

Is Power Noumenal in Nature?

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ABSTRACT: This paper engages Rainer Forst's doctrine of noumenal power. At the centre of this doctrine is its signature claim that power is noumenal in nature. I reconstruct Forst's definition of power and distinguish three conceptions of noumenal power in his writings. I argue that, on each conception, we should reject that claim. It emerges that the professed noumenality of power is either a trivial feature of power, or else a feature only of some forms of power. Consequently, Forst's definition of power cannot be adequate and the claim that power is noumenal in nature is either trivial or false.

RÉSUMÉ : Cet article s'intéresse à la doctrine de Rainer Forst sur le pouvoir nouménal. Au centre de cette doctrine se trouve une affirmation qui lui est propre, selon laquelle le pouvoir est de nature nouménale. Je reconstitue la définition du pouvoir proposée par Forst et je distingue dans ses écrits trois conceptions de la nouménalité. Je soutiens que, pour chacune de ces conceptions, nous devrions rejeter l'affirmation. Il en ressort que la prétendue nouménalité du pouvoir est soit une caractéristique triviale du pouvoir, soit une caractéristique de certaines formes de pouvoir seulement. Par conséquent, la définition du pouvoir de Forst ne peut pas être adéquate et l'affirmation selon laquelle le pouvoir est de nature nouménale est soit triviale, soit fausse.

Keywords: noumenal power, power, reasons, intentional action, Rainer Forst

1. Introduction

Power, it has been observed, is “sociologically amorphous,”¹ while the concept of power is “essentially contested.”² That is, power not only instantiates in many

¹ Weber 1969, 117 .

² Lukes 2018, 47–48.

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different ways, it is also contested what distinguishes power phenomena in the first place. If that is so, it must be a challenging task to define power in general, or to specify its nature, in terms that not only are helpfully specific, but that are both plausibly inclusive in scope of application and relevantly uncontested. Rainer Forst, who in recent years has emerged as a leading critical theorist, has advanced a doctrine of noumenal power that, it seems, aspires to do just that.³ At the core of this doctrine is its signature claim that power is “noumenal in nature.”⁴ Is this claim true? Is power noumenal in nature?⁵

Below, I argue that this is not so. In a nutshell: once clarified, the professed noumenality of power either marks a trivial feature of power — and one that power, or its successful exercise, shares with numerous other things, including desert strawberries and rock faces — or it is a feature only of some forms of (social, interagentive) power. I proceed as follows. To assess the doctrine at hand, we need to know what phenomena it ranges over, and what it would mean for power to be noumenal. As these things are hard to pin down, some of my effort is reconstructive. Sections 2 and 3 focus on, and clarify, Forst’s definition of power. Sections 4 and 5 engage Forst’s signature claim that power is noumenal in nature. The doctrine of noumenal power oscillates between three conceptions of noumenal power. But as Sections 4 and 5 argue, on each conception, we should reject that claim. If the noumenality of power is not a merely trivial feature of power, then power, or its successful exercise, instantiates noumenal power only where power compliance must be in the form of intentional action. As Section 5 shows, however, not all successful exercises of (social, interagentive) power require power compliance to take this form: in some cases, indirect omission compliance (in a sense to be detailed later) can occur while power subjects do not act intentionally. Accordingly, Forst’s definition of power cannot adequately define all forms of (social, interagentive) power, and the claim that power is noumenal in nature is either trivial or overgeneralizes to the point of falsehood. Section 6 concludes.⁶

³ Forst 2015, Forst 2017, and Forst 2018.

⁴ Forst 2017, 42.

⁵ Forst’s doctrine of noumenal power ties into his view of practical reason as “justifying reason” (see Forst 2017, 21–35), but we can assess it independently from that view, which is what I do here. For recent accounts of the link between these things, see Bajaj and Rossi 2020 or McNay 2020. I engage Forst’s view of practical reason and justification elsewhere: see Besch 2015 and Besch 2020.

⁶ That the doctrine of noumenal power does not show that *all* power is noumenal has been argued before. For example, one recurrent objection is that the doctrine, since it construes power as interagentive, cannot account for structural or systemic forms of power (see, e.g., Hayward 2018 and Azmanova 2018). Another recurrent objection is that since this doctrine construes noumenal power in strong cognitivist terms, some power phenomena — e.g., unconscious power — cannot plausibly be construed as

2. Preliminaries

To start with, here are exemplary statements of Forst’s view of power:

Let us begin by defining power as *the capacity of A to motivate B to think or do something that B would otherwise not have thought or done*. Power exists as the capacity (“power to”) to be socially effective in this way — that is, to “have” power — which leads to power as being *exercised* over others (“power over”) ... [Exercises of power] are exercises of noumenal power.⁷

[A]t the basic conceptual level ... I argue that an agent A having power means that A has the capacity to motivate another agent B to think or act in a way B would not otherwise have thought or acted — and that thereby the power effect is noumenal in nature, that is, an effect of A changing the space of reasons that motivate B.⁸

[T]he phenomenon of power is noumenal in nature: *to have and to exercise power means to be able — in different ways — to influence, use, determine, occupy, or even seal off the space of reasons for others.*⁹

The first passage states what Forst offers as a definition of power (I specify a refined version of this definition in Section 3). The second passage restates a key

(continued)

noumenal (Hayward 2018; Kettner 2018; Lukes 2018; Susen 2018; McNay 2020; Bajaj and Rossi 2020; see also Sections 4 and 5). In light of such objections, many critics draw conclusions to the effect that noumenal power at best is, as Gilbert puts it, “a proper subset of power” (Gilbert 2018, 84). I agree with that conclusion, but arrive at it on different grounds. As to the first objection, I set it aside. Forst claims that the doctrine can explain structural power in interagentive terms (Forst 2017, 42; Forst 2018, 304, 309). But whether or not this is so, the doctrine still fails if some (undisputedly, evidently) interagentive power phenomena are *not* noumenal: and this, we shall see, is the case unless ‘noumenal’ is understood in effect-centric terms that in their own right undermine the doctrine (see Sections 4 and 5). As to the second objection, Forst indeed often foregrounds a strong form of cognitivism (see Sections 3 and 5), but we shall find that he sometimes embraces a *weak* (and more inclusive) form of cognitivism: thus, the problem is not that his cognitivism is implausibly strong, but that it is *incoherent* (see Section 5). Below, I foreground problems of the doctrine of noumenal power that arise even if it can accommodate structural and unconscious power and can coherently adopt a weak form of cognitivism. I am indebted to an anonymous reviewer for reasons to highlight this here.

⁷ Forst 2017, 40–41.

⁸ Forst 2018, 296.

⁹ Forst 2017, 42.

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conceptual claim made by that definition, or the view of power it helps to articulate. The third passage expresses Forst's signature claim that power is noumenal in nature. My focus here is the view of power that is expressed in these three passages.

It seems, then, that Forst defines power along the following lines:

- (1) Power is ("exists as") the capacity of α [an individual or collective power agent] to motivate β [an individual or collective power subject] to think or do something that β would otherwise not have thought or done.

However, he sometimes puts matters in different terms:

[L]et us define *power (Macht)* in general as the ability of A to influence the space of reasons of B such that how B thinks or acts is a result of A's influence, where the influence in question must be intentional, since otherwise one could only speak of an effect and not of power.¹⁰

We call *power* generally the capacity of A to influence the space of reasons for B and/or C (etc.) such that they think and act in ways they would not 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 (i.e., a form of influence).¹¹

This, too, construes power as an agentive capacity to influence other people in a certain way. Other than this, it is not obvious that these passages and (1) single out the same phenomena as power phenomena. But since my focus here is on the first, more prominent definition — say, the official definition — I will draw on passages like the two just quoted only in order to clarify the view of power that (1) helps to articulate.

What, then, of Forst's official definition of power? Problems arise in relation to both its definiendum and its definiens. As to its definiendum, it is not clear what phenomena this definition ranges over, or aims to define. As to its definiens, it is not straightforward how this definition defines whatever phenomena it ranges over. Both issues go to the heart of Forst's doctrine of noumenal power and impede its assessment. I address the first problem now, and turn to the second, more complex matter in the following sections.

At first pass, it clearly is Forst's ambition to define *all* power — or *the* phenomenon of power, or power *in general* — as a capacity to influence others in a certain way. The second passage quoted above then specifies the targeted phenomenon as *agentive* power, or the *having of power by an agent*. But then Forst's view would be a non-starter: trivially, not everything that can intelligibly

¹⁰ Forst 2017, 64.

¹¹ Forst 2017, 49.

be said to instantiate *agentive power* instantiates power over others — e.g., consider your power to chew ice cream. Forst also refers to the targeted phenomenon as power “in the social realm,”¹² “social” power,¹³ or “power over others” (see above), or — using a German term — as “*Macht*.”¹⁴ This suggests his target is agentive power over others:

- (2) α has power over β if and only if α has the capacity to motivate β to think or do what β would not otherwise have thought or done.

This has initial plausibility. (2) ranges over agentive power over others *only*, and (trivially) exercises of such power often, if not typically, involve attempts to make people think or do things. But it is plain from the above that Forst sometimes denies a possibility that (2) permits, namely, that some power does *not* instantiate in the form of agentive power over others. While (2) has initial promise, then, Forst sometimes eyes a more ambitious view.

In other words, it is unclear what phenomena Forst’s definition of power aims to range over. Hence, it is unclear what phenomena this definition, and with it his doctrine of noumenal power, must be able to plausibly conceptualize or account for in order to be acceptable. Textual evidence suggests that the definition aims to range over *all* power, or all *agentive* power, or *agentive power over others* only. If it is either of the first two things, Forst’s view of power appears to face defeat by counterexample. If it is agentive power over others only, the view has initial appeal. But this would undercut what appears to be Forst’s ambition. From the outset, then, the view is in a bind: Forst’s definition either faces defeat by counterexample, or else the doctrine of noumenal power it helps to articulate is incoherent.

This problem — we might think of it as a problem of scope — is systemic in Forst’s approach to power. In what follows, we need to keep the problem in mind; it remains in the background throughout, and I shall return to it later. For now, however, we may safely attribute to Forst the following working definition, D:

- D Σ if and only if α has the capacity to motivate β to think or do what β would not otherwise have thought or done,

where Σ is a placeholder for the phenomena that Forst’s official definition ranges over, e.g., power in general, or agentive power in general, or agentive power over others only. (I specify a refined version of D shortly.)

¹² Forst 2018, 310.

¹³ Forst 2018, 312.

¹⁴ Forst 2017, 64.

To keep matters concrete, we might for the time being think of Σ in D in the first instance as ranging over agentive power over others, while keeping in mind that this does not capture what appears to be the ambition behind D.

3. A Refined Definition

With this I turn to D's definiens. Forst claims that power must be placed "solely in the realm of reason and of justifications,"¹⁵ or "only works within the realm of the cognitive."¹⁶ Accordingly, he construes D's definiens in "cognitivist" terms:¹⁷ this means, amongst other things, that power agents motivate power subjects *by giving them reasons*, or what power subjects *recognize as reasons*.¹⁸ In Sections 4 and 5, I take a closer look at Forst's notion of reason giving and the kind of cognitivism that he adopts. For now, I elaborate on the kind of *acceptance* that Forst takes to be entailed in the recognition of something as a reason. This will allow us to arrive at a refined definition of power.

At the outset, Forst adopts a strong reading of what it takes to recognize something as a reason. For a contrast: on a *weak* reading, you can recognize R as a reason without accepting R. For example, you might recognize R as a reason to φ in an 'inverted comma' sense: that is, you might recognize that *I* treat R as a reason to φ , without also accepting R as a reason to φ in your own right, or from your own perspective. Or you might recognize R as a reason that, from a perspective that usually matters to you, applies to you, even though in the situation at hand you are committed to ignore R. However, while Forst concedes that the recognition of R as a reason to φ need not be "reflexive or consensual,"¹⁹ he insists that power subjects, when they recognize R as a reason to φ , must in their own right accept R as a *good enough* or *justifying* reason to φ :

[P]ower rests on recognition. This is ... not necessarily a reflexive or consensual form of recognition, for the threat that is perceived as real is ... also recognized and gives one a reason for action as intended by [the power agent] — in that sense, to point a gun at someone is to "give" him or her a reason. ... The exercise and effects of power are based on the recognition of a reason ... to act differently than one would have acted without that reason. This recognition rests on seeing a "good enough" reason to act; it means that you see a *justification* for changing how you were going to act. Power rests on recognized, accepted justifications — some good, some bad, some in between. ... But power exists only when there is such acceptance.²⁰

¹⁵ Allen, Forst, and Haugaard 2014, 12.

¹⁶ Forst 2018, 304.

¹⁷ Forst 2017, 38, 40 .

¹⁸ Forst 2017, 41–42.

¹⁹ Forst 2017, 41.

²⁰ Forst 2017, 41.

Power subjects are “moved by reasons”²¹ that they in their own right, or from their own perspective, accept as good enough or justifying reasons — in this sense, they are “moved by justifications.”²² And, as Forst adds in passing, these reasons, or what power subjects take them to be reasons for, must also accord with the power agent’s *intentions*. Note the contours of the view that is taking shape here: α ’s efforts *vis-à-vis* β instantiate (a successful exercise of) power only if α gives β a reason, R, to think or act in ways that accord with α ’s intentions, while β accepts R as a good enough, justifying reason to think or act accordingly, and is moved, or effectively motivated, by R.

However, Forst does not assume that power subjects always accept salient reasons critically, or thoughtfully:

Even though the kinds of acceptance sufficient for subjection to power all have a cognitive character, there is a spectrum of kinds of acceptance ranging from explicit acceptance based on critical reflection and evaluation ... up to ... cases where one accepts certain justifications almost blindly without further question ... All of these forms of being moved by justifications are “noumenal” ... insofar as they involve a certain relation in the space of justifications. But the cognitive and normative character and quality of these justifications varies greatly.²³

[P]ower works if the reasons intended by the wielder of power are effectively accepted, whether out of persuasion, fear or ideological delusion.²⁴

The relevant contrast at work here is this:

- (i) β recognizes and so accepts R as a good enough or justifying reason to φ , and this is based on critical reflection and evaluation;
- (ii) β recognizes and so accepts R as a good enough or justifying reason to φ , and this is *not* based on critical reflection and evaluation.

Forst notes that exercises of power can implicate forms of acceptance that vary greatly in their degree of doxastic merit. Given his cognitivism, though, he assumes that β ’s acceptance of R as a justifying reason must have a first-personal life — it must be, say, *agent-aware*. That is, β ’s acceptance of R must not merely be something that an observer attributes to β from an external, explanatory or third-personal perspective.²⁵ Instead, R must count as a justifying reason

²¹ Forst 2017, 38.

²² Forst 2017, 38, 41.

²³ Forst 2017, 41–42.

²⁴ Forst 2018, 298.

²⁵ Forst 2018.

from β 's own, first-personal perspective. As Forst puts this, if you accept R as a reason to φ in this sense, then “you see a *justification*” for φ ing,²⁶ or you have a reason to φ “in an explanatory as well as normative (first-personal) sense.”²⁷

A more sophisticated definition of power emerges — call it the ‘refined definition,’ RD:

RD Σ if and only if α has the capacity to motivate β to think or do things that β would not otherwise have thought or done, where

- (i) α gives β a reason, R, to think or act in certain ways;
- (ii) β accepts R as a justifying reason to think or act accordingly;
- (iii) β 's acceptance of R as such a reason is agent-aware;
- (iv) β is moved by R;
- (iv) R, or what β takes R to be a reason for, accords with α 's intentions.

As before, RD's scope is obfuscated: Σ might refer to power in general, all agentive power, or agentive power over others only. Before I move on, three comments are in place.

First, some authors have argued that phenomena of structural or systemic power are not best construed in Forst's interagentive terms. For example, social structure can instantiate power relations that, it seems, are not mere extensions of the agency of some agent or group, but have a life of their own,²⁸ while social systems can involve forms of domination such that all agents operating within these systems are power subjects.²⁹ Forst is confident that his interagentive view can explain structural power, and that such challenges can be met.³⁰ Fortunately, I may sidestep this complex dispute.³¹ Relevant for my purposes are only power phenomena that clearly are interagentive.

Second, as part of an effort to motivate his definition of power, Forst appeals to the views that power is exercised only over free agents, and that power fails when force is needed.³² For example, if the ruler orders the protesters off the square, then the order assumes that they have a choice between leaving and not leaving the square; but if riot police must force them off the square, the

²⁶ Forst 2017, 41; the first emphasis is added.

²⁷ Forst 2018, 298.

²⁸ Hayward 2018.

²⁹ Azmanova 2018.

³⁰ Forst 2017, 42; Forst 2018, 304, 309.

³¹ See Hayward 2018; Azmanova 2018; Lukes 2018; McNay 2020; see also Forst 2018.

³² Forst 2017, 39–41.

order itself fails to make them leave. However, a *general* view of power must take these views with a grain of salt: they do not sit equally well with all forms of power. Yes, if power agents aim not merely for compliance, but for compliance that is based on, e.g., agreement, trust, attributed authority, positive incentives, and so on, then they may need to (sometimes) exercise power in ways that (seem to) leave power subjects with a viable choice of non-compliance. But not all exercises of power aim for this kind of compliance. To use Forst's own example,³³ if α holds up a gun to make β hand over β 's wallet, α aims to make non-compliance seem *unviable*. Thus, while some forms of power might clearly contrast with force, not all do. RD can accord with this: it defines α 's power in part as α 's capacity to move, or *effectively* motivate, β to behave in certain ways. Thus, let us bracket the two views just referred to.

Not least, third, to assess a candidate definition of power, it is often useful to ask what would serve that definition as a paradigm case of power. Given the initial, strong cognitivist ring of Forst's view, what comes to mind are discursive interactions such that α convinces or persuades β to φ by promulgating reasons that β accepts, or can be made to accept, as justifying reasons to φ , and on the basis of which β then forms a motivation to φ . Of course, not all power phenomena are relevantly similar to such discursive episodes (and Forst does not deny this). Thus, for RD to be inclusive in scope, its initial, strongly cognitivist ring must somehow be watered down. And, we shall find, this is what Forst does: the kind of reason giving to which RD refers is not the kind just indicated, and the kind of cognitivism that it entails is much weaker than Forst initially suggests.

4. 'Noumenal' Power?

This brings us to Forst's signature claim that power is noumenal in nature. What does this mean and what, according to Forst, makes power noumenal?

To begin with the word 'noumenal,' Forst does not use the word in the Kantian sense, but refers to power as noumenal in order to convey that power works on *nous*, thought, or in the space of reasons, or in the space of reasons and justifications,³⁴ or that it "only works within the realm of the cognitive,"³⁵ or "solely in the realm of reason and of justifications,"³⁶ or that power works in or on minds,³⁷ or "through, with or on reasons,"³⁸ or that it affects or produces reasons, or "reasons or motives," or "motives and background motives."³⁹ But what does any of *this* mean?

³³ Forst 2017, 41.

³⁴ Forst 2017, 38; Forst 2018, 297.

³⁵ Forst 2018, 304.

³⁶ Allen, Forst, and Haugaard 2014, 12.

³⁷ Forst 2018, 303.

³⁸ Forst 2018, 300.

³⁹ Forst 2018, 302.

Unfortunately, Forst’s view of the noumenality of power is very difficult to pin down. He only gestures at the feature or features that constitute noumenality, and he tends to do so with the help of metaphors that often do not illuminate much.⁴⁰ As a result, the view invites more than one reading — or, rather, it oscillates between different conceptions of noumenal power. Three candidate conceptions stand out.

To fix ideas, for Forst, episodes of the following kind, when they instantiate power, instantiate noumenal power:

- (i) α motivates β to φ by giving β reason to φ (where β ’s φ ing, or being motivated to φ , accords with α ’s intentions).

In virtue of what feature or features, then, would type-(i)-episodes instantiate noumenal power? On the first, most self-suggesting conception of noumenal power, power is noumenal owing to the *effects* of its (successful) exercise on power subjects — which accords with most of the things listed in the second paragraph of this section. Hence, type-(i)-episodes would instantiate noumenal power in that α ’s efforts as a matter of fact impact β ’s mind, motives, or reasons. Call this the ‘effect-centric’ conception. For now, I understand the noumenal effects referred to here in the strong cognitivist terms that Forst initially suggests: if type-(i)-episodes instantiate power, then that α gives β reason to φ , or impacts β ’s mind, motives, or reasons, must have a first-personal life for β , or be agent-aware.

However, the effect-centric conception has strings attached. Yes, in type-(i)-episodes, α (somehow) works on β ’s mind, motives, or reasons. But if my desert strawberries are tasty enough to motivate me, or give me reason, to eat more, then they, too, (somehow) work on my mind, my motives, or my

⁴⁰ A case in point is Forst’s claim that power affects changes in a person’s “space of reasons” (Forst 2017, 38). This leans on Sellars’ remark that “in characterizing an episode or a state as that of *knowing* ... we are placing it in the logical space of reasons, of justifying and being able to justify what one says” (Sellars 1997, 76). To place φ in the space of reasons in Sellars’ sense entails *taking responsibility* for φ in the way in which we take responsibility for the things that we *claim to know*. To affect *changes* in β ’s space of reasons would hence involve affecting changes in those of β ’s doxastic states that β places, or would place, in that space. What doxastic states are these? A self-suggesting reply is this: these doxastic states are beliefs that β deems especially credible, or justifiable — say, β ’s convictions. Thus, power affects changes in β ’s convictions. This resonates with the reason-centric ring of Forst’s view. But it cannot be what he is after: in his view, α can exercise power over β even if α does *not* change β ’s convictions so long as α induces in β a cognitive or emotional state that makes β act intentionally as intended by α (see below). Thus, this use of Sellars’ metaphor obscures more than it illuminates.

reasons. And so does a rock face if it looks intriguing enough to motivate me, or give me reason, to climb it. But shall we, therefore, speak of noumenal desert strawberries and noumenal rock faces? We can, but then all things that, in some agent-aware manner, mean something to someone would for that reason be noumenal — including desert strawberries, rock faces, and, presumably, most exercises of power. By implication, Forst's claim that power is noumenal would be, well, trivial.⁴¹

This might understate things: on the effect-centric conception, Forst's signature claim is trivial *at best*. Forst's signature claim is not merely the claim that (all) power is noumenal. Rather, Forst claims that power is noumenal *in nature*. And what does it mean to say that X is ψ *in nature*? On a natural understanding, it means that being ψ is not only necessary, but distinctive for being X. But even if we grant for the moment that it is a necessary feature of all power that it, or its successful exercise, has noumenal effects — albeit this is not so, as we will see later — it cannot also be a distinctive feature: desert strawberries and rock faces can have noumenal effects, too. Strictly speaking, then, Forst's signature claim would not be trivial, but rather false, or incoherent.

Forst sometimes suggests a different reading of the noumenality of power. On this reading, type-(i)-episodes, when they instantiate power, instantiate noumenal power in virtue of the *strategy* by which α , the power agent, brings about salient motivational results in β , the power subject. Specifically, noumenal power instantiates insofar as α brings about β 's motivation by giving β a reason for φ ing that β accepts as a justifying reason. Call this the 'strategy-centric' conception of noumenal power. At first pass, this sits well with Forst's refined definition of power, RD. It also ties the noumenality of power to power effects of the sort listed above: α brings about these effects, or tries to do so, as part of α 's strategy to motivate β . Forst's signature claim would hence be a claim to the effect that all (social, interagentive) power is exercised through some such reason-giving strategy. And whether or not this claim is true, it is not trivial.

The strategy-centric conception seems preferable for Forst. However, it comes in two versions. On one version, the strategy used by power agents must be reason giving in an ordinary, narrow, or *discursive* sense — a sense that involves things like illocutionary acts, raising validity claims, reasoning with others, disputing things, dialoguing, argumentation, and so forth.

⁴¹ Note that the choice of examples here is not meant to deny that Forst sees power as interagentive. Instead, it highlights that noumenality in the effect-centric sense would be a feature of all things that, in some agent-aware manner, mean something to someone — including numerous things that have *nothing at all* to do with power, power-agency, subjection, the interpersonal, or interactivity. And, of course, by itself the fact that all power is interagentive and noumenal (if it is a fact) does not entail that noumenality, too, must be interagentive or must always instantiate interagentively. I am indebted to an anonymous reviewer for reasons to highlight this here.

On this version, type-(i)-episodes will instantiate noumenal power only insofar as α motivates β by giving β reasons in the narrow, discursive sense. Call this the ‘narrow’ strategy-centric conception of noumenal power.

Alas, this, too, comes with strings attached. If noumenal power instantiates only if we use a strategy of reason giving in the above, discursive sense to bring about salient motivational results in others, then it is natural to say that *non*-noumenal power instantiates where we use *other* means to bring about such results. And, plainly, reason giving in the discursive sense is not always the only, the most effective, or the best way to motivate people. But then the claim that power is noumenal in nature would have to suppose, falsely, that power agents must always use reason giving in the discursive sense to motivate people. Thus, Forst’s signature claim would have to be rejected: some (social, interagentive) power is noumenal power, but not all is.

Fortunately, there also is what we might call a ‘wide’ strategy-centric conception. Here, too, power agents use reason giving as a strategy to motivate power subjects, but now what they do can count as ‘reason giving’ even if it does not take a discursive form. This view is implicated when Forst concedes, in reply to various critics of his cognitivism, that power can be *unconscious*, or can (up to a point) work *around* rather than *within* a person’s space of reasons.⁴² How can this accord with the noumenality of power? Forst explains:

For my account of noumenal power, I need to analyze *the cognitive-emotional state that makes someone conform to what another person intends ...* The question of the deeper causes of what we feel and think ... may remain forever in the realm of the thing-in-itself. ... The *analysis of noumenal power ... remains at the level of the considerations that move you*, without reaching the level of the “true” causes of these considerations.⁴³

I don’t think that our reasons are all “derived from reason.” Rather I am interested in what it means to form or have an interest or desire. If you *follow an interest or desire in action*, you know what the interest is in and what you desire. It has a content. It also involves what Davidson called a pro attitude ..., that is, you think that it is a good thing to realize that interest or desire and you know why it is a good thing ... You *see a justification* — what Davidson calls a “*primary reason*” in an explanatory as well as normative (*first-personal*) sense — for being interested in it or for wanting it. Note that

⁴² See Forst 2018, 302–303. Various critics have interpreted Forst’s cognitivism in strong, reason-centric terms that go beyond the (already strong) kind of cognitivism that I attributed to him in Section 3: see Hayward 2018; Kettner 2018; Lukes 2018; Susen 2018; McNay 2020; see also Bajaj and Rossi 2020. Forst clearly invites such interpretations, but he ultimately commits himself to a rather *weak* form of cognitivism (see next section).

⁴³ Forst 2018, 302–303; the emphasis is added.

I don't claim that the justification *grounds* the interest or desire causally ... my claim is only that if we want to understand an action we need to understand the justification that the actor sees for it ...⁴⁴

Observe that this anchors the noumenality of power in the intentional agency of compliant power subjects. Forst's focus is on a feature that pertains to power insofar as it is exercised successfully and power subjects, in acting as intended by power agents, act intentionally, or on the basis of a Davidson-type primary reason. The underlying idea seems to run like this:

1. Intentional action is action for which the agent has a primary reason "in an explanatory as well as normative (first-personal) sense" — i.e., the agent has a pro-attitude toward acts of a certain kind and believes that the act in question is an act of that kind.⁴⁵
2. If a compliant power subject, β , in acting as intended by the power agent, α , acts intentionally, β acts for a primary reason "in an explanatory as well as normative (first-personal) sense."

Forst then suggests:

3. α 's successful exercise of power induces in β some "cognitive-emotional state" that makes β have a primary reason, R, to act as intended by α ; this is the reason that β accepts as a good enough, or justifying reason.

But it is possible that β has a primary reason to φ , R, without having a first-personal, agent-aware reason to adopt R as such a reason, and without being aware of α 's influence or the cognitive or emotional state that makes β adopt R. And, insofar as the noumenality of power requires merely that β has an agent-aware reason for φ ing, rather than also an agent-aware reason to adopt that reason, power can be, as Forst claims, both noumenal (in relation to one level of thought) and unconscious (at another level of thought). This result confirms that we may attribute to Forst (1)-(3).

Let me bring this back to the wide strategy-centric conception. First, the notion of 'reason giving' here acquires the wide sense of *making others have a primary reason* — in a sense of 'have a primary reason' that is implicated in all intentional action. Anything can here count as 'reason giving' that brings about the relevant effect in others, e.g., pointing a gun at someone — this is Forst's example⁴⁶ — smiling, spiking drinks, persuasion, bribes, torture,

⁴⁴ Forst 2018, 298; all emphases, except the last one, are added.

⁴⁵ Davidson 1963, 687.

⁴⁶ Forst 2017, 41.

omissions, and so on. At the same time, reason giving in a narrow, discursive sense might not constitute ‘reason giving’ in this new, wide sense. For example, if α justifies to β , on the basis of reasons that β cannot coherently reject, that β ought to φ , but β does not then form any intention to φ , then α carried out reason giving in a discursive sense, but, it seems, not also in Forst’s new, wide sense.

Second, on the wide strategy-centric conception, noumenal power instantiates insofar as power agents use reason giving in the wide sense to produce salient motivational results. In light of (3), this can be specified: noumenal power instantiates insofar as power agents motivate power subjects by way of inducing in them some “cognitive-emotional” state that makes them *have a primary reason* to act in certain ways (widely conceived, perhaps, so as to count thinking as acting, too). Forst’s signature claim that power is noumenal in nature would hence be a claim to the effect that power must always be exercised in some such way.

Before I move on, I briefly take stock. After clarifying Forst’s definition of power, I asked what makes power noumenal. Forst’s view oscillates between three conceptions of noumenal power, and each suggests a different answer to this question. On the effects-centric conception, power is noumenal owing to its effects on power subjects — power, or its exercise, (somehow) impacts their minds, reasons, or motivation. This might allow Forst’s signature claim to be fairly inclusive in scope, but it would also make that claim trivial at best. On the narrow strategy-centric conception, power is noumenal insofar as power agents bring about salient motivational results in others through a strategy of reason giving in a narrow, discursive sense. Forst’s signature claim would hence not be trivial, but it would turn on the falsehood that power agents must always use discursive reason giving to motivate others. This leaves us with the wide strategy-centric conception of noumenal power. What, on this conception, would become of Forst’s doctrine of noumenal power?

5. Three Comments

In reply, I add three comments. The first two comments concern the internal coherence of Forst’s view. The third comment probes whether the wide strategy-centric conception helps Forst’s signature claim to fare better than it does on the other two conceptions: as we shall find, this does not seem to be so.

First, on the wide strategy-centric conception, Forst’s refined definition of power (RD), too, must be construed in terms of a wide sense of reason giving. Thus, rather than requiring that α motivates β by giving β reasons in the discursive sense identified earlier, RD must require that α motivates β by making β *have a primary reason* to act in certain ways (widely conceived, perhaps, so as to count thinking as acting, too). Construing things in such terms has the benefit of making RD more inclusive: α ’s activity can now count as an exercise of power even if it does not involve *discursive* reason giving.

More important now, second, the wide strategy-centric conception calls for a weaker kind of cognitivism than Forst initially suggests. He initially claims that

power “only” works in “the realm of the cognitive,”⁴⁷ or “solely” works “in the realm of reason and of justifications.”⁴⁸ Accordingly, he claims that power subjects are “moved by reasons” that they accept *as* justifying, or are “moved by justifications.”⁴⁹ These things suggest not merely that power compliance takes the form of intentional action, or action for which the agent has a primary reason. Instead, they suggest that, in acting as intended by α , (i) β acts on the basis of R, and (ii) β acts on R *because* β believes, in some agent-aware manner, that acting on R is justified, or suitably licensed. Call this ‘strong’ cognitivism about power.

But something else must be in play in Forst’s accommodation of unconscious power. Power now does not work in the realm of the cognitive *only*, or *solely* in the realm of reason or justification. It now works by inducing in people cognitive or *emotional* states — Forst speaks of “cognitive-emotional” states — that they can be unconscious of, but that lead them to act intentionally in ways that accord with the intentions of power agents. Accordingly, Forst assumes that β , in acting as intended by α , acts for a primary reason, R. But β now need not have any agent-aware reason to adopt R. Hence, it now need not be true that β adopts R because β believes, in some agent-aware manner, that acting on R is justified, or suitably licensed. This allows Forst to count unconscious power as noumenal power. Yet, other things being equal, it also requires his cognitivism to *retreat* to the much weaker claim that power compliance must take the form of intentional action, or be based on a primary reason. Call this ‘weak’ cognitivism about power.

In short, Forst here commits himself to weak cognitivism. Of course, we may wonder what, on weak cognitivism, it could mean to say that power subjects must *see justification* to act or be *moved by justifications*: on weak cognitivism, these things seem quite overstated. At any rate, whatever these things might still mean, what they refer to must be on display in *all* power compliance that comes in the form of intentional action, or action that is based on some Davidson-type primary reason — including cases of unconscious power, cases where it does not expressly cross the agent’s mind whether her reasons are good, and cases where agents act intentionally but are doubtful about the quality of their reasons. But we may leave this to Forst. For now, it is fair to conclude that his cognitivism about power is not coherent.

As for a third comment, recall that Forst anchors the professed noumenality of power in the intentional agency of complaint power subjects: power is noumenal insofar as power subjects, when they comply with power agents, act intentionally, or on the basis of a primary reason (where this reason has been given to them by power agents in the wide sense of reason giving). Accordingly, it is

⁴⁷ Forst 2018, 304.

⁴⁸ Allen, Forst, and Haugaard 2014, 12.

⁴⁹ Forst 2017, 38, 41.

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fair to understand Forst's claim that power is noumenal in nature as supposing that power compliance must always take the form of intentional action, or action that is based on a primary reason. But does it?

One way to pick up the stick is this: exercises of power (instrumentally) succeed when power agents achieve their aims by using the means that they intend to use. Hence, what kind of compliance the successful exercise of power (instrumentally) calls for depends in large part on the aims and means of power agents. In some cases, it will require power compliance in the form of intentional action. But, in other cases, it may not require power compliance to take this form. Yet, only in cases of the first kind will a successful exercise of power instantiate noumenal power. It is helpful, then, to consider various kinds of power compliance.

First, there is a difference between *direct* and *indirect* compliance. Direct compliance occurs when β complies intentionally, on purpose, or acts in order to comply with α . Indirect compliance occurs when β is or behaves *in* compliance with α 's aims, but does not comply intentionally. If the drill sergeant aims to drill obedience into the minds of recruits by making them follow meaningless orders, direct compliance may be needed. If traffic regulations prohibit speeding, indirect compliance might suffice. Second, there is a difference between *action* and *omission* compliance. If α orders β to close the door, action compliance is needed: to be in compliance with that order, β must close the door. If α orders β not to cross the road, omission compliance is needed — to be in compliance with that order, β must omit crossing the road. Needless to add, the two distinctions intersect.

Plainly, all direct compliance must come in the form of intentional action, while indirect compliance at least sometimes takes this form. Hence, let me grant for the sake of argument that a successful exercise of power instantiates noumenal power when it requires direct compliance, or indirect compliance in the form of intentional action. However, must indirect power compliance always be in the form of intentional action? Consider:

Secret Curfew. α aims to keep the villagers off the streets after midnight, but α wants no villager to know about α 's intentions. To keep the villagers off the streets, α can do one of two things. Either (i) α convinces each of them to stay off the streets after midnight. Or (ii) α secretly puts drugs in the village's water supply, which makes the villagers fall asleep before midnight. To keep the villagers in the dark about α 's intentions, α opts for (ii). At midnight, β , like all other villagers, is at home and sound asleep. At that time, β is in indirect omission compliance with α 's aims and does not act intentionally.

It is perfectly intelligible to say that α here successfully exercises power: *Secret Curfew* displays α 's successful exercise of a power to make β comply with a relevant aim, and a power to make this happen by using means that α intends to use. In fact, *Secret Curfew* displays a successful exercise of power over β , if not a form of domination. At any rate, as β 's indirect omission compliance does

not take the form of intentional action, α 's successful exercise of power does not instantiate noumenal power. Thus, even assuming that successful exercises of power instantiate noumenal power whenever power compliance must be in the form of intentional action, not all successful exercises of power instantiate noumenal power: some successful exercises of power do not require power compliance to be in this form. The point: we should reject Forst's signature claim and construe noumenal power "as only a proper subset of power."⁵⁰

Could Forst counter that α only exercises *force*, but not power? That is, could he salvage his signature claim from counterexamples like *Secret Curfew* by claiming, perhaps by appealing to his refined definition of power, RD, that there cannot be successful exercises of *power* that do *not* require compliance to take the form of intentional action? This claim would be implausible — and if RD supports it, RD would be the worse for it. Yes, in *Secret Curfew*, α does not secure compliance through a strategy of reason giving (in the wide sense), and so α does not exercise *noumenal* power. And, yes, α secures β 's compliance by using means that, in some sense, leave β no choice. Still, it is perfectly intelligible to say that α in *Secret Curfew* exercises power — to restate, a power to make β comply with α 's aims and a power to make this happen by means that α intends to use (and, ironically, had α needed to use *other* means, e.g., reason giving, then α would have had *less power* than α actually demonstrated). The plausible view hence is this: while α does not exercise *noumenal* power, α *does* exercise power, namely, a form of non-noumenal power that does not require power compliance in the form of intentional action.

What follows for RD? The above suggests a nuanced assessment. We saw in Section 2 that it is not clear what phenomena Σ in RD ranges over. Let me assume that power as defined by RD is always noumenal power. This leaves us with two options. Either (i) Σ *only* ranges over forms of power (or powers) that require for their successful exercise compliance in the form of intentional action, or (ii) Σ does *not* only range over such forms of power (or powers). In the case of (i), RD is compatible with the case just made. All power as defined by RD may be noumenal power, but RD would define only a *subset* of power. And this appears to be the plausible view. As we have seen, though, Forst's ambition favours (ii). But then RD cannot be adequate.

6. Conclusion

After reconstructing, and clarifying, Forst's definition of power, I engaged his signature claim that power is noumenal in nature on three distinct conceptions of noumenal power. On each conception, this claim ran into problems. On the effects-centric conception, the claim that power is noumenal is trivial at best. On the narrow strategy-centric conception, the claim is not trivial, but turns on the falsehood that power agents always use discursive reason giving to

⁵⁰ Gilibert 2018, 84.

bring about salient motivational results in others. On the wide strategy-centric conception, not least, Forst's view can accommodate unconscious power, but his signature claim will again turn on a falsehood — this time, the falsehood that power compliance must always be in the form of intentional action.

It does not follow that there is no noumenal power. Of course, there is. That exercises of power often are noumenal in the sense of at least one of the three conceptions of noumenal power identified above is uncontroversial, and unproblematic. Trivially, many exercises of power will instantiate noumenal power in the effect-centric sense. Similarly obvious, power compliance will often have to be brought about through reason giving — in the narrow or the wide sense — and it will often need to come in the form of intentional action. The problem with the doctrine at hand, then, is not that there is no noumenal power, but that the claim that *all* power is noumenal, or that power is noumenal *in nature*, is trivial at best or overgeneralizes to the point of falsehood. In its present form, therefore, Forst's doctrine of noumenal power cannot be right.

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