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Dahl's power and republican freedom

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Keywords:

Introduction

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Robert Dahl's classic discussion of the power of one party over another remains of relevance and importance in contemporary political theory, despite all the commentary and criticism to which it has been subjected (Dahl 1957). This paper tries to support that claim by showing how his analysis, suitably regimented, can serve in the articulation of the concept of freedom associated with the long republican tradition (Pettit 1997, Skinner 1998, Richardson 2002, Viroli 2002, Maynor 2003, Pettit 2007). According to this way of viewing things, the antonym of freedom is not interference but the power associated with being able to exercise interference, in particular arbitrary interference. Dahl's concept of power points us towards a very effective way of spelling out that view.

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My paper is in three sections. First, I argue that there are some fine-grained revisions that Dahl's analysis needs; this discussion is slightly technical and some readers may prefer to skip it. Second, I argue that the amended Dahlian analysis can be usefully extended beyond the paradigm case on which he focuses, where punctual targets and tactics are involved. Third, I show that there are two important distinctions to be made within the emerging category of power or control and that, with those distinctions made, the category enables us to define republican freedom. The distinctions are between congenial and uncongenial forms of control and between controlled and uncontrolled, or non-arbitrary and arbitrary, versions of uncongenial control. According to the analysis presented, someone will be free in a given choice to the extent that no one exercises uncongenial, uncontrolled control over that choice.

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Before proceeding, one preliminary matter. Dahl's conceptualization allows for a distinction between possessing and exercising power. To possess power over another will be to have access to the resources that allow one to affect the behavior of another; to exercise power will be to make use of those resources for that purpose. I shall often make use of that distinction in what follows, although Dahl does not explicitly mark it in his original analysis (but see Dahl 2002).

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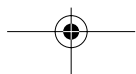
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1. Amending Dahl's analysis

Dahl concentrates on the case where A, drawing on a base of available resources, adopts a discrete or punctual means in order to exercise control over a discrete or punctual response on the part of B (Dahl 1957). The focus is the 'mediating activity by A between A's base and B's response' (p. 203). The paradigm case is one where A, by doing something w to B, exercises power over whether B does x shortly after.

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Critics might reject Dahl's concentration on the case where one party exercises power over another, rather than cases of power more generally; for an overview of more general issues, see (Dahl 2002). That looks like criticizing him for having dealt with the wrong question, however, rather than criticizing him for having dealt badly with the question addressed. He should not be taken to be trying to analyze power in general, only the power exercised by one party over another (Morriss 2002). I shall have nothing more to say about this line of criticism, though I do comment on the related complaint that it is less than fully satisfactory to focus just on punctual tactics – A's action, w – in order to affect a punctual target: B's action, x .

Dahl's core idea about the paradigm case can be stated very briefly. A has or possesses power over B's x -ing to the extent that B can do w and, by doing w , raise the probability that B x 's. The increase in probability level gives the measure of A's power. Dahl's central idea is on target, I believe, but there are three ways in which he goes amiss in commenting on it and developing it.

The first slip occurs in the comment that he casually makes on the paradigm, when he says that where the idea applies, A 'can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do' (p. 203). This is an incautious and mistaken gloss, at least on face-value interpretation. For A can raise the probability that B x 's by w -ing, and can thereby exercise power over B, even if it happens that B would have done x in any case. A can exercise power without leading B to do something B would not otherwise have done. Suppose you are going to attend a meeting of your own inclination but that I take an action that increases the probability of your being there, say because it guards against a change of mind on your part. I will exercise power over you in doing this, even though I do not make you do something you would not otherwise have done.

The second slip that Dahl makes comes in his account of the baseline by reference to which we determine whether A makes it more probable that B x 's. To say that by taking action w , A makes it more probable that B x 's invites the question: more probable than what? In addition, Dahl's answer is: more probable than B's x -ing would have been in the absence of A's action, w . But that answer is not completely satisfactory.

Suppose that B is affected just by the fact that A is present in B's life so that no matter what A does, no matter even if A omits to do anything, A's presence reduces the probability that B will x ; it reduces that probability below the level that it would have been at, had A not made an appearance at all. It would be paradoxical in such a situation to say that there is something A can do to exercise power over whether B x 's. A is worse than powerless in relation to B's x -ing, say because A triggers defiance in B, as an intrusive parent might trigger defiance in a teenager. A makes it more probable that B will not x than it would have been had A not been in the picture: had A been absent or inattentive. In that situation, however, it may well be the case that by taking the action, w – say, by apologizing for intruding – A raises the probability of B's x -ing above the level it would have if A had not taken that action. So on Dahl's analysis A has or possesses power over whether A x 's.

The lesson of this observation is straightforward, though it may not have importance in many practical cases. We should say that by taking action w , A exercises power over whether B x 's only if A thereby raises the probability that B x 's beyond the level it would have had in A's absence. It is not enough that A raises the probability beyond the level it would have had just in the absence of A's taking action w . A's taking action w may be an attempt to make the best of a bad lot, not anything we would want to think as an exercise of power.

Now to the third problem with Dahl's analysis of the paradigm case. In explicating the idea that A raises the probability that B x 's, Dahl invokes the notion of conditional probability. He does so when he takes (a) and (b) as equivalent:



- (a) by doing w , A raises the probability that B x 's;
- (b) the probability of B's x -ing, given that A does w , is higher than the probability of B's x -ing, given that A does not do w .

However (a) and (b) are not equivalent. Suppose that A and B are friends. The probability that B is in hospital, given that A sends B flowers, is higher than the probability that B is in hospital, given that A does not send B flowers. Nevertheless, A's sending B flowers is a sign of B's having gone to hospital, not the source of that move. A does not raise the probability of B being in hospital – not, in the intended, practical sense of that phrase – by sending B flowers and there is no question of A's exercising power over B.

In order for A to raise the probability that B x 's, by doing w , A's action must make the probability rise, not just show that it has risen. This is best explicated by the probability attaching to the conditional 'If A should do w , B would x ', not by the conditional probability of B's x 'ing, given that A does w . The point will be familiar from the arguments in favor of causal over evidential decision theory (Joyce 1999). But this is not the place to pursue that rival explication; I am content just to note that some such amendment is necessary.

2. Extending Dahl's analysis

Beyond punctual tactics and targets

Dahl's account of the power of one party over another can be extended so that it does not require the power-holder to perform a punctual action, w , with a view to having an effect on a punctual action, x ; these variables, ' x ' and ' w ', are allowed to range over a wider domain. The attraction of the extension is that it enables the account to escape a number of influential critiques, and to make sense of the fact that one party can exercise power over another without actually doing anything at all.

Following this strategy, we fix the actors involved in a power relation, be they individuals or groups or organizations, but do not require the means available or the response targeted to be punctual in character. We put no restriction on the means or tactics whereby power is exercised and allow the response targeted to be a discrete response, a general disposition, a habit of thought, or a mind-set. This extended account of power may reduce the operational applicability of the idea, making it too complex to support a simple index or set of indices. However, it has two distinct advantages.

First advantage

First, the departure enables the account to allow for at least a number of cases where power is possessed and exercised in virtue of agenda-fixing or attitude-shaping resources (Bachrach and Baratz 1962, Lukes 1974). There is no block to including extended resources in the arsenal of power, once the exercise of power is not associated with punctual means that are directed at punctual responses. Thus there is no reason why A's power should not affect what B does at a given time, or over time, in virtue of initiatives taken earlier or over time; no reason why it should not be exercised over someone in virtue of general initiatives that are not directed at that individual in particular; no reason why the initiatives should not go behind the back of the individual and rig his or her motives or mind-set; and so on. The extended, Dahlian notion looks quite capable of handling a variety of such cases.

Second advantage

The second advantage of extending Dahl's analysis beyond punctual tactics and punctual targets is that it makes it possible to see that A may exercise power over B's x -ing – this may continue

to be taken as a punctual action – even in cases where A does not interfere in any positive way with B; even where B does nothing (Pettit 1997). The broadened concept of power allows us to see that power may be exercised even in cases where there is no active interference.

A may interfere to raise the probability that B x's in any of a variety of ways. Under each variation, A worsens B's choice-situation. B may be deprived of certain resources, executive or informational, or may have certain options removed or replaced by inferior alternatives. The salient possibilities are these:

- A manipulates B's mind-set, thereby reducing B's capacity for deliberation;
- A imposes a sure or probabilistic block, real and/or purported, on B's not x-ing;
- A imposes a sure or probabilistic burden, real and/or purported, on B's not x-ing
- A misinforms B about the blocks and burdens in place, to get B to x.

In each of these cases it is plausible that A exercises power over B in the choice of x. However, it turns out that A may exercise such power over B without interfering actively at all.

Suppose that A has preferences over how B behaves in a given type of situation, though preferences that may in principle vary from time to time. Imagine that A does not in general interfere with A in that situation, finding what A does acceptable – perhaps even finding it acceptable on some occasions that A should behave in whatever way A wishes. But suppose that A is poised to interfere, should B make a choice that turns out not to appeal to A; suppose A interferes with B, only on a need-for-interference basis, where the need is dictated by A's preferences at the time. In such a case, we may say that A invigilates B's choice, interfering only when the choice does not please. A's invigilation may not be a conscious or intentional action that would provide a referent for 'w' in the original schema; it may consist merely in being there, ready to interfere – and interfere intentionally – should B not behave to A's taste.

Does A exercise power over B's choice, and do so both in the cases where interference is triggered, and in the cases where it is not? Yes, on the extended Dahlian analysis, A exercises power over B even in the absence of actual interference. Take the case where B is disposed to act in a way that pleases A. Even in such a case, A's invigilation of B raises the probability that B will indeed act in that way; it guards against a change of mind on B's part. A will exercise power over B just in virtue of invigilating B. Whatever B does will be done, more or less implicitly, by A's leave; B, in the old republican phrase, will act only *cum permissu*, only with permission.¹

It will be true that A exercises power over B in such a case, whether or not B becomes aware of A's invigilating presence and A's capacity to interfere. However, if B becomes aware of A's presence and potential – or indeed if B mistakenly ascribes a potentially effective, invigilating presence to A – then A's exercise of power will run on an independent motor. If B seeks not to trigger A's interference, B may second-guess A's wishes and seek to keep A happy. B may self-censor his or her choices with a view to placating A or even resort to attempts at self-ingratiation. At this limit, A exercises the most exquisite form of power over B: a form of power in which B is both the mediator of A's control and its victim. Not only does A invigilate B, thereby helping to ensure that B acts as required; A inhibits or intimidates B, thereby making this assurance doubly assured.

3. From power to freedom

Amending and extending Dahl's analysis of power takes us to the borders of normative theory. Let one person exercise power over another's choice, on the pattern of that analysis – let one person have a degree of control over the other's choice – and the natural question to ask is whether the person affected suffers a reduction of freedom in that choice. I argue, in line with the republican tradition, that such control involves a loss of freedom, provided it is uncongenial rather than

congenial, and uncontrolled rather than controlled. It will be useful in conclusion, then, if I show how these distinctions apply within the amended and extended analysis.

Congenial and uncongenial control

In order to deliberate about what to do, in the manner that is distinctive of human beings, we have to assume with respect to the options before us in any context that we can take one or we can take another; call this the principle of personal choice. The principle holds that in any such choice the options are there for us as things that, in the most basic sense possible, are available for choice. Sometimes, of course, we think of an option, not in the basic terms in which it is so available, but under the richer description that reaches out to include a desired but uncertain consequence; we think of it as hitting the target, for example, rather than just trying to hit the target. However, in every case of deliberation and decision there has to be an aspect under which each option presents itself to us such that we can think: I can do that or not do that; whether I do it, is up to me.²

With the notion of personal choice explained, it is possible to distinguish between congenial and uncongenial exercises of power: congenial and uncongenial forms of control. Suppose that B faces a personal choice between options x, y and z and that A exercises power in raising the probability that B will do x, whether on a particular occasion or more generally. This exercise of power will be congenial if it leaves the can-do assumption in place with each option; if it enables B to think, and think correctly, of each option as it was originally presented, I can just do that or not do that; it is up to me. The exercise of power will be uncongenial, on the other hand, if it undermines or jeopardizes this assumption in the case of any of the options.

The congenial exercise of power is associated with reasoning or deliberation. As human beings reason with themselves, shaping their own deliberation and decision-making, so they can play this same reasoning role, not just with themselves, but also with one another. They can lend one another their reason, as it were, taking the part of advisors or collaborators, and helping one another to get clear on the options available in any choice and on the pros and cons of those alternatives. They can act in relation to one another as an *amicus curiae*, a friend of the court. This will show up particularly in the fact that the help provided in such co-reasoning, like the help provided in self-reasoning, leaves the agent in a position to choose as he or she will; the advice or analysis provided may be rejected.

A may exercise a degree of control over B via co-reasoning or deliberation of this kind, changing the probabilities attached to one or more of the options that are thought to be available. Nevertheless, that sort of control will not be uncongenial, since it will do nothing to undermine the can-do assumptions associated with personal choice. Where B could rightly have made a can-do assumption prior to receiving counsel, he or she will still be able to endorse that assumption in its wake. The claim that co-reasoning is a congenial exercise of power will be unsurprising but it supports a corresponding line on the rather more controversial case, where one agent controls what another does by making an offer rather than issuing a threat (Nozick 1969). The line supported is that normal offers or rewards do not make for an uncongenial form of control.

Suppose that A is deliberating with B about what B should do, as in the model just given of congenial control. One of the things that A may usefully point out to B, and do so without exercising uncongenial control, is that the options available, say x, y, and z, can be extended to include the option of choosing y and getting a reward from C for doing so. This will be so if C really wants B to take x, and might be prepared, at least if approached in advance, to promise to reward the choice of that option. Now suppose that what is true of C under this hypothesis is actually true of A, and that A knows this. And suppose that A points out to B that as a matter of fact there is a further option available, apart from x, y and z, neat; this is the option, x+, of doing x and receiving a reward from A for doing so. If A's telling B about C was not an instance of

uncongenial control, neither can A's telling B about A – thereby effectively making an offer – be an instance of uncongenial control. It will not be an instance of uncongenial control so long as the offer is refusible, sincere, and non-mesmerizing.

By contrast with the deliberative case – including the case of a regular, refusible offer – A's control over B's choice will be uncongenial to the extent that it manipulates B's capacity to choose deliberatively or undermines the truth or the thinkability of one of B's correct can-do assumptions. The control exercised may undermine the truth of an assumption by removing one option from the set of options available, as in rendering the choice of that option impossible. Alternatively, it may undermine the truth of an assumption by replacing that option by one that involves an extra difficulty or penalty or constraint (or perhaps an extra, unrefusable reward); with such a rider attached to an option, B will no longer be able to think rightly of the option, as originally presented: I can do *that*. Alternatively, finally, the control exercised by A may undermine the thinkability of a can-do assumption by leading B to believe – rightly or wrongly – that one or another of the options has been removed or replaced.

How might A exercise uncongenial control over B? There are a number of possibilities, as already registered in the second section.

- *Interference*. A may interfere with B in manipulating B's choice, in removing or replacing an option, or in deceiving A about the options available.
- *Invigilation*. With or without B's awareness, A may stand by and invigilate B's choice for whether it is, or is likely to be, to A's taste; let it be acceptable and A does nothing, let it be unacceptable and A interferes.
- *Inhibition*. A may inhibit B by inducing or availing of a belief in B, mistaken or otherwise, that A is able to interfere in those ways. This may lead B to exercise self-censorship or self-ingratiation: to try to avoid choices that are displeasing to A or to try to give A an incentive not to practice interference.³

These different varieties of impact will involve uncongenial control, since they all undermine the deliberative assumption of personal choice; this is the assumption that with each option originally on offer the agent, B, is positioned to think, and rightly think, I can just do that. Interference does this by its very definition. Invigilation does it insofar as it replaces an option – perhaps every single option in the choice – by a burdened substitute: an option, z, will be replaced by z-provided-it-is-to-A's-taste. And inhibition does it insofar as B takes A, rightly or wrongly, to have replaced an option in that manner; where B could previously see z as an available option, for example, the option presented will now be: z-provided-it-is-to-A's-taste.⁴

Controlled and uncontrolled control

With the category of uncongenial control defined, it may seem that we can say: a person is free in a given choice just to the extent that no one exercises uncongenial control over the choice. That is not quite right, according to the republican tradition. For the tradition always makes a point of stressing that what is important is that no one exercise uncongenial control on an arbitrary rather than a non-arbitrary basis.

This distinction is not spelled out very carefully in the long republican tradition but I have suggested elsewhere that it may plausibly be taken as the distinction between control, on the one hand, that is not forced to track the interests that the controlled person is disposed to avow – not forced to track the person's interests according to his or her own judgments – and control, on the other hand, that is restricted by being forced to track those interests (Pettit 1997). Moreover, understood in that way, we can make good sense of the distinction within the broad terms with which we have been working here.



Suppose that I am worried about smoking too much and decide to ask my partner to keep the key to the tobacco box hidden and to refuse to give it to me before dinnertime. Suppose, in particular, that this regime is subject to my continuing affirmation; I can withdraw at dinnertime on any day by calling it off for later periods. In the scenario envisaged, I am subject to the uncongenial control of my partner during daytime, since the option of having a smoke is removed from me, or at least made somewhat more difficult. However, intuitively, this sort of control is not a violation of my freedom, since the regime that allows it is subject to my own continuing control. My partner's interference represents a controlled sort of uncongenial control, not the normal variety.

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This gloss on the notion of non-arbitrary interference and control enables us to see why the republican tradition should only have indicted arbitrary interference, or the capacity for arbitrary interference, as the source of a restriction on someone's freedom. The story of Ulysses and the sirens would have served as an ancient illustration of the contrast in question. In republican thought, the distinction was important because of the institutional challenge it raised: that of identifying those conditions, if there are any, under which the governmental control of civic life can be rendered non-arbitrary and reconciled with the freedom of those who live under it. That challenge remains of contemporary significance.

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Conclusion

Dahl's classic paper on power remains relevant and useful, then, in contemporary discussion. It may need some small amendments, as outlined in the first section. However, it allows of extensions that make room for both Marxist and civic republican perspectives on power. In addition, fleshed out with the distinctions between congenial and uncongenial power, and between the controlled and uncontrolled versions of uncongenial power, it enables us to reconstruct the republican conception of freedom. For a given choice, an agent enjoys such freedom to the extent that he or she is not subject to the uncongenial, uncontrolled power of others.

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Republicans were particularly concerned with how people could be liberated from such power, not just in any choice, but in the basic liberties: in those choices that are of significance in personal life and that can be fully enjoyed by everyone consistently with being simultaneously enjoyed by others (Pettit 2008). In order to explore the republican conception of liberty properly, then, we would need to move on to the consideration of the means whereby people might be protected in their basic liberties – and protected, if possible, by a state that exercised only a controlled version of uncongenial power in their lives. Nevertheless, that exploration would carry us well beyond the limited concerns of this paper.

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Notes

1. Notice that in this case, the distinction between possessing and exercising power tends to break down. To have the resources that enable A to exercise power will just be to exercise power, provided that A implicitly or explicitly invigilates B.
2. My inclination is to think that we should take an option to be a course of action such that, as things stand independently in the world, it is up to the agent whether or not that course of action materializes. This conception means that a course of action may be an option for me, even if it is not logically guaranteed that I can realize it. All that is required is that in fact, things in the world conspire to let me realize it; they do not rule out that possibility, nor do they leave it just up to chance. It may be an option for me that I share a piece of information with someone, even though it is not logically guaranteed that he or

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she will hear what I say, but it will not be an option for me that I hit an archery target: things may or may not turn out to ensure that my effort is successful.

3. This scenario is effectively equivalent to one in which B succeeds in making interference by A unlikely by offering A rewards for not interfering. B will control A's interference but only in the congenial way that leaves A still with the interfering options that establish A's control.
4. In self-censorship B will seek to avoid z, in self-ingratiation B will seek to exploit A's taste for some reward, making the choice of y in the presence of that reward palatable to A.

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