Power: A Philosophical Analysis, 2nd edition
Peter Morriss
Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2002, 327pp.
ISBN: 0 7190 5996 8.

Manchester University Press should be congratulated for bringing out a 2nd edition of Peter Morriss's book on power 15 years after it first appeared. The book was, and is, an important contribution to the conceptual analysis of political power that deserves as close attention from the reader as Morriss obviously devoted in producing it. Morriss has chosen not to change anything from the first edition (he says he's not changed his mind so why should he?) but to add 36 pages of introduction defending his position. In that sense the book remains a partial analysis of power. Morriss resolutely ignores strategic considerations in his account of power, and so does not consider the great advances in game-theoretic explanations of social processes that have been made in the social sciences since his book first appeared. Morriss excuses himself on the grounds that his account is incomplete (p. xiii) and those who criticize him on these grounds misunderstand what his arguments are about (p. xiii). However, its incompleteness affects the way in which we understand power and to my mind is almost like defining evolutionary processes without mentioning natural selection.

A simple example demonstrates this important element missing from Morriss's account of power. A group of people have the power (in both Morriss's ability and 'ableness' senses) to perform some collective act that is in every member of the group's interest. However, they fail to do so. Why? In addition to common interests each group member also has contrary ones too. This is the familiar collective-action or free-rider problem. Each individual could contribute to the collective interest, and each would be better off if they did so. In one sense they have the power, in another they lack it. Now there are many types of collective action problem, and collective action can fail in numerous ways. Examining the nature of those collective acts, and what properties tend to lead to more severe collective action problems is surely an important element of 'power research'. We cannot use the cooperative game theory underlying Morriss's approach to analyse these problems because it assumes that once a contract is written there are no compliance problems. Compliance problems are the heart of political science, and need to be the heart of the examination of the power and lack of it for members of society.

It might be possible to examine these questions by looking at game-forms rather than games themselves. This may be compatible with Morriss's overall aims. However, his account of power-as-ableness seems to be an attempt to bring in precisely the preferences that enable us to solve games.

Morriss identifies power-as-ability with the resources of actors. Although he denies that he does this since to do so would be to commit the 'vehicle fallacy', Morriss suggests that no one has questioned his account of the 'vehicle fallacy'. So let us have a go.

For Morriss the equating of something's power, with the factors that give it that power, is fallacious. To think that the power of whisky to intoxicate is given by its alcohol content is fallacious, since other factors affect human intoxication — how much one has eaten, how much one is used to drinking, and indeed one's genetic makeup. However, the power of whisky to intoxicate *is* given by its alcohol content. Those other factors that enter into how intoxicated I become on any given occasion relative to you simply allow us to analyse how much power the alcohol in the whisky has under different conditions. Morriss's account here is tied very closely to an argument about the nature of dispositions. Quine suggests that when we say sugar is soluble we are making a claim about its subvisible structure. It is true of course, as Morriss points out, that we do not need to know anything about sugar's subvisible structure, nor about why it dissolves when placed in water in order to understand what 'soluble' means. The intension (meaning) of 'sugar is soluble' is something like 'when you put sugar in liquid it becomes part of the liquid'. But as scientists we want to find out more than this, and to understand the extension of 'solubility'. We can only discover that by looking at the properties of objects that are soluble. In this example examining the subvisible structure may be the right approach. And that is one difference between Morriss and myself. I want to try to explain the power structure of society, Morriss seemingly just wants to define 'power'.

At times Morriss's version of the vehicle fallacy seems to consist in the argument that simply because two things have the same dispositional properties, they do not have to have the same (structural) properties. Of course not, but it does follow that whatever (structural) properties the objects have must include some that give them the disposition in question. The extension rather than intension of 'power' is important when doing empirical political science. It is the properties that make sugar soluble, not the dictionary definition of solubility, which interests someone trying to explain why some objects dissolve in liquid more readily than others. Similarly, the properties that lead some people to get what they want more often than others, not the dictionary definition of power is what is of interest to the social scientist. I have argued that sometimes people get what they want because of their luck and systematic luck ((Dowding, 1991, 1996), which Morriss applauds and suggests

is similar to his 'passive power'. I am not sure that it is but we can leave that aside) and this requires us to understand the strategies that people adopt given their preferences. Social science explains the behaviour of types — such as capitalists, bureaucrats and politicians, rather than tokens — such as Rupert Murdoch, Peter Kemp and Tony Blair. These interests are tied to those roles and together with resources surely lead to strategic interactions that are part-and-parcel of what power is. These important issues are not discussed in the book, and I still believe that this is a flaw, not simply in any attempt to understand how society works, but in our understanding of 'power' itself.

References

Dowding, K. (1991) *Rational Choice and Political Power*, Aldershot: Edward Elgar.
Dowding, K. (1996) *Power*, Buckingham: Open University Press.

Keith Dowding
Department of Government,
London School of Economics.