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Pathologies of Power and Cognition

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[5500 Words]

Pathologies of Power and Cognition[1]

Leadership and hierarchy are effective ways of coordinating human activity, but they also tempt us into making chronic mistakes. Students of history have long been concerned by the psychological effects of gaining power over others and can point to numerous examples where seemingly reasonable individuals have become pathologically destructive and cruel upon the assumption of high status social roles. Similarly, myth and fable caution against the pathologies of power and standard accounts of notorious emperors (Nero, Caligula), infamous warlords (Genghis Khan, Coriolanus) and psychotic dictators (Hitler, Stalin) have long served to highlight the dangers of tyrannical, *hubristic* or corrupted thinking. Well-worn popular quotes inform us that power 'goes to the head' and 'absolute power corrupts absolutely.'[2] More recently, researchers in organisational and management studies, psychoanalysis,[3] social psychology,[4] linguistic[5] and neural science[6] have sought to provide additional tools to identify, explain and manage this troubling tendency. Of particular interest are current attempts to determine clinical indicators for *hubris* as a psychopathology.[7] Given our inability to adequately manage power in our society, a better account of the scope of these pathologies and the mechanisms by which they occur, would be of considerable value.

This paper uses the explanatory lens of social cognition to reveal how asymmetrical relations of power affect what we see and think.[8] It provides a philosophical review of recent multidisciplinary research on the pathologies of power and traces the distortions of perception that can mushroom into the pathologies of *hubris*, corruption and tyranny.

The pathologies of power cannot be solely individual. Though sometimes passed over by psychological and biographical approaches, we are social and organisational beings and so make meaning together. We blend our own cognition with institutionalised information processing, so these pathologies are somehow situated *between* the individual and the organisation, that they are intersubjective, of complex ontology and are perhaps best characterised as 'disorders of position.'[9] In such cases, as we shall see, individual cognition is strongly influenced by hierarchic social structures, so entering a vicious circle that encourages individuals and institutions to so spectacularly misbehave.

The pathologies of power and cognition are more widespread than usually imagined and certainly afflict more than all-powerful leaders. Increasingly, we note its prevalence across our organisational lives, in companies and public institutions, in offices, civic associations and families.[10] With the financial crisis and the expenses scandal, we have had recent cause to extend the accusation to investment bankers and democratically elected politicians.[11] And the pathologies of power affect not only the tiny tyrants of everyday life, but also, those who *lack* power. Here, in a kind of mirror world, we can again use social cognitive tools to identify a rather different set of 'symptoms' among subordinates, slaves, the poor and the apathetic.

The paper begins with a social cognitive examination of the pathologies of power, first as they afflict holders of power and and subordinates, showing that while leaders become aggrandised and over-confident, those without power become dependent and incapacitated. The paper then traces the cognitive mechanisms underlying such pathologies. Tyrants lack awareness of their condition, their perceptions become stunted and their increasing organisational separation from subordinates denies them information and perspective. It is thus Gandhi's quote, that power '…makes men deaf and blind,'[12] that best captures the sometimes-pathological interaction of power and cognition. Or perhaps John Dewey is more accurate still when he suggests that 'all special privilege in some way limits the outlook of those who possess it'.[13] The paper aims to give a cognitive account for how this limitation occurs.

Leadership and hierarchic social relations are effective ways of coordinating human activity because they simplify and focus organisational information processing. The paper tries to show that it is just this reduction of information and gradual narrowing of awareness that threatens degeneration into the pathologies of power. Hierarchy simplifies.[14] Yet when this results in organisational maladaptation, destructiveness, wasted lives and arbitrary cruelty, it simplifies too much. Holding power over others is thus to lose information; it is this that renders excessively hierarchic social structures inherently unstable.

Diagnostics for Powerholders

After years of scholarly neglect,[15] a variety of social scientific disciplines now seek to identify and manage the pathologies of power, offering explanatory schemes, behavioural indicators and possible symptoms to assist with its study. These often focus on the leader's growing self-belief, on his (we can reasonably use the generic masculine here) aggrandisement, then recklessness and cruelty. But we can also pick out other recurrent patterns - or perhaps clusters, or even clinical indicators - from various studies. Our list would then include:

1. Inflation of the Self
2. Devaluation of Subordinates
3. Organisational Separation
4. Loss of Awareness

The first, as noted, begins with a growing self-confidence, a sense of being right,[16] an unbounded belief in the superiority of one's own judgment.[17] It is this confidence that mushrooms into arrogance, aggrandisement and the inflation of the self. The afflicted individual comes to imagine that they are uniquely capable and that their elevated status is fully deserved. There is a growing identification with the organisation, so that the collective interest becomes indistinguishable from the leader's own and the organisation becomes little more than an extension of the leader's individual psychological processes.[18] In this way the tyrant comes to see the organisation as a playground for his overwhelming egotism and evident genius. This is often accompanied by the adoption of political and management theories that stress the importance of strong leadership and the superiority of leaders over followers.[19]

As the self-belief of the hubristic leader billows out to fill the entire organisation, restraints on his behaviour are removed. So disinhibited, his actions become bolder, impulsive and reckless.[20] Here we might reach for the conceptual language of psychoanalysis, with its suggestion that it is the eruption of narcissistic need, with all its impatience with the world, which finally undermines the leader's judgment.[21] With the organisation no longer performing its usual mediating ego functions,[22] narcissistic impulses are unchecked[23] and what amounts to a personality disorder is acquired.[24] We can now measure the authoritarian attitudes of the fully-corrupted leader - perhaps using Adorno's 'F' scale[25] or with tools developed to study Social Dominance Orientation[26] - and show the ideological shift towards elitist and 'hierarchy enhancing' ideas that accompanies the assumption of power over others.

This billowing and pathological over-confidence invites a social cognitive approach, as it entails a focusing of attention onto particular elements in the phenomenological field – here, the special abilities of the leader. Cognitive science shows that while we are aware of the

products of our cognition, the *processes* that create them occur largely beneath consciousness.[27] This, of course, is necessarily so, for otherwise, our finite conscious attention would be overwhelmed by apparently simple tasks.[28] Walking down the street, picking up a pen and drinking tea are in fact triumphs of hugely complex processes of cognitive selection and simplification.[29] We scan, parse, compare and cut again, finally reaching out to just *that* sense data and no other – all without conscious awareness.[30] Automation speeds cognition, and we can turn right and ask for two sugars without undue concern. This is no more than to repeat that human cognition uses heuristics and bias,[31] that attention is finite and that, thrown into a world, we need to get on with using our cognitive resources to solve the next problem. There is much to be gained by cognitive shout-cuts and simplifications that quickly jump over information processing that we already know or which looks, at first sight, to be reliable. What we are here considering is an automated series of confirmation and affirmational cognitive biases[32] that function to simplify and assist, but which, in certain organisational circumstances, become pathological - screening out the normal critical capacities to question the self and consider other points of view. Such biases, usually helpful, here begin to hinder.

The second clinical indicator of the pathologies of power is a loss of respect, and then a growing contempt, for subordinates. Evidently they are incompetent, do not share responsibility for decisions, care little for the organisation, constantly question and are fearful of change. As 'free-riders',[33] they do not share the leader's bravery and willingness to take risks, cannot see his vision and are shunned as inferior,[34] stereotyped as less than human[35] and finally seen as physically disgusting.[36] Tyrants are contemptuous of those they lead and imagine they deserve the cruelty they receive. The imbalance of power can now be detected at the level of autonomic responses within the body,[37] with high status individuals showing decreased 'empathic accuracy'[38] and measurable reductions in 'facial mimicry' and 'respiratory sinus arrhythmia.'[39]

As contempt for subordinates intensifies and becomes pathological, it is enacted in physical and organisational forms. Gradually, ineluctably, the tyrant becomes separated, first from his subordinates and then from critical advisors. This is a devastating and progressive loss of perspective. Now, every opposing comment is dismissed and those who utter them fear for their lives. The tyrant will tolerate only sycophants and yes-men[40] and his growing organisational isolation reduces the quality of his decisions, as well as impeding the organisation's ability to adapt.[41] Pathologies of power often involve a loss or wastage of information and here we see this as a physical separation, a growing cognitive isolation and an immunisation against learning. This separation takes architectural form, as palaces, private retreats and vast walled follies further illustrate the gap between the tyrant and the world. Now there is no restraining voice, no 'toe holder'[42] or limit. Treatment for the pathology must now be by force.

Finally, we note repeated references, across research disciplines, to a loss of awareness. The first three clinical indicators: inflation of the self, devaluation of subordinates and organisational separation must, therefore, be accompanied by a fourth, in which all this takes place in ways seemingly invisible to the afflicted. The pathologies of power are automated cognition and do not enter consciousness, where the tyrant gazes only upon himself. You cannot appeal to reason or humanity, for neither can be seen. Tyrants, both little and large, build worlds that tend to seal themselves off from other people and from reality. We see this again in their increased use of stereotyping.[43] In this way, they are, as Gandhi pointed out, made 'blind and deaf' by power.

The pathologies of power are disorders of position and perceptual. They involve an almost psychotic loss of contact with reality and cannot be characterised merely as 'willful blindness',[44] or as one big self-serving lie. We observe this perceptual disorder when the corrupt and distended leader speaks to camera. He is not lying when he says he is uniquely qualified to lead and that he alone is all that holds us from disorder. He really believes it.

It is this last symptom, the lack of awareness, which makes the pathologies of power so hard to treat. As Freud pointed out, there can be no therapy with the narcissist, for they lack the very capacity for insight. It is an understatement to say that the tyrant also lacks the motivation to engage in Cognitive Behaviour Therapy and is, indeed, more likely to shoot the one who suggests it - but the point is that the shrinking world, the cognitive separation, the immunisation against learning – all become so pronounced that they are untreatable by psychiatry and in need of some more political solution.

It may be that some of simplifications provided by *hubris*, such as focus, self-belief, vision and risk-taking, are desirable in a leader,[45] though we must then acknowledge our inability to state the point at which (desirable) charisma shades into megalomania. The notion that *hubris* is a pathological extension of (something like) charisma is intriguing, as it raises the possibility that a continuous spectrum of a psychological process is at work here. Normally functional, this process can, in the right person and under the right organisational circumstances, suddenly expand until it becomes destructive or pathological (is 'acquired'). The best candidate for such a process is afforded by psychoanalytic theory, with its postulation of narcissistic need. Narcissism, or perhaps self-esteem, is here seen as a normal requirement for human flourishing.[46] It is internalised through primary object relations and changes during maturation, usually enabling the development of a mentally healthy adult. We can then identify forms of leadership according to narcissistic needs; distinguish between good and bad narcissism and between mature and pathological narcissistic styles.[47] The notion of a biological narcissistic drive may clarify and even be heuristic, but remains unable to identify causal mechanisms by which power corrupts, or, indeed, to be falsified.[48] Certainly, there is no neurological substrate

for the Freudian architectonic, or for self-esteem, and we are again reminded that Freud gave us a 'depth hermeneutics' rather than an empirically grounded science.[49]

This pathological combination of solipsism and narcissistic need was, in fact, identified in the Eighteenth Century by G.W.F. Hegel in his analysis of the relationship between master and slave.[50] His concern was to show how the divided perspectives of leader and subordinate affect each differently. As well as confirming the profound impact of social roles on how we make meaning, Hegel manages to reveal how awareness and information actually flows away from the master and to the slave.

The main difference between them concerns what each party needs to know in order to stay alive. For the master, information about the individuality of the slave is of little importance. The master does not require such knowledge and, indeed, 'exists only for himself.'[51] As we have already noted, one effect of asymmetrical power is the reorientation of interactions with subordinates towards *you* as the leader*,* so that they increasingly reflect *your* needs and *your* psychological processes.[52] For the slave, however, it is of considerable importance to know the master, to watch him carefully, for otherwise the slave will not survive. Hegel thus states that, 'servitude has the lord for its essential reality.'[53] There are, therefore, quite different knowledge requirements for master and slave respectively.

So too is the narcissistic project distinct for each role, for importantly, Hegel suggests that the master achieves the full recognition of his power *in the eyes of the slave.* In effect, he becomes dependent *on the slave* for the maintenance of his identity.[54] This confirmation becomes habituated and soon he cannot live without it. Now intoxicated by power, the master must constantly search the eyes of the slave for the recognition he craves.[55] By the end of the passage, the distinct cognitive effects of asymmetrical power on master and slave result in a sudden reversal of roles, and we begin to see how subordinate groups are at their most powerful when they are just emerging from oppression. Snodgrass and colleagues suggest a similar informational advantage be attributed to women, who's greater ability to read non-verbal communication is empirically demonstrable and may derive from a long history of subordination.[56] Gamson goes so far as to suggest that groups that lack power are motivated to engage in a more reflective and wide-ranging style of political discussion,[57] while Kraus et al show that subordinates are more empathic, context sensitive and communal than their dominant counterparts.[58]

We see that the narrowing of the leader's awareness is a perceptual distortion arising directly from his high relative status. There is a chain of such informational reductions at play here, all of which are usually functional but clear a space for the cognitive pathologies of power:

- Individual cognition simplifies and selects

- Leadership is like a bottleneck in the flow of information, a necessary funnel for decision-making
- Tyranny is a re-orientation of organisational processing to the individual psychological needs of the leader

Together, these amount to a choking-off of knowledge, a rendering 'deaf and blind', a perceptual suffocation. Now living in a separate narcissistic world, the tyrant is starved of information, so that while he becomes ever more outrageous, disconnected and damaging, he is also weakened. As Hegel suggested, the tables turn because information is removed from the master and gained by the slave.

The pathologies of power are parasitic on the very structure of our cognitive apparatus. They are an iatrogenic side effect of doing cognition in the way we do. At the same time, these pathologies occur in the interaction between simplifying cognitive structures within the human mind and simplifying organisational structures within the institution. Once again, we note that while some simplification may be functional, while too much can be deadly. In the pathologies of power, normal cognitive simplification becomes excessive. Organisational information processing volume is massively reduced as it re-orients to the psychological - and perhaps narcissistic - needs of the leader, at last catching the wind and striking out across dangerous waters.

Yet if we wish to understand the true costs of these pathologies, we must range beyond their cognitive effects on insane leaders - beyond even the damage they inflict on their institutions; for asymmetrical power also corrupts those who have none.

The Symptoms of Subordination

The pathologies of power affect subordinate cognition and do so in different ways.[59] Instead of enhancing their self-esteem and fulfilling their narcissistic needs, subordinates find their humanity denied. The principle results are resignation, passivity, dependency, reduced confidence and 'learned helplessness.'[60] Scott cites the centrality of resentment and passive resistance to the identify of the slave[61] and we have already noted an increased awareness of, and orientation to, the leader's psychological needs. Both Machiavelli and Rousseau offer withering descriptions of corrupt citizens who live under a tyrant, characterising them as gullible, fearful and lacking vigilance for their own freedom.[62] Similarly, in 1530, Montaigne's friend La Boétie observed that obedience *must* be voluntary, as the people could at any time deploy their superior numbers and throw off the tyranny should they wish to do so.

The fact that they do not suggests that some other force is at work, something internalised by the subordinates themselves, something that reduces agency and the ability to defend one's own interests. Precisely this 'other force' was developed into the theory of ideology from Rousseau through Marx to Althusser,[63] but so too have social psychologists and

theorists sought to explicate the mechanisms by which individuals internalise the values of their masters and take on the task of oppressing themselves.[64] In particular, the phenomenon of 'outgroup favoritism' has occupied social justification theorists, who have sought to explain the motivation to emulate the oppressor and devalue the self by recourse, first, to the evolutionary adaptation of subordinates to the historical prevalence of hierarchic social relations and second, to suggest that obedience somehow provides the subordinate with existential and perhaps narcissistic assurance.[65] The suggestion here is that elites and organisations 'push' conceptions, schemas[66] and self-descriptors at individuals who then 'pull' them deep into themselves. In this way, a poor self-image is automated in the cognition of the subordinate and becomes self-fulfilling. When elites claim to be uniquely capable, subordinates believe them[67] and the socially constituted social hierarchy is, at last, reified as real.

We should note that occupancy of a low status role benefits directly from the processing simplifications on offer. Obedience brings a reduction in cognitive work. The organisational hierarchy filters information for the subordinate and when this reaches pathological proportions, fuels conformity and 'blind' obedience.[68] Once again, information flows are severely restricted, here for the subordinate, with existential assurance supplied by a social role, a class identity and a motivating myth of social mobility.

Blind obedience involves dangerous perceptual distortions and has a long history of violence. The legal category 'Crime of Obedience' was codified at Nuremberg following the Holocaust and gave precedent for the My Lai massacre trial following the Vietnam War. Both Milgram's famous experiment,[69] in which subjects were successfully encouraged to administer a fatal electric shock to another merely by displaying the accouterments (clip-board, white coat) and language ('Please continue with the experiment') of authority and Zimbardo's Prison experiment,[70] where students became vicious prison guards in a few hours of role playing, attest to the dangers of cognitive obedience to a misbehaving power.

Upon joining a hierarchy, you are invited, by the very structure of individual cognition itself, to *alienate* portions of your thinking to the organisation. To be afflicted by the pathologies of power *as a subordinate* is to 'out-source', or *cede*, information processing tasks – and thus a portion of one's cognition - to the hierarchy. This 'taking-on' of organisational information processing accounts for the many descriptions of subordinate collusion that see it in terms of a psychological process of internalisation.[71] Here, organisational structure reaches directly into individual cognition, offering plausible cognitive strategies, work-reducing schemas, structured identities and reified legitimating narratives. This kind of obedient cognition is self-reinforcing and when in full pathological cry, results in the worst excesses of individuals within organisations.

At the same time that the aggrandised leader comes to replace the information processing of the organisation with his own distorted cognition, the subordinate internalises

that organisational processing. In this way, the subordinate absorbs what is merely a simulacrum of collective information processing - now usurped by the psychological processes of the *hubristic* leader himself. Tyranny is thus a two-way street in which leaders lead followers *and* followers lead leaders. This may help to explain why Charles Manson once audaciously declared from his prison cell, 'Don't let me out; they'll just make me do it again.' Leaving his dramatic turn aside, we can see that the failure of responsibility exhibited by the corrupt leader is also, in part, a failure of those who follow. The pathologies of power are co-created by leaders and followers: they involve both elite madness *and* subordinate collusion. Of the afflicted leader, we would say he has taken over too much. But the long-suffering subordinate, with a head full of cognition serving the interests of others, has surely ceded independent thought in a manner at best irresponsible and at worst downright dangerous.

Our social cognitive lens suggests that what power, hierarchy and leadership offers the obedient subordinate is a form of *proxy* cognition, a stand-in, a water carrier; one willing to share the burdens of information simplification and narcissistic defence. In this way, for both leader and subordinate, power distorts our thinking and absolute power colonizes us absolutely.

Conclusion

The pathologies of power, among which we have listed *hubris* and helplessness, are a set of collective disorders of institutional information processing. They involve a vicious circle of cognitive simplifications, the blurring of individual and social cognition and a chain of what are almost substitutions of information processing. In such pathologies, leader, organisation and subordinate *exchange* cognition in a strange dance across a usually unlit floor. When illuminated, we can just make out the usually hidden power struggle over the very contents of our minds.[72] In particular, the lens of social cognition has helped identify actual mechanisms that drive the various pathologies of power and shows them to be 'parasitic' on our 'innate tendencies to think in certain ways.'[73]

Among the many things humans do is make meaning - as individuals, between individuals and in collectives. In the pathologies of power and cognition, we are looking at a complex blend of these influences, with organisational structures effectively 'pushing' narratives and notions that are variously internalised or 'pulled' into the automated cognition of individuals.

Organisations are social constructions, brought into being by the collective activity of individuals and reified into social structures and institutions. We are social selves, and live in a social world in which our actions create meanings that in turn *act back upon us* from outside. Ontologically, and quite unlike the material world, the social world exhibits 'bi-directional'

causation[74] and this provides good reasons to be cautious about overly realist and perhaps medical - even psychopathological - assumptions.

The blurred boundaries we have been walking - between individual and organisation - speak against the 'commonsense' belief that we are autonomous individuals, able to think for ourselves and with thoughts that are our own. This fiction is present also in the methodological individualism of so much psychological research, where the influence of organisational factors on our cognition is often neglected.[75] Yet as studying the pathologies of power and cognition shows, we are centaurs: part human, part organisation.[76] This is the source of our extraordinary collective abilities, but also of our chronic pathologies of power and cognition.

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