

# On Power

Neurophilosophical  
Foundations and  
Policy Implications

by

**Nayef R. F. Al-Rodhan**

Series in Philosophy



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# Introduction

Writing a book about “power” is challenging. Many have tried to decipher the concept, the notion, the meaning of power in human society. Some have managed to present inspired theories, and others have influenced their peers with convincing arguments. Is power a notion, is it a concept, and is it tangible? It’s a challenge to grasp because the very meaning of power has been so widely debated, and it remains one of the most contested and contentious notions in philosophy and politics.

The complexity of the term *power* seems endless. Greek mythology, the Sanskrit scripture of the *Bhagavad Gita*, religious texts such as the Bible and the Koran, political philosophers (ancient, modern, and contemporary), statesmen across centuries (CE): all have had something to say about power. Whether invoked in relation to the cosmos or to the gods, or expressed in terms of relations among people or states, power has been a fundamental preoccupation of literature, philosophy, mythology, and political theory. So, where does one begin? How does one make sense of such a complex conceptual maze?

My goal in this project is to provide a panoramic, in-depth, historical, contemporary and predictive analysis of power. I define power as *the ability to exercise influence, positively or negatively, in order to achieve specific endpoints that satisfy primordial or perceived psychological predilections and provide innate neurochemical gratification*. In doing so, I go a step further from previous general conceptualizations of power such as that proposed by Robert Dahl, for example, who described power as any case in which “A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do.”<sup>1</sup> This book will look deeper into the history of power, outlining its role in the history of humanity and, more importantly, in the context of human nature. This conceptualization will seek to understand not only individual power, but crucially—critically—power as conceived in social, political, cultural and national contexts.

Some key questions have guided my inquiry: How is power expressed in neurochemical terms and what does that tell us about human nature? How has the meaning of power evolved from thousands of years ago to the present day? I posit that the meaning of power *has* changed and evolved dramatically over the course of recent history. What are the main ways that the meaning of power has been transformed over time at the individual, collective, and state levels? How will automation alter the meaning of power? How is human enhancement challenging the notion of power in a societal context? Globally, and at the state level, what imminent changes should one expect in the distribution of power?

The themes explored throughout the book help shed new light on the way power has been exercised in the past and where it is headed in the face of political and technological transformations. I hope to make an original attempt to draw on the recent findings in the field of neuroscience to produce a neurochemical understanding of the nature of power. Thinkers have conventionally defined power as the capacity to influence or coerce. Bertrand Russell regarded it as one of the most profound human desires, one that is boundless and can never be fully satisfied. The advent of neuroscience in the twentieth century, and its incredible tools for mapping changes in the human brain down to the neurocellular and neuroanatomical levels, has brought about new insights into power—including absolute power. These insights into the human brain also demonstrate how political power is expressed neurochemically as well as how transitions and political change can be handled securely and sustainably. But before reaching for contemporary tools to understand and analyze power, let's take a panoramic view of other influential philosophical understandings of power.

Throughout history, philosophers have explored the notion of power in great depth. In the nineteenth century, Friedrich Nietzsche and Arthur Schopenhauer put forward very different conceptions of it. While Schopenhauer insisted on viewing power as the “will to live,” devoid of anything more significant than our egoistic human nature, Nietzsche asserted that the substance of morality is contained within power.

For Schopenhauer, there is nothing beyond will. Robert Wicks has summarized his conception: “The world as it is in itself is an endless striving and blind impulse with no end in view, devoid of knowledge, lawless, absolutely free, entirely self-determining and almighty.”<sup>2</sup> The “will to live” thus encapsulates the whole notion of power that exists in a world without sense or meaning beyond its attainment. Only our egoistic nature helps us survive in a directionless environment. In Schopenhauer's own words, “the will to live everywhere preys upon itself and in different forms is its own nourishment, till finally the human race, because it subdues all the others, regards nature as a manufactory for its use.”<sup>3</sup> Provided we are filled with the feeling of power with which the will endows us, “we need have no fear for our existence, even in the presence of death.”<sup>4</sup>

To Nietzsche, by contrast, good and bad in the world are defined by reference to the notion of power. Indeed, there exists good and bad to the precise extent that power is obtained or relinquished. In his writings, good is defined as “everything that heightens the feeling of power in man, the will to power, power itself”; whereas bad is “everything that is born of weakness.”<sup>5</sup> Nietzsche thus maintains that one's increasing sense of power and ability to overcome obstacles to its acquisition constitutes the very meaning of happiness in the world. His definition of power, as R. Lanier Anderson has summarized it, is the “tendency toward growth, strength, domination, or expansion.”<sup>6</sup>

Nietzsche's notion of power as attained and maintained provides meaning for the concept of "good," but also connotes the perennial struggle for absolute dominance, involving competition and comparison with others. For Nietzsche, the tension inherent in this circumstance is what makes humans strive for more; indeed, strive for the "will to power." This doctrine, Anderson argues, "seems to claim that everything that exists rests fundamentally on an underlying basis of 'power-centers,' whose activity and interactions are explained by a principle that they pursue the expansion of their power."<sup>7</sup> One can retain from his writings that the world is made of power centers that exert force and test their respective strengths against one another. The notion of power centers is disputed and is a focus of extended scholarly controversy. Nietzsche's description of the concept is abstract, evoking references to nineteenth-century physics and the notion of "force-centers," although there are also possible references to concrete entities, such as people and organisms, exerting a will to power. Nietzsche primarily sought to refute Schopenhauer by explaining that life is not meaningless, and that power is precisely what drives humanity to evolve and improve. We aim at the enhancement of our power, because it is "good" for our species and for the world in general.

In the twentieth century, new wars and new realities changed our conception of the world and of human nature. Bertrand Russell distinguished himself with a deep and inspired analysis of the notion of power. Nations and nationalisms had torn profound wounds across continents, which may be why Russell's conception of power is largely focused specifically on *state* power—whether economic, political, or cultural. He insists that some human desires are "essentially boundless and incapable of complete satisfaction," and that "of the infinite desires of man, the chief desires are the desires for power and glory."<sup>8</sup> For Russell, power is "naked," because its subjects respect it "solely because it is power, and not for any other reason."<sup>9</sup> He emphasizes, however, that different types of impulses create the desire for more power, namely "explicit" impulses—inherent in leaders, and "implicit" impulses—inherent in followers.<sup>10</sup> He thus rejects Nietzsche's "master-slave morality," arguing that followers do not feel they have the requisite competence to lead and end up seeking out a leader. Seeking power can thus be a "genuinely cooperative enterprise," in which followers gain vicariously from the achievements of their leader.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, Russell suggested, and I believe rightfully so, that "human beings find it profitable to live in communities, but their desires, unlike those of bees in a hive, remain largely individual; hence arises the difficulty of social life and the need of government."<sup>12</sup> This vision supports and completes his theory of "naked power."

The features of Russell's concept of power are different from those outlined in the nineteenth century. Power is the ability to achieve goals, but is also a form of social domination, as the "impulse of submission . . . has its roots in fear."<sup>13</sup>

This analysis of the notion of power thereby includes an appeal to emotionality. Ultimately, Russell's definition of power can be summarized as the "production of intended effects." He breaks forms of influence down into three general categories: the power of force and coercion, the power of reward and punishment, and the power of propaganda and habit.<sup>14</sup> The key ambition of Russell's work is thus to develop a new method of conceiving of the social sciences, which amounts to the deeper examination of the different forms of power; meaning the analysis of the various ways human beings have power over one another.

Russell's analysis highlights central ideas about the notion of power. To me, the validity of his arguments lies in his understanding and thorough exposé of the contrasting notions of "power of" and "power over." This is of interest because the emotional aspect included in his theories can be explained and verified through neuroscience. It strongly resonates with my own theory of human nature, which includes aspects of emotionality, and, critically, the neurochemical reaction produced by fear. Before presenting my own approach to the notion, however, I would like to mention a third philosophical source that has significantly contributed to the discussion of power.

After the Second World War, the world experienced a period of uncertainty on numerous fronts, including in domestic and global politics. Signs of renewal and recovery began to emerge, however, in the following years (at least in Western Europe), and with this, a growing will transcend some of the barriers that defined the previous eras. It was in this context that the European integration process began, as well as other regional cooperation movements. The French postmodernist movement realized the potential of this shift, and seized the opportunity to add an important dimension to the analysis of power—the idea that truth and objectivity do not exist; only power and interest do. According to Michel Foucault, there is no power in the substantive sense. To him, power is characterized by relations. Relations of power consist of a variety of more or less organized, hierarchical, and coordinated clusters. The analysis of power thus necessarily extends beyond the limits of the state. Foucault insists that the "state is far from being able to occupy the whole field of actual power relations."<sup>15</sup> In fact, he rightly explains that "the state can only operate on the basis of other already existing power relations." He also proposed an interesting explanation of the link between power and truth. Truth, he argues, "is not outside power or lacking in power." Indeed, each society has its own "regime of truth." The accepted discourse, the mechanisms installed to discern true and false, the sanctions, the values, the status of those who articulate truth—all of these, combined, form a regime of truth specific to each power relation. In other words, "'truth' is to be understood as a system of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation

and operation of statements.”<sup>16</sup> Foucault maintains that power is “above all a relation of force,” but contrary to Nietzsche’s goodness–power relationship, he views power as that which represses.<sup>17</sup> He thus emphasizes the idea that “we are subjected to the production of truth through power, and we cannot exercise power except through the production of truth.”<sup>18</sup> For Foucault, power and interests are thus unbreakably intertwined.

Michel Foucault has understood that we are influenced by our surroundings, and as such, we are part of a field of power relations that create various regimes of truth depending on where we are within them. My own exploration of the concept of power will offer a neuroscientific analysis that can justify this line of thinking. The added layer of analysis I propose brings scientific evidence to bear to support these philosophical propositions.

Based on this very brief and non-exhaustive review of the literature most relevant to the exploration of the concept of “power,” I would like to sketch a brief outline of the theoretical and scientific analysis I propose for gaining a better understanding of it. Both Schopenhauer and Nietzsche insist that the notion of power is strongly linked with humanity’s will to survive, to live, to strive for power, to be superior to others. From this, I derive what I call *egoism*—the primal instinct for survival that is the goal of our neurochemical makeup. Russell’s analysis of “power over” and “power of” suggests a form of fear linked with the understanding power. Fear is part of our emotional mapping, and is a central element in our instinct to survive. In this book—and in my previous writings over the past decade—I put forward an interpretation of the concept of power in light of emotionality.

Finally, as Foucault correctly interprets it in my view, power is linked with the environment we find ourselves in. We are influenced by, and taught to behave according to, power relations, and their corresponding regimes of truth. Power is thus strongly connected to our surroundings. From a neuroscientific standpoint, these claims can be substantiated with evidence showing that the malleability of our brains enables our environments to easily affect us. I therefore claim that we all start on an amoral level, and begin learning moral values only when confronted with the realities in which we live. My theory of human nature, which I have termed *emotional amoral egoism*, relies on findings from neuroscience that have accumulated over recent decades. These findings, I argue, bring robust illumination to bear on the concept and reality of power.

The reason I am interested in analyzing power is the opportunity to take a new approach to the traditional discourse. More specifically, I am interested in the application of neuroscientific insights to the analysis of the concept of power in the field of international relations.

When analyzing the concept of power in international relations one is really “investigating influence,” as Steven Lukes points out. Power resides in the hands of those who influence. Lukes explains that, among other things, “as a result of mystification, repression, or the sheer unavailability of alternative ideological frames, subordinates remain unaware of their true interests.”<sup>19</sup> This is why, even though the terms “influence” and “power” are often used interchangeably, power goes beyond influence. It is not only “the capacity to do things and in social situations to affect others to get the outcome we want,” the basic definition Joseph Nye begins with, but also not to allow the development of certain possibilities for others to discover different outcomes.<sup>20</sup> Power can thus be viewed as the ability to influence and control a narrative, without providing the tools to allow an understanding that there might be an alternative. Thus, in contrast to Robert Dahl’s version of A getting “B to do something that B would not otherwise do,” Lukes suggests a more nuanced version: “A in some way affects B,” and “A does so in a non-trivial or significant manner.”<sup>21</sup> Rather than the simple exertion of control Dahl offers, power for Lukes involves *shaping perception*. It can be viewed as the ability to “prevent people, to whatever degree, from having grievances by shaping their perceptions, cognitions and preferences in such a way that they accept their role in the existing order of things.”<sup>22</sup> But how can we measure and interpret the magnitude of power? Indeed, what if power holders misread people’s interests?

The entity that has thus far proven most relevant when it comes to protecting people’s interests in the present geopolitical context is the nation-state. As I highlighted in a previous article, the capacity of a state in international politics has long been assessed in terms of its military prowess and physical resources.<sup>23</sup> Frequently, geopolitics has focused on a few specific conceptions of power without providing a comprehensive framework for analyzing all of the elements that contribute to the stability of states and their positions in the international system. I thus analyzed statecraft in the twenty-first century in light of its key components, and this framework goes beyond the dogma of geopolitics. Distinct from traditional geopolitical analysis, my theoretical framework of *meta-geopolitics* provides a more nuanced treatment of the determinants of state power in terms of seven crucial capacities that make up national power.

These capabilities break down as follows: *social and health issues, domestic politics, economics, the environment, science and human potential, military and security issues, and international diplomacy*. I analyze these capabilities in detail in Chapter 3, but it is important to emphasize the following point here. These seven capacities of states provide a measure of state stability and can be used as indicators to predict the longevity of a particular state, and to point to troubling

trends within states that undermine their stability. As a more comprehensive understanding of power in the twenty-first century, the meta-geopolitics paradigm also offers a basis from which to derive policy recommendations because weaknesses in any one of the above-described capacities also often present an opportunity for reform, and thus for improved governance. Understanding the concept of power in the realms of international relations thus also means providing scales to measure the status of a power center or actor. As I present in more detail later in the book, I propose using such measuring scales to assess state capabilities as means of reaching a better understanding power and the *perception* of power in the twenty-first century.

Traditionally, within international relations theory, state power has been linked with a form of hard power, which can be narrowly defined as a military force and economic might. Imposing security barriers, menacing with invasion tactics, or influencing trade agreements has long been seen as the main measuring scale of state power. At the end of the Cold War, and through the spread of liberalism and liberal norms, another form of power began to take shape, and was advocated for—namely, *soft power*. Soft power is primarily linked with the spreading of a state's culture and lifestyle. Furthermore, a strategic combination of hard and soft power led Joseph Nye to suggest, back in 2003, that power can also be *smart*.<sup>24</sup> In fact, according to Nye, in order for power to be smart, a state needs to find “ways to combine resources into successful strategies in the new context of power diffusion and the ‘rise of the rest.’” Indeed, he continues, “a smart power provides the answers to five questions: First, what goals or outcomes are preferred?” Second, “what resources are available and in which context?” Third, “what are the positions and preferences of the targets of influence attempts?” Fourth, “which forms of power behavior are most likely to succeed?” And fifth, “what is the probability of success?”<sup>25</sup> The influence of a nation-state can thus be measured by its employment of force or of cultural persuasion. I would add, however, that while all three forms of power are indeed observable and help establish the status and capabilities of a state, power also needs to be *just*. One of the aims of the present work is thus to strongly emphasize that hard, soft, or smart forms of power above all need to be subjected to an overarching form: *just power*. States and other power holders must act in accordance with the respect for human dignity and human rights around the world.

As my argument starts from this geopolitical perspective on power, and incorporates a neuroscientific approach to the concept of power and its impact on social relations, the aim of this book is to propose sustainable solutions in light of the evolution of the concept of power over time, and thereby to help make sense of our highly interconnected and technologically advanced world. The timing of this publication reflects the ever-growing fragility of world

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## **About the Author**

Professor Nayef Al-Rodhan is a neuroscientist, philosopher and geostrategist. He is an Honorary Fellow, St. Antony's College, University of Oxford, Senior Fellow and Head of the Geopolitics and Global Futures Programme at the Geneva Center for Security Policy, Geneva, Switzerland, and Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of Philosophy, School of Advanced Studies, University of London. He is also a member of the Council on Frontier Risks at the World Economic Forum (WEF). He is a prize-winning scholar who was voted among the top thirty most influential neuroscientists in the world. He has written twenty-two books and 250 articles. He was educated at the Mayo Clinic, Yale University, and Harvard University. Through many innovative books and articles, he has made significant conceptual contributions to the interplay between neuroscience, philosophy, international relations, and policy. He has applied this to the study of human nature, history, global security, national security, contemporary geopolitics, cultural discourse, global futures, frontier cascading risks, outer space security, synthetic biology, transhumanism, artificial intelligence, human dignity, sustainable governance, conflict, the neurochemistry of power, and war and peace.



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