by influencing the process of formation of the beliefs, desires, emotions, dispositions, and other features and circumstances of B that affect B’s intentions and actions regarding the production of O (as when A persuades B to go for O by presenting some evidence that O would satisfy B’s present desires, or by steering B into forming some new desires that lead B to pursue O, or by reshaping the set of options available to B so that O gains prominence in terms of its noticeability, desirability, or feasibility).[[27]](#footnote-27)
* Finally, BAP includes power over things besides persons. Thus, we can talk about power as a social relation, but also as a relation between human beings and their material environment.[[28]](#footnote-28) We can talk about technological power, and also explore its significance for social power. An important topic both in social science and political philosophy concerns the extent to which the feasibility of certain types of social organization (such as capitalism and socialism) is constrained or affected by various levels of technological power.[[29]](#footnote-29)

We can develop substantive views about power relationships by asking and answering descriptive and normative questions about the different dimensions of power allowed by this broad conceptual characterization. Substantive debates turn on how to best specify, in a certain context of discussion, the relevant circumstances, agents, subjects, outcomes, and their relations.

To provide a handy framework to organize debates about the multiple possibilities identified above, I suggest that we can seek answers to the following questions about a certain power:

1. Who has or exercises this power? (*Agents of power—power-holders or power-wielders.*)
2. Over what or whom is this power held or exercised? *(Subjects of power.*)
3. What outcomes does this power help create or facilitate? (*Outcomes of power. Range of power.*)
4. To what extent would these outcomes be under the control of the agent? (*Degree of power.*)
5. What are the unintended effects (to be distinguished from the intended outcomes) of power relationships and exercise? (This relates to historical issues—see below.) (*Intended and unintended outcomes of power.*)
6. What are the means, or mechanisms, through which the agent can exercise this power, and help create or facilitate the relevant outcome? (Force, coercion, inducement, persuasion, etc.) (*Means, mechanisms, forms of power.*)
7. What are the resources the use of which enable the agent to exercise this power? (Prestige, status, authority, economic resources, tools of violence, organization, knowledge, rhetorical and argumentative skills, etc.) (*Resources of power.*)
8. Why, and in what circumstances, do the agents of this power want to have and use this power (if they do)? *(Operative reasons for power.*)
9. Why, and in what circumstances, do the agents of this power have reason to have and use this power (if they do)? (*Normative reasons for power.*)
10. What are the enabling, and what might be some disabling, conditions for the agent to exercise their relevant power? (e.g. circumstances that might be necessary for the agent to use certain resources successfully, or that may block the likelihood of their intentions being fulfilled, etc.) (*Enabling and disabling conditions or circumstances of power.*)
11. How did circumstances C arise? (*History of circumstances of power*) (This includes the constitution of the agents and subjects of power; which may themselves be the effect of previous processes involving power.)
12. How might C change? What feasible reforms or transformations are feasible and how feasible are they? What degree of power do agents have to introduce them? (*Feasibility of change in circumstances of power; dynamic power.*)
13. How should C be changed (if C should indeed be changed)? (*Desirability of change in circumstances of power.*)
14. If there is reason to reform or transform C, how does this change relate to the relations of power under discussion (both normatively and causally)?
15. If certain power relations are desirable but not sufficiently feasible or reasonably accessible in C, is there reason to change C (into different circumstances C\*) so that the new relations emerge? If so, what could and should be done to change C in this way? (*Dynamic duties to change circumstances of power*).[[30]](#footnote-30)

These questions exhibit, and frame the exploration of, the real complexity of agential power. As a properly broad account, BAP is appealing precisely because it enables us to capture that complexity in full.

Forst is indeed right that we need a broad account of power. He is also right that we should pursue an account that is non-moralized, in the sense of covering normatively undesirable power mechanisms besides normatively desirable ones. Even if the account I propose here is broader than his, I agree with, and build upon, Forst’s important contribution regarding these points. I also think that our definitions of power can be indirectly defended by showing their fruitfulness for normative work about social justice. In my own work, I am exploring the significance of a broad account account of power like BAP for the articulation of our duties to respond to human dignity.[[31]](#footnote-31) If the ground for the normative assessment of power relations is the requirement to enact proper respect and concern for the dignity of persons, then we should shape our social orders in such a way that the valuable capacities that give rise to people’s dignity are affirmed. This means, specifically, that our power relations should be constrained by negative duties not to destroy, and by positive duties to enable and facilitate, the development and exercise of people’s valuable capacities (including our own). Dignity calls for solidaristic empowerment.

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1. A concept which, surprisingly, has received insufficient attention by political philosophers. For a recent illuminating survey see Morriss (2012). See also the classic treatments in Lukes (2005) and Morriss (2002). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Forst (2015a). A German version of the paper (“Noumenale Macht”) appeared as chapter 2 of Forst (2015b). Forst’s account is also presented in Allen, Forst, and Haugaard (2014) (with a summary at p.12). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. I use “agential power” to mark out a kind of power that can be had and exercised by entities in their capacities as agents. Agential power differs from other powers or dispositions (such as those held by non-agential entities –think about the power of water to dissolve sugar—or by agents when not operating agentially—as when my body has the power to displace water when it falls on a pond by accident). In this paper, I mean *agential power* when I use “power.” [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Forst, (2015a, p. 115). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Forst (2015a, p. 124). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Scanlon (1998, pp. 18-19). See further Parfit(2011, vol. 1, pp. 34-37). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Forst (2015a, pp. 119-21). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The double significance of relations of justification (for purposes of description and normative assessment of social life) is addressed in the Introduction to Forst’s (2015b). For Forst’s powerful normative agenda (according to which we have a fundamental right to justification, and must engage in discursive exchanges in which we seek reciprocal and general reasons to justify the terms on which we live our social life), see Forst (2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Forst (2015a, pp. 114, 115, 125-6). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Forst (2015a, p. 114) [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Forst (2015a, pp. 114, 116). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Forst (2015a, p. 115). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Note that my objection here is not addressed by Forst’s emphasis on the fact that noumenal power can be exercised in many ways, including those that affect its subject’s emotions, bodily dispositions, and so on. That reply may be enough to respond to an objection that NPA is too narrow in its account of how people are affected in the discursive and mental processes leading to actions. See Forst’s response to Allen and Haugaard in   
    (2014, p. 22). My objection is that there are dimensions of power which involve forms of influence that altogether circumvent the subjects of power’s discursive or mental life. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. See Cohen (2001). For a critique of technological determinism that affirms a greater malleability of social (noumenal) frameworks, see Castoriadis (1998, Part I). The debates about the relative significance of physical violence and various forms of persuasion and consensus formation sparked by the work of Antonio Gramsci on hegemony are still relevant. See Gramsci (2000, sects. VI and X). For discussion, see Anderson (1976), Mouffe (1979),Przeworski (1985), and Wright (2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. See Kant (1996). Particularly striking is Kant’s critical discussion of the vice of “servility” (at 6:434-7). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Forst (2015a, p. 116 n.17). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. See Forst in Allen, Forst, and Haugaard (2014, p. 11). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Allen in Allen, Forst, and Haugaard (2014, p. 27). The criticism is hard to assess as it is phrased in quantitative terms (focusing not on whether, but on how much, responsibility it is appropriate to ascribe to oppressors and victims). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. It is also useful to distinguish between a *concept* and a *conception* of power. The distinction between concept and conceptions comes from Rawls (1999, p. 5) and Hart (1994, pp.160, 246). A concept can be shared across different conceptions. Even if they use “power” in the same sense, different scientific theories may disagree about what mechanisms of power operate in a certain social context, and different normative theories may propose different views about the desirability of those mechanisms. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. We can add time indices to make the account more explicit. We can for example talk about A having power at time t1 with respect to an outcome at tn—where tn coincides with, or comes later than, t1. Furthermore, it is common to add a counterfactual clause saying that the outcome of power exercise would not have occurred without that exercise. One should phrase this point carefully, however, as it could be that, e.g., if A had not exercised power over B to get B to produce O, O would have still been produced by B because, say, C got B to do it, or B decided to do it independently of anyone else’s prompting. What is crucial for the counterfactual is that O would not have arisen in the exact same way (the one whose description makes reference to the agent of power’s exercise of their power). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. As a matter of degree, power is best characterized as involving scalar feasibility. I explore this point in more detail in Gilabert (2017). See also Gilabert and Lawford-Smith (2012), and Gilabert (2012, chs. 4 and 7). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. I should add that although my characterization of power focuses on what agents can voluntarily bring about, it does not assume that the choices, intentions, etc. of those agents must be conscious. It is not ruled out by the definition proposed here that power be wielded unconsciously. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. We can in this way capture the idea of “power with.” See Morriss (2012, p. 589). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Sen (2009, pp. 215-7). [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Often power operates through communicative interaction. That interaction can involve respectful and concernful discursive argumentation of the kind explored by Juergen Habermas’s discourse ethics and politics. See Habermas (1990)and (1998). Communicative interaction can also display mechanisms of violence and domination. See Bourdieu (1991). Forst’s discussion of noumenal power nicely covers the whole spectrum of communicative power. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. See Wright (2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. There is also the view that subjects of power may themselves be, in some respects, constituted by exercises of power. This happens, e.g., in the contexts of socialization in the family or in educational institutions, in which many people’s beliefs, preferences, and habits are formed. The topic of constitution is familiar from sociological research. See Lukes (2005). It is also a central element in Foucault’s inquiries about power. See, e.g., Foucault (2000). For a discussion of how constitution is important for critical theory see Saar (2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. So, even though BAP is restricted to intentional agents with respect to the power-wielder, it does not say that the subject of power must also be an intentional agent, and even when the subject of power happens to be an intentional agent, the account does not say that every power relation must affect the receiving subject *as* an intentional agent. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. See note 14 above. Of course, another important topic concerns the normative dimensions of power relations between human agents and non-human animals and plants. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. On the related notions of *dynamic duties* and *dynamic power* see Gilabert (2009), (2011), (2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Gilabert (2015, forthcoming). [↑](#footnote-ref-31)