

Power and Resentment



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Two themes that my mind has been dwelling on lately, in relation to each other, are *power* and *resentment*. I here offer some musings on these themes, but I do so under the condition that they are still very much debris in the air that has yet to settle. Make of them what you will.

Resentment

What does it mean to *resent* someone? Latin *sentire* means “to feel,” so to *re-sent* means, etymologically, “to feel again.” To feel what again? Today’s *resent* comes directly from 17th century French *ressentir*, which was used as “feel pain, regret.” To *resent* someone, then, is the feeling of pain or regret that re-occurs when they are brought to mind.

What would cause someone to *resent* another? Perhaps first we must ask about the many ways a person can cause pain in another person. They are, among others: having your heart broken by someone you care deeply for; being betrayed by a close friend or family member; being lied to; being ripped-off or stolen from, being verbally or physically assaulted; being disrespected; being made to feel unimportant or inferior. We can all imagine scenarios such as these, probably even in our own lives. Toward those who perpetrate them, we “feel pain, regret” when they are brought to mind.

Power

Lord Acton wrote that “power corrupts.” Is that so? Must it always? Or does it only *tend to* corrupt? Of course we are talking about the use of power, and its wielder thereby becoming corrupt. Consider the power you have in your own life. In mine, I have a car and can use it to get from place to place very quickly. Walking is arguably healthier, but that’s not the only consideration I make when choosing to drive instead of walk. Though I enjoy walking, and try to get in at least an extra mile on top of regular movement every day, the number one reason I choose to drive is because I can. It’s a power that I sought and obtained. If I didn’t want it, then I would rid myself of the costs of owning a car and walk everywhere.

Maybe we can see now why Lord Action believed that power corrupts. When you have power, you use it or intend to use it at some point. If you didn't, you would get rid of it. When a person is offered and accepts power over others, they intend to use it. When that power is an illegitimate usurpation of authority, eg. a post with the state, their acceptance is the first step on the path of corruption, the path of destruction.

Final Thoughts

I said that these themes were on my mind in relation to each other. Resentment, as pain, probably wants to be healed. Most people seem to be untrained in the art of healing resentment. In my experience, resentment makes someone want to heal the suffering by causing suffering in those they resent. They want to "get even" or get revenge. Or, they may look at the larger social context of the resented behavior to determine a bigger cause. Bigger causes can only be battled with greater power. In order to heal, they believe, they must obtain power sufficient to destroy their greater enemy. In other words, resentment leads to a desire for power in order to "right wrongs." Do these ideas explain some of the suffering in the world today? Do they, or can they lead to understanding and explaining some of humanity's greatest evils? It seems probable.