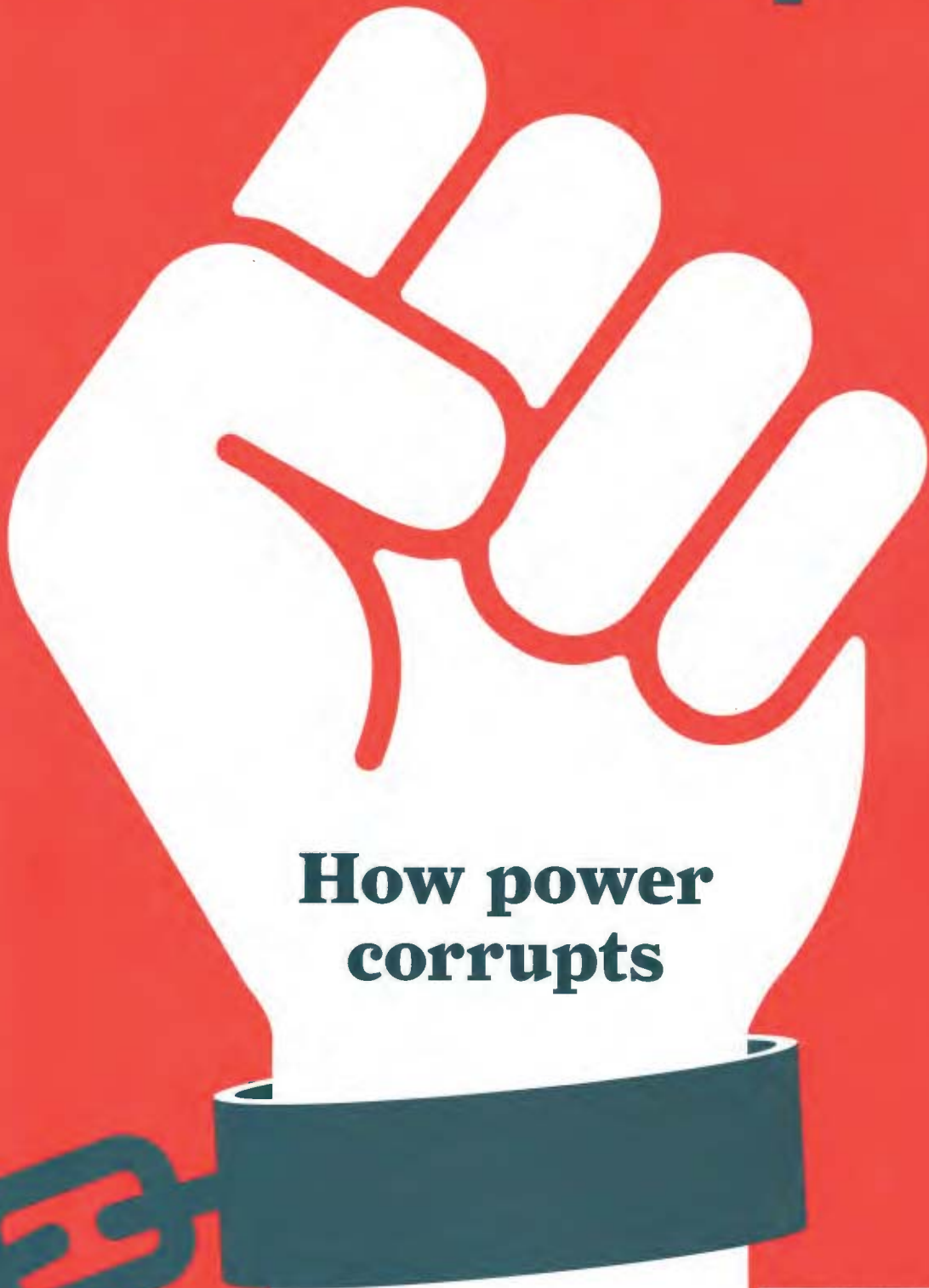


POLITICAL POWER GAMES

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Uncontrollable feelings

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by Mariana Alessandri

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The Ancient Greek slave and Stoic philosopher Epictetus believed that you could control your feelings. He filed feelings under “things that are up to us”, in contrast to something like reputation, which he categorised as out of our control. If your feelings are causing you suffering, the Stoics believed that you could heal yourself by getting a handle on them. Through a series of lifelong practices, Stoic philosophers train their errant feelings to answer to reason. Their remedy for my own go-to feeling, anger, would involve writing, meditating, and talking to friends about it until I became convinced that it was unreasonable and let it go. Although Epictetus would admit to the glacial pace of dominating one’s negative feelings, he would still prescribe this Stoic medicine to suffering souls. But while we are

consulting Ancient doctors of philosophy, let’s get a second opinion.

Before Epictetus declared it possible to tame our inner brute, Aristotle said *don’t bother trying*. Feelings seem to arise in us unbidden, he wrote, and we don’t blame people for them. Even nasty feelings are good for something: they serve as the occasion for virtuous actions. Suffering souls who would rather be happy should forget about controlling their feelings. Aristotle spent the *Nicomachean Ethics* making the case for behaving beautifully in the face of wayward feelings, so instead of scolding yourself for your anger, sadness, envy – anything less than joy – you should try acting virtuously. Telling yourself you shouldn’t be angry, or even trying not to be, is a waste of energy compared to deciding what you must do in the face of anger (or not do, as it were).

To be fair to Aristotle, he also hinted that if we train ourselves to behave beautifully, our feelings are likely to change. Behave better, and you may feel better, but in the meantime don’t beat yourself up for feeling bad. Feelings are to be dealt with only obliquely, for Aristotle, and trying to bridle them will only distract you from

becoming virtuous. Every semester when I tell my Ethics students that Aristotle doesn’t want them chastising themselves for errant feelings, they report relief. (Tellingly though, several of my students mistakenly believe that Aristotle doesn’t ask them to change.) They’re relieved because he doesn’t ask them to change what feels unchangeable: their feelings. Aristotle accepts their misfit emotions, so they don’t mind him asking them to work on treating people better, including themselves. Changing their feelings seems Sisyphean; changing their behaviour seems only hard.

Aristotle and Epictetus agreed that we can control our reactions to negative feelings, whatever their source and however unreasonable they may be. But if you don’t train your behaviour because you are busy trying to wrangle your feelings into submission, you are more likely to misbehave, and when you do, you are more likely to blame it on something other than yourself. I’ve witnessed countless parents violently blaming kids for their own lack of self-control: “You made me lose my temper!” They don’t realise that they’re using the language abusers use

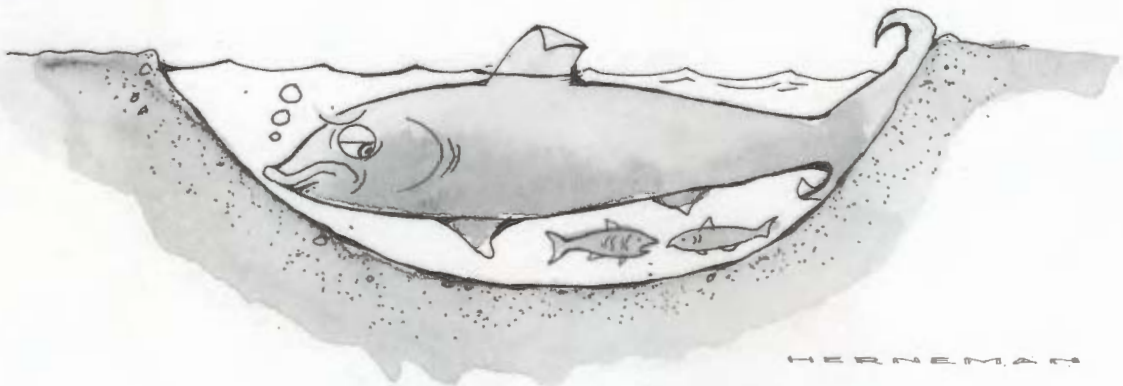
to justify their misdeeds. Phrases like this are a sign of a confused society, in which people misunderstand their own power and responsibility. The child may have made the parent angry (of course Epictetus would challenge this, saying that the parent must have agreed to become angry), but Aristotle would insist that it's precisely when we're angry that we have a decision to make. Since teaching Aristotle's ideas, my message to my own children has evolved into: *I am angry, and I want to hit you. But hitting is not something that I allow myself to do. You can always be mad, sad, anxious, sleepy, hungry – these are your feelings and you don't need to change them or feel bad about them or make them go away. But they are never an excuse for bad behaviour. I control my reactions, and I expect you to also.* Aristotle's choose-your-battle method makes things easier: believing that feelings are out of your control frees you to focus on your actions.

The haziness about whether our feelings are 'up to us' or not once again revealed itself in two seemingly unrelated movements that both gained traction in the middle of the 20th century: cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) and non-violent resistance. CBT draws on Epictetus's declaration that

we control our feelings, our outlook on life, and ultimately our happiness. It teaches that thoughts and feelings are related and are manipulable to a certain extent. As it did for the Stoics, happiness for cognitive behaviourists involves talking, meditating, and rewriting any harmful narratives we tell ourselves. In trying to empower us, CBT faults us, subtly, for having negative feelings, and implies that they are up to us. If Aristotle was right that feelings arise unbidden and we shouldn't spend so much time worrying about them, then CBT is barking up the wrong tree. Practitioners of CBT are likely to suffer from the same type of impotent navel-gazing that philosophers get accused of, compared to those who spend their life becoming virtuous. Even acceptance and commitment theory (ACT), which emerged in part as a corrective to CBT's admonishment of negative feelings, still has us spending a lot of time absorbed in our feelings, if only to become more accepting of them. Aristotle understood that our energy is limited, and every minute we waste trying to rule our emotions is a minute we don't devote to virtuous action.

In contrast, non-violent resistance takes negative feelings as a given, and

aims to practise what Aristotle prescribed: to behave beautifully in the face of contrary feelings. Proponents like Thoreau, Ghandi, Tolstoy, and Martin Luther King Jr. advocated self-control, but they weren't referring to our feelings. Like Aristotle, they would have us aim our power where it will get the most traction, at our behaviour, instead of at the Bermuda Triangle of our emotions. Using my energy to practise controlling myself even when I am angry is more efficacious than training myself not to become angry. Not becoming angry isn't even a desirable goal; defenders of anger like bell hooks and Maria Lugones have long argued for anger's value, since it can lead to fighting against injustice. Negative feelings often serve as the best impetus for action, so eliminating them would be detrimental to virtue. Aristotle would even argue that we need not bother asking about the appropriateness of the motivating feeling. Behaving beautifully in the face of unjustifiable anger is still virtuous. Similarly, justified anger can't turn vice into virtue. Feelings are neither blameworthy nor praiseworthy. Only action is, so let's quit trying to cheer up and get busy behaving beautifully. ▣



"Oh, and Mr Big fish gets very cross if you suggest we're in a small pond."