POWER & RIGHTS, A LOOK AT THEIR SOURCE-AUTHORIZATIONS 'ELLIOTT #2127

This Thinksheet tries, from a particular angle, to increase the role of reason in thinking & argumentation about power & rights. Tough going, for "power" & "rights" are affect-laden, feeling-loaded words, as are the human psychosocial realities to which they point. Tough going also because the usual political use of this sanction of source is to shift discussion to a plane where analytic reason either cannot function (because the plane is inherently irrational, nonrational, unavailable to human critical intelligence) or need not function (since the authority of the source pointed to transcends reason's assignment in human life)....The particular angle here is rhetoric: in any persuasion effort that makes reference to source(s) as inducement(s) to agree and/or submit, (1) what is/are the source(s) and (2) what use(s) is/are being made of it/them?....(A fistful of other angles on "power" & "rights"--all as important as the angle I'm viewing from in this Thinksheet. Eg, instead of focusing, as I do here, on the rational il/legitimacy of particular source-references, one might focus on the process or outcomes of particular instances of power-use--eg, the outcome defintions of "power" (March, Dahl, Simon, Nagel, as detailed in Jack Nagel's "power as causation of ourcomes by preferences," p.175 of his Yale/75 THE DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS OF POWER, where he--I believe, rightly, from the social-science angle & responsibility--argues that "the most useful definitions (of power) are those which direct efforts to empirical research." This outcomes-orientation reinforces my U. of Chicago PhD thesis distinction between "sanctions of consequence" or outcome and "ultimate sanctions," the latter moving human beings without calculation of consequence-outcome.)....Now some notes angling in on this Thinksheet's angle:

1. There's an ironic contradition between philosophy's "genetic fallacy" (the irrational but powerful argument that something's inferior or unworthy because its source is inferior or unworthy--eg, man is "merely" an animal because descended from animals) and rhetoric's sanction of antiquity (the old is better, so the oldest is best--the basic fallacy of fundamentalism). On this, my present purpose is satisfied by only noting the functional overlapping of the sanction of antiquity with the sanction of source, of which it is actually only an instance.

2. The divine sanction--God as the source of power & rights--is often victimized both by the genetic fallacy (secularists arguing the at least probable unimportance of something on the ground that it derives from theistic piety) and by the sanction of antiquity (as when religion argues something as from God because so old as to have been taught "everywhere always by everybody"). "God" is one way, our primary Western way, of signaling the Ultimate as worthy of absolute human commitment & therefore of unquestioning obedience ("unquestioning" in the sense that the commitment has ultimate-sanctional force whatever the consequences). Two other ways, both powerful in the West, are the natural sanction (eg, "You can't fool Mother Nature") and the rational sanction (eg, science for science's sake, no matter whether humanity survives our inventions). To make progress (such as we need in recreating the Am. public school), the trialog of religion-philosophy-science must assume & accept the fact of faith when we humans, in any of our projects, are up against the unconditional, the ultimate, the to-be-obeyed-without-question; and the fact that the belief we can live humanly without ultimate commitment is an illusion....The category of "idolatry" is what everything but the biblical God is thrown into by us Christian & Jewish monotheists--as, eg, Nazism, which sucked the divine-natural-rational into etatism, the worship of a people-and-therefore-their-government. Another instance is humanity as having ultimate value & therefore the right to be central in the antinuclear movement (Jon. Shell, Carl Sagan--I'm

OVER

amazed at how uncritically many Christians accept this secular grounding of thier secular pacifist cofighters, just as I was disappointed that Christians, including Ro. Cath. priests, joined with their Sandinista cofighters in a consitution whose "Grundlinien" ("ground-lines" --great German word for this) are mechanistic-materialistic-Marxist.... If the drafters of the Nicaraguan constitution had had the good sense and foresight to leave out the metaphysics, Washington might be giving $ to the Nic. gov't. for its many worthy projects, instead of--directly, & through Irangate--to the Contras. It's stupid to believe, as do economic determinists, that ideas are epiphenomenal to power: they are the engines of history--which of course reveals me to be a spiritual-intellectual determinist!)

3. We humans, individually & collectively, should do what God wants: the will of God is the ultimate-ultimate sanction. Two "ifs": (1) If (as I believe) God exists; and (2) If God wants anything of us and communicates to us his wantings (as also I believe). But this still doesn't bring us out of the woods and into the clearing: hermeneutics, the decisional understanding of what God wants of and for us here & now. Atop that is the issue of the hermeneutical locus; where, in our human life, is the authoritative voice on what should be done (=, in our religious language, what is God's will)? A priestly caste (hierarchy)? A sovereign (monarchy)? A group honored for human quality (aristocracy) or wealth (plutocracy) or achievement (meritocracy)? The people (democracy--the worst option, according to Plato!)? Sacred literature (scribism of a caste of scholars and literalism of individuals)? An ecstatic (prophetism, eg Hebrew-Jewish, including Jesus)?

(1) The divine right of kings (sovereigns) runs into the awkward problem that the ruler has no right to govern wrong. The Rev. Jim Jones had no right to lead 913 followers to death even though (in his own eyes) he'd become God. The right to rule is nobody's ultimate right except God's (Wm. Penn's "Either theocracy or tyranny").

(2) Though might does not make right, it makes rights-&-powers claims --every dynasty (as Scott observed) "running back to a successful soldier." Here too put Napoleon's "How many legions does the Pope have?" and Mao's "Power & rights begin at the front end of a gun." Reminds me of the meeting of A. & D.: *Alexander* "I am Alexander the Great." *Diogenes* "And I am Diogenes the Cynic." And the Greek-Cynic epigram on Alex.: "A tomb now suffices him for whom the whole world was not sufficient." But also that fountainhead of Prussianism, Fred. the Great: "Great guns...are the most respectable arguments of the rights of kings." But the same man, great humanist as well as great soldier: "They say kings are made in the image of God. I feel sorry for God if that is what he looks like." Finally, Emerson's classic statement of the royalty of everybody: "Every chair should be a throne and hold a king." And two crusty characters: SENECA, in a statement that gets me thinking about Khomeini ("A multitude of executions discredits a king, as a multitude of funerals a doctor"); and GBS ("Kings are not born, they are made by universal hallucination").

(3) We're looking forward to a visit from Ted Francis, head of the Canterbury-&-Rochester dioceses' Council for Social Responsibility, whose 1986 Annual Report we just got. In Britain, ecopolitical rights include housing, which some in the USA think should be a right in the USA--and some of these think it a God-given right, so that society is out of God's will in not providing, codically & actually, housing on demand....Declaration of Indep. divine rights, "endowed by their Creator"--leading to First Amendment rights....How read Job's "the LORD giveth, the LORD taketh away" vis-a-vis abortion, war, and capital punishment, as well as Living Will, infanticide-at-birth of the severely impaired, and covenant euthanasia--and even suicide?*

* *Of these socalled "rights," which are (1) given directly by God (not, I think for one, the right to conceive)? (2) given by God through society? (3) not given by God at all (with various implications!)?*