1.3. HUMANKIND, POWER AND HISTORY – FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONS

At the beginning of the previous section, we stated that the nature of power necessarily depends on the nature of humankind. Power is an irreducible social phenomenon that exists only in and through interactive relationships between persons. Without people, there is no power. However, the converse is also true. Because humans are by nature social beings, they are constantly exposed to and must also deal with power. No one has so concisely encapsulated this insight as Aristotle with his *zoon politikon*, a political animal.[84] This designation signifies, firstly, that humankind instinctively aspires to fellowship and has been accordingly striving for organization into groups throughout world history. People share this characteristic, as Aristotle notices rather humorously, for instance, with bees. However, secondly and more crucially, the Aristotelian statement means that human beings cannot be thought of as detached from a cooperative community in which they are embedded. Our needs and goals, indeed our entire self-image, are constituted by communal ties. No matter what role and function we attribute to ourselves – whether father, manager, tennis player, environmental activist, model airplane maker or Catholic – we always assume a social context that gives meaning to our self-description. Any attempt to conceptually separate individuals from social ties in order to determine what they are 'in themselves' can only end in abstract and uninformative anthropology.[85]

84 Mulgan, Richard (1974): Aristotle's Doctrine That Man Is a Political Animal, *Hermes,* 102 (3), pp. 438-445.; Papadis, Dimitris (2006): Is Man by Nature a Political and Good Animal, According to Aristotle?, *Phronimon,* 7 (1), pp. 21-33.; and Miller, Fred (2011): Aristotle's Political Theory, in: Edward N. Zalta (ed.), *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy,* [online] https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2017/entries/aristotle-politics/, retrieved on 21.12.2017. Yu (2005) points out that this opinion is hardly restricted to Hellenistic or even Western schools of thought. Similar consideration, although differing in detail, may also be found in Confucianism. Cf. Yu, Jiyuan (2005): Confucius' Relational Self and Aristotle's Political Animal, *History of Philosophy Quarterly,* 22 (4), pp. 281-300.

85 Accordingly, the economic and social scientific ideal of humankind as *homo oeconomicus,* i.e. as a socially unbound and instrumentally rational utility maximizer, is not only an ethically questionable but above all an extraordinarily weak explanation. See thereto Taylor, Charles (1989): *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

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Still, these social contexts and attachments, as we noted in the last section, are always permeated by power. Within the social field, power is ubiquitous. It manifests itself in friendships as well as in love relationships, in sports and in children's education. This leads to the following conclusion: (a) because humans are social beings, (b) and because the realm of the social is inextricably linked with power, (c) humankind is inescapably exposed to power. Of course, in the history of global civilization, people have never submitted to this fate without resistance. The most influential strategy of resistance can be found in Buddhism and Christian mysticism, as in the teachings of Meister Eckhart: the overcoming of (earthly) power through the dissolution of the self.[86] The radicalness of the idea cannot be overestimated. The individual can only shed the shackles of worldly existence and cease to be the object of others' power by overcoming his or her personal perspective on the natural and social environment through strict meditation, asceticism or hermitic retreat, it is argued. However, this is not a question of erasing the phenomenon of power, but of achieving a spiritual state of absolute emptiness and letting go, as it were, arriving in a domain in which power no longer matters because there is no longer a personal entity that is subject to it. Buddhism refers to this state as *Nirvana* or the *Pure Land.*[87]

At this point, we encounter an obvious intersection with the ancient life philosophy of the Stoics, as discussed in Chapter 1.2. Similar to Buddhism and some schools of Christian mysticism, the Stoics understand our earthly, spatio-temporal existence as a sphere of dependence, inadequacy, suffering, greed, and misguided needs that must be negated and overcome. The attraction of this way of thinking continues to this day, and we would hardly be inclined to speak pejoratively of or disparage it. Nevertheless, it is clear that a lifestyle of world renunciation is not a realistic option for everybody, not even for the majority of people. For most of us, our status as a *zoon politikon*, as a worldly and socially bound being, is not a burden, but an opportunity offering fulfillment. The consistent dissolution of the self does not seem to be a form of salvation, but instead an existential threat to all that is dear to us: familial and friendly ties, professional success, physical and mental

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86 Meister Eckhart (1260 - 1328) was a German theologian, Dominican philosopher and spiritual master who gained prominence during the Avignon Papacy and was ultimately tried as a suspected heretic. Cf. Hackett, Jeremiah M. (2013): *A Companion to Meister Eckhart,* Leiden: Brill.

87 Regarding the Buddhistic concept of the Pure Land, see Bando, Shojun (1973): Jesus Christus und Amida. Zu Karl Barths Verständnis des Buddhismus vom Reinen Land, in: Yagi Seiichi and Ulrich Luz (eds.), *Gott in Japan: Anstöße zum Gespräch mit japanischen Philosophen, Theologen, Schriftstellern.* Munich: Kaiser, pp. 72-93.; p. 73.

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enjoyment and, last but not least, the consciousness of ourselves as distinct persons with specific characters, our own biographies, likes, dislikes, values and persuasions. For those who are unwilling or unable to pay this price then, the problem of power remains. Since power is an inseparable part of our (worldly) existence, there is no point in worrying about how to get rid of it. Instead, we need to better understand how it manifests itself in concrete terms, how we deal with it, how we shape and legitimize it. Here, it is helpful to recall the discussion of the principles of power and to formulate questions from this position:

1. The phenomena of power are ubiquitous and diverse – but what are their specific shapes and forms, and how can the social fields in which they occur be classified?
2. Power must be justified – but how do we concretely legitimize it?
3. Power can be purposively produced – but how? What are the resources and techniques by which we gain, consolidate, multiply and exercise power, and how can they be used successfully?

With these questions, of course, we depart the sphere of general definition and enter into the domain of the concrete community with its historically contingent, religious, economic and political practices and habits. We turn our attention to the social concretions of power. This focus on power as a historically concrete, mutable phenomenon is indispensable because the relationship between humankind and power can only be experienced in the temporal-spatial dimension of historicity. In other words, every figuration of power is always the power of a concrete person or group in the historical context of their respective community. The talk of power *sui generis* is only an abstraction of this historically concrete form of our existence. In order to understand the phenomenon of power, we must therefore take into account the *existential challenges* that arise from the historicity of our existence. The discussion of these challenges introduces, as it were, the following chapter, Chapter 2, which is dedicated to the concretions of power.

The *first* existential challenge can be summarized in a simple slogan: *everything is changeable.* Every phenomenon in space and time is – within the parameters of logic, of the laws of nature and of the principles of power outlined in Chapter 1.2 – subject to continuous and sometimes dramatic transformation processes. Powerful states, such as the Roman Empire or the Achaemenid Empire, develop and disintegrate over a period of centuries; influential religions, such as Mithraism, suddenly fall into oblivion, while at the same time Christianity experiences a global ascent; seemingly incontestable forms of rule, such as the absolute monarchy, are swept away in revolutionary fury within a few days; technological

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innovations, such as the internet, turn understandings of communication and information on their heads within a generation. The changeability of the political, economic, religious, technological, and not least also of the natural world of humankind thus makes up the core of what we call history.

This insight is as old as occidental philosophy itself. It already resounds in the writings of the great pre-Socratic thinker Heraclitus, to whom the saying *panta rhei* (Greek: "all things flow") is attributed.[88] Heraclitus, however, does not mean that our natural and social environment is completely chaotic or so fluid that any orientation and planning becomes impossible. Indeed he insists, as the historian of philosophy Marcel van Ackeren notes, that change is by no means so disordered that everything is always and in all respects subject to change, a condition which would lead to nothing being identifiable.[89] Our existence is, consciously or unconsciously, rather in a field of tension of constants and variances. Consequently, the practical challenge for humankind is to predict *which aspects* of the natural and social environment change in *which way* and to decide what influence they themselves can and will have on these transformation processes. This *conditio humana* is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it constitutes humankind as being capable of shaping their existence. On the other hand, it brings with it a constant uncertainty about the future, and thus the fear of loss for what has been achieved and the burden of assuming responsibility.[90]

In relation to the phenomenon of power, the changeability of our lifeworld first and foremost means that power may always be lost (but may also be gained). No ruler is inviolable, no state order is guaranteed perpetuity, no political alliance is set in stone forever, no power resource is inexhaustible. From this circumstance arises the necessity of a *strategic use* of power. Power actors must always align their actions with probabilistic goal-means-environment calculations that take into account the variability of their decision-making context; otherwise they run the risk of being outmaneuvered by other actors or being overwhelmed by changes in their environment (for discussion of the concept of strategy, see Chapters 2.5.2 and 3.3.1). In other words, those wanting to exercise power in a constantly changing environment face the challenge of predicting the behavior of their opponents

88 The pre-Socratic thinker Heraclitus is for Plato the "theorist of universal flux". Cf. Kahn, Charles H. (2008): *Art and Thought of Heraclitus,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.; p. 4.

89 van Ackeren, Marcel (2006): *Heraklit: Vielfalt und Einheit seiner Philosophie,* Bern: Peter Lang.; p. 107.

90 In more contemporary times, both aspects have been cultivated most notably in the philosophy of existentialism. See Sartre ([1945] 2007).

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and allies as well as the development and effectiveness of their own means of power, in order to use these predictions to define their goals. Only through strategy does the changeability of the natural and social world become (at least partially) manageable. So anyone who does not plan the use of power and is only guided by instinct, will become the plaything of the Heraclitian concept *panta rhei.*

The very notion of strategic planning, however, also presupposes a concept of time as a manageable resource that can be used to one's advantage and that can be compartmentalized and measured in discrete units.[91] Once power actors conceive human history not as cyclical, i.e. as an eternal recurrence of the same states of affairs, but rather as linear and directed towards a future that is yet indeterminate, does strategy – understood as a probabilistic endeavor – fully come to its fruition. This is by no means trivial as historians such as Reinhart Koselleck and Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht have made abundantly clear:[92] In different cultures and eras, time has always been experienced and described differently, the relationship between past, present and future being sometimes conceived as one of cosmic continuity and sometimes as teleological connectedness or indeed characterized by caesuras and fractures. Historically speaking, then, the universal concept of one singular time that passes according to the same constant and universal laws for all peoples and cultures is relatively new and the outcome of global Western influence in the nineteenth century. Considering the fact that time is not an objective given as such, but culturally malleable, it is only natural that actors have also sought to utilize it directly as a power resource by introducing new calendars or changing the number of weekdays, e.g. during the French Revolution or Stalin's reign in the Soviet Union. Following Christopher Clark, we may label this specific power technique chrono politics.[93] In a way, chrono politics is a variant of technical power as described in section 2.1 in that it affects people's lives via technological means (such as metrical measurements and standardization) and forces them to adapt their habits or modes of production to new rhythms and tempos.

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91 Cf. Clark, Christopher (2019): *Time and Power Visions of History in German Politics, from the Thirty Years' War to the Third Reich,* Princeton/Oxford: Princeton University Press.

92 Cf. Koselleck, Reinhart (2004): *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time. Series: Studies in Contemporary German Social Thought,* translated and with an introduction by Keith Tribe, New York: Columbia University Press.; and Gumbrecht, Hans Ulrich (2004): *Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey,* Stanford: Stanford University Press.

93 Cf. Clark (2019): p. 6.

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The *second* challenge to humans in the context of their historical existence is: *everything has its price.* This does not mean, of course, that every act and every object may be monetized or that every person can be bought. We understand the term 'costs' rather in the widest possible sense – that is, as an acceptance of risks, losses and (negative) consequences. Accordingly, the principle states that all the merits and achievements of humankind are always linked to an (implicit) balancing of goods, considerable effort, a conscious sacrifice or renunciation.[94]

At first glance, this principle hardly seems tenable in its generality. Throughout human history, there have always been persons or groups to whom certain benefits and privileges have been conferred by birth or happy coincidence; benefits and privileges that others do not enjoy. Anyone born in the fifth century B.C. into the small group of the male citizens of Athens – and not into the much larger group of slaves and metics (resident foreigners without civil rights) – could make use of all the rights of Europe's first direct democracy. Those who belonged to the aristocracy in the Middle Ages or the modern era not only possessed exponentially more political and economic power than the rural population, but also enjoyed a higher life expectancy thanks to better medical care and a lower workload. A look at the present finally shows us a blatant discrepancy between the standards of living and the legal security of the industrialized and developing countries. Is not the absurdity of the principle 'everything has its price' revealed by these unearned – i.e. not acquired by achievement – privileges of whole nations?

However, a second, closer look shows a more nuanced picture, which also allows us to further sharpen the principle and its meaning. Let's start with the example of the medieval and modern European nobility. A central characteristic of this class is the understanding aptly outlined with the well-known dictum *"Noblesse oblige"* ("nobility obligates"). Behind this is the habitualized conviction that the aristocracy's supremacy is accompanied by exclusive obligations to the general public: exemplary behavior in all areas of life, a strict code of honor, charity towards the needy, constant readiness for military defense of the state and so on. The dictum *"Noblesse oblige"* thus means that the privileges of the peerage have a 'price', namely the fulfillment of exclusive social functions – connected with a specific life ideal. Now, it is clearly ludicrous to claim that in European history all members of the peerage fulfilled these requirements at all times. But such an admission misses the point: privileges, goods, resources, achievements,

94 Cf. Flaig, Egon (2017): *Die Niederlage der politischen Vernunft. Wie wir die Errungenschaften der Aufklärung verspielen,* Springe: zu Klampen. Thereby, Flaig addresses the decline in political reason, arguing that man is squandering the achievements of the Enlightenment.

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etc. do not exist in a vacuum, but are always and necessarily linked to specific social interactive relationships, anticipations, role models, and cost-benefit calculations. The one is never without the other.[95]

We can easily extend this conclusion that everything has its price, as understood above, to other areas: those who enjoy public attention and prestige must cultivate their reputation and accept that each of their actions and statements will be judged based on the proverbial gold scale; those who receive rich gifts from benefactors and friends are bound to gratitude and reciprocity; anyone seeking political, economic, artistic or scientific success must be willing to sacrifice other spheres of life, interests and, not infrequently, personal ties; and whoever strives for power in its various forms must learn to live with envy and adversaries. One might think that is only possible to break out of this paradigm through a lack of ambition, through a conscious unwillingness to will, as it were. Such a conclusion, however, would be deceptive. Even powerlessness costs something. Anyone who consciously renounces power as the potential for asserting their own interests against external resistance quickly becomes a plaything in the power of others. The attempted escape from the paradigm of "everything has its price" does not lead to freedom, but leads directly to the loss of autonomy.

Like the principle that everything is changeable, the principle that everything has its price is a *conditio humana,* a human condition. This has two practical consequences. Firstly, people at all times and in all cultural contexts face the task of identifying the price of the goods they have or seek. Secondly, they question whether they will pay the price and, if they do not want to, what alternatives to their current goals exist. Not only individuals have to face this problem. Especially in the context of political power, the cost issue is a continuous challenge for entire

95 This insight is found in very different versions in all cultures. It culminates in a great, metaphysically far-reaching form in the principle of karma, which we know from the reincarnation religions of Hinduism and Buddhism. In a nutshell, this principle says that every one of our actions – that is, morally good as well as bad – is directly related to our own well-being. Every wrongdoing will be compensated in the mid-term (either in this life or in the next) by an evil suffered, every good action will result in a benefit. Thus, the principle of karma extends the principle of "everything has its price" to the ethical sphere by postulating a strict law of equivalency: everything we do has its ethical price and everything that comes back to us is well deserved. For a compact discussion of the karma principle and its moral-philosophical implications, see Kaufman, Whitley (2007): Karma, Rebirth, and the Problem of Evil: a Reply to Critics, *Philosophy East and West,* 57 (4), pp. 559-560.

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states and their leadership elites. Of course, this question can only be repeatedly raised and clarified temporarily, but never finally settled.

The third challenge is: *not everything is achievable.* In Chapter 1.2, we have already emphasized that humankind is characterized by neediness, whereby actions are driven by natural inclinations (food, safety, closeness, etc.) and cultivated preferences (for exquisite wines, good books, expensive cars, new electronics, etc.). It is this characteristic, along with vulnerability, that exposes humankind to power. However, as the historian and political theorist Egon Flaig notes, there is another fundamental problem, that people's desires, however culturally oriented, tend to be insatiable.[96] The satisfaction of an inclination regularly initiates the formation of another inclination whose scope and fulfillment exceeds that of the previous one. On the other hand, this potentially infinite expansion of our range of needs is offset by a finite set of unevenly distributed resources. The result is that human needs remain continuously unfulfilled, frustrated. This *conditio humana* has – in general terms – two central effects: on the one hand, the unsatisfiability of their desires drives people to continuous innovation and stimulates inventiveness and entrepreneurship. Instead of accepting, e.g., a meager harvest that does not meet the nutritional needs of the community, grains are crossed in order to achieve higher yields in later years. Instead of accepting that the high production costs of a commodity make it attractive only to a small group of consumers, the manufacturing process is optimized so that new and less affluent buyers can be found. The history of humanity is a history of continuous increases in the efficiency and effectiveness of needs satisfaction against the background of finite resources. However, as Flaig recognizes, the principle of the unsatisfiability of all human desires is also a source of deprivation and disadvantage, of dissatisfaction and misfortune.[97] Even if we continuously optimize the process of satisfying needs through technology and cultural creation, we face a two-fold problem, first, that wishes grow along with improvements in this process and, second, that the all-round, fair – and ideally even global – satisfaction of all human needs is fundamentally utopian. The result of this is seen in continuous distribution struggles within and between communities, up to and including military conflicts. The key currency of these conflicts between individuals, classes and nations is, of course, power. The unfulfillability of desires cumulates in the struggle for influence.

However, this guiding theme, the phenomenon of power, represents a special case in this context. Unlike other objects of human inclination (knowledge, money, food, clothing, etc.), power is divisible but in its totality not enlargeable –

96 Cf. Flaig, Egon (2017): p. 46.

97 Ibid.: p. 47.

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that is, it is a constant good. Accordingly, the pursuit of power is always associated with a zero-sum game. The power of one is the impotence of another. What I gain in power, someone else has lost. There is no cultural technique and no technology to optimize the satisfaction of the natural striving of humankind for power (discussed in Chapter 1.2) – at least not in the sense of an increase in the total.

The only thing which can be optimized is the ability of competing actors to succeed in this zero-sum game. As we discuss in Chapter 2, these techniques of power are highly specific to the social fields (religion, economics, politics, etc.) involved. At this point, however, we do not intend to anticipate, but only to summarize the conclusion. In a world of scarce, unequally distributed resources, the insatiable needs of humankind not only lead to the optimization of needs satisfaction but also to distributional struggles, and consequently to a struggle for power; and since power is a constant good, human efforts for optimization concentrate here on techniques and means in the struggle for power itself. The practical challenge is obvious: those who want to prevail or win in zero-sum games are forced to constantly evaluate and innovate their means of power. Standstill means defeat.

Finally, the fourth and final existential challenge that runs throughout the history of humankind is that *everything strives for meaning.* For some of our readers, this may appear to be an esoteric category overburdened with ponderous content and pathos. And indeed, associations with a philosophical and theological grand scheme, the meaning of life, are almost inevitable.[98] The principle which we have introduced, however, is not in danger of getting into these deep waters. It merely focuses on the central fact that we humans have always been asking ourselves and others why-questions, not only in search of explanations (Why do magnetic needles point north? Why do the stars in the sky change with the seasons? Why do people follow a herding instinct?), but also so-called normative why-questions (Why should we honor father and mother? Why should we exercise and keep fit? Why should we study the history of our community? Why should we pay taxes? Why should we have a democratic form of government?). The latter questions call for convincing reasoning and, unlike explanatory why-questions, this requires more than adequately addressing cause-and-effect relationships in our natural and social environment. We have to show what kind of justification there is for democracy or parental respect. If this cannot be found, the corresponding conventions, the norms and forms of order, are proved meaningless to us. And they lose their obligatory nature.

98 For a refreshingly unpretentious and well-written treatment of this topic, see Nagel, Thomas (1987): *What Does It All Mean?*, New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press.

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The pursuit of meaning and justification, both in shaping our social order and in personal life projects and relationships, is an integral part of our anthropological constitution. It shapes the way we interact with each other, how we organize ourselves, and what demands we place on our communities. And accordingly, it also covers all areas of human life, from business and politics to sports, art and culture. Meaningfulness has an indisputable motivational force comparable to that of inclinations, positive and negative incentives, and authoritative attachments. If people regard a goal or a project as meaningful, they will seek, at least for the most part, to realize and defend it. If they classify it as meaningless, as barren of any justification and legitimacy, it will be virtually impossible to motivate them (without extrinsic incentives) for support and cooperation.

The demanding and searching for meaning has a consequence for the phenomenon of power, one which has already been implied in the discussion concerning the purposive production of power (see Chapter 1.2). The acceptance of power, be it the power of a head of government, football coaches, a church leader or a CEO, requires those subjugated to the power to recognize it as meaningful. Put simply, if power makes no sense, it lacks (intrinsic) motivational force. It has to rely on coercion. As we discuss in detail in Chapter 2.5.2 in our discussion of justification, however, such a constellation of power – especially in the area of political rule – is unstable. Power requires a justification. What is more, as we shall see, it needs a plausible understanding of the social world, based on shared history and common values and symbols.

The critical question of what gives meaning to our actions, our bonds and our communities has been answered in various ways through history. However, a central role has often – indeed, almost always – been played by religion, which is discussed as an independent field of power in Chapter 2.2.1. Religions provide sense by postulating a transcendent sphere beyond our natural senses which is populated by a deity or a pantheon, which is not only the source of moral values but which also embodies and defines a salvatory history of the world. By virtue of its capacity to satisfy the basic human need for meaning and at the same time to legitimize social forms of order and norms, religion is an almost unrivaled source of power. Therefore, it is not surprising that alternative paradigms providing human meaning, such as the Enlightenment or socialism, have always worked on religious models of reason and have even sometimes adopted religious logic systems and mindsets. Precisely because the pursuit of meaning is central to the justification of power, the struggles over it are among the most vehemently ideological battles in history. These give the following chapter a decisive, substantial foundation.

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At this point, we wish to conclude our overview of the challenges and questions that shape the relationship between humankind, power and history. We now redeem the promises initially made and look at the concretions of power in order to clarify which forms it assumes, in which fields it occurs, what logic it follows there – and finally, how it is exercised and legitimized.

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