Why Propaganda Works:

Rationalist Explanations and Implications

Anton Sobolev

Disclaimer: I have a light form of *dysgraphia*, and my slides usually suffer from various typos and mistakes. Please, accept my apologies in advance.

Roadmap

Fake News

Misinformation

Propaganda

Disinformation

Roadmap

Fake News

Misinformation

Propaganda

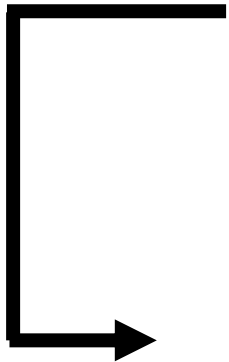Disinformation

Information about the world

Roadmap

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Information about the world

World we live in

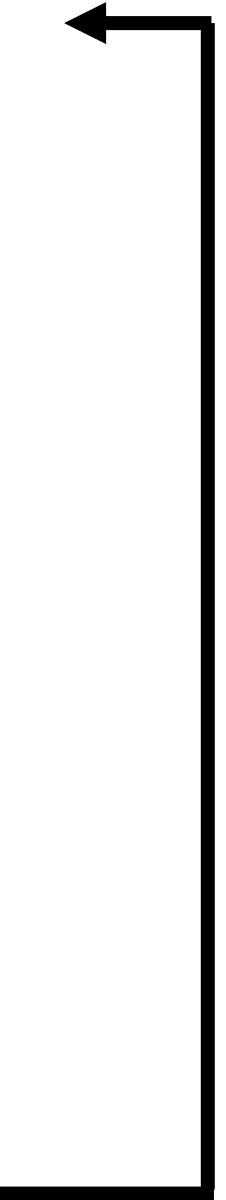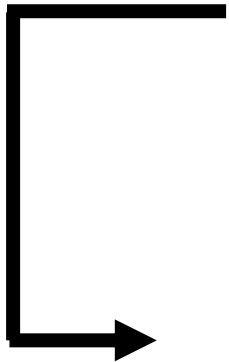# Roadmap

What features of the World make propaganda work?
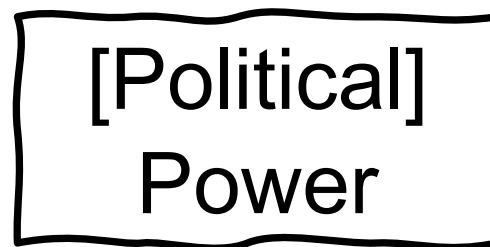
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World we live in

Roadmap

[Political]
Power

Roadmap

[Political]
Power

↓

Conflict

Roadmap

World Features

"Earth-616"

[Political] Power

Conflict

Roadmap

World Features

"Earth-616"

[Political] Power

Conflict

Roadmap

World Features

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Conflict
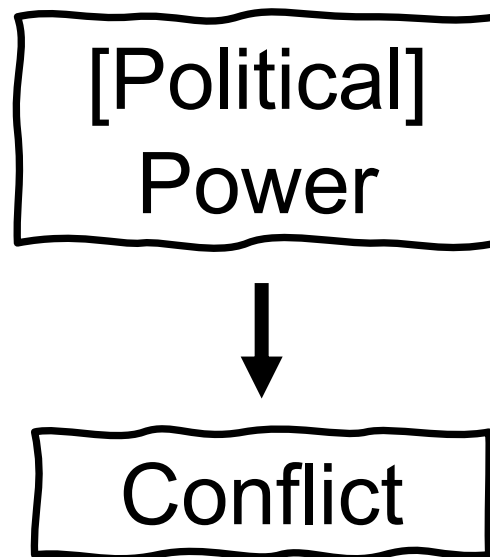
Roadmap

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Roadmap

World Features **"Earth-616"** $\rightarrow$ [Political] Power $\rightarrow$ Beliefs

[Political] Power $\rightarrow$ Conflict $\rightarrow$ World Features

Beliefs $\rightarrow$ Beliefs ⟿ Facts $\rightarrow$ Conditions $\rightarrow$ Examples
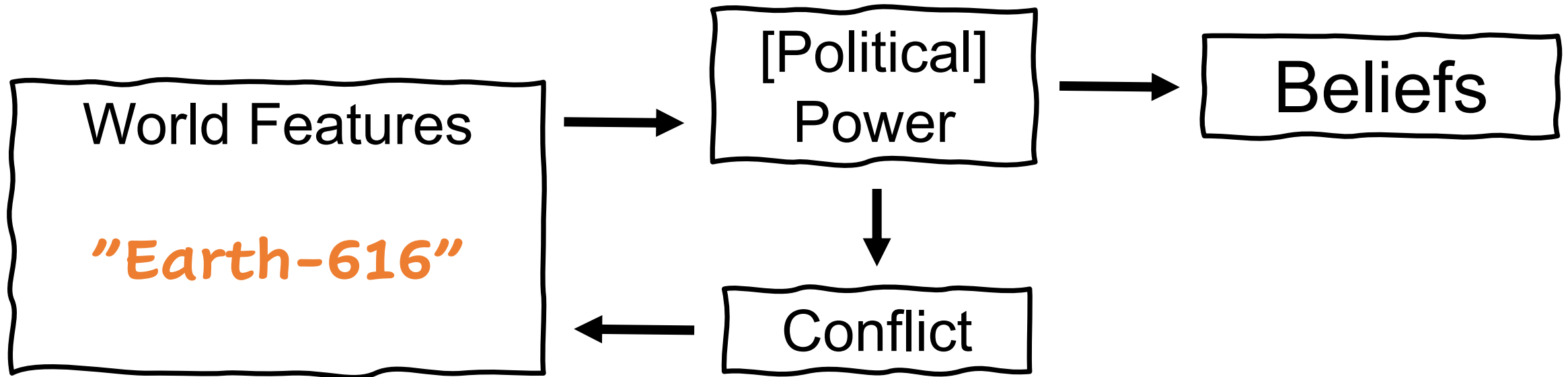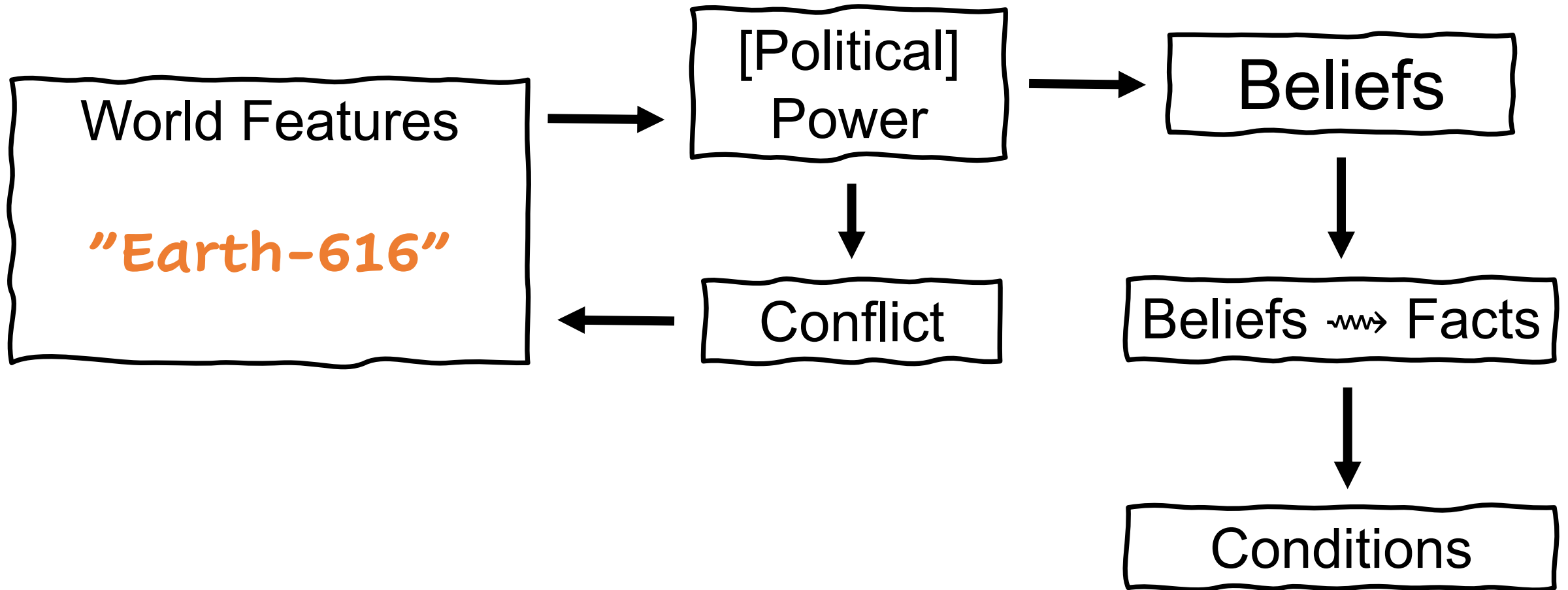
Question: *What is political power?*
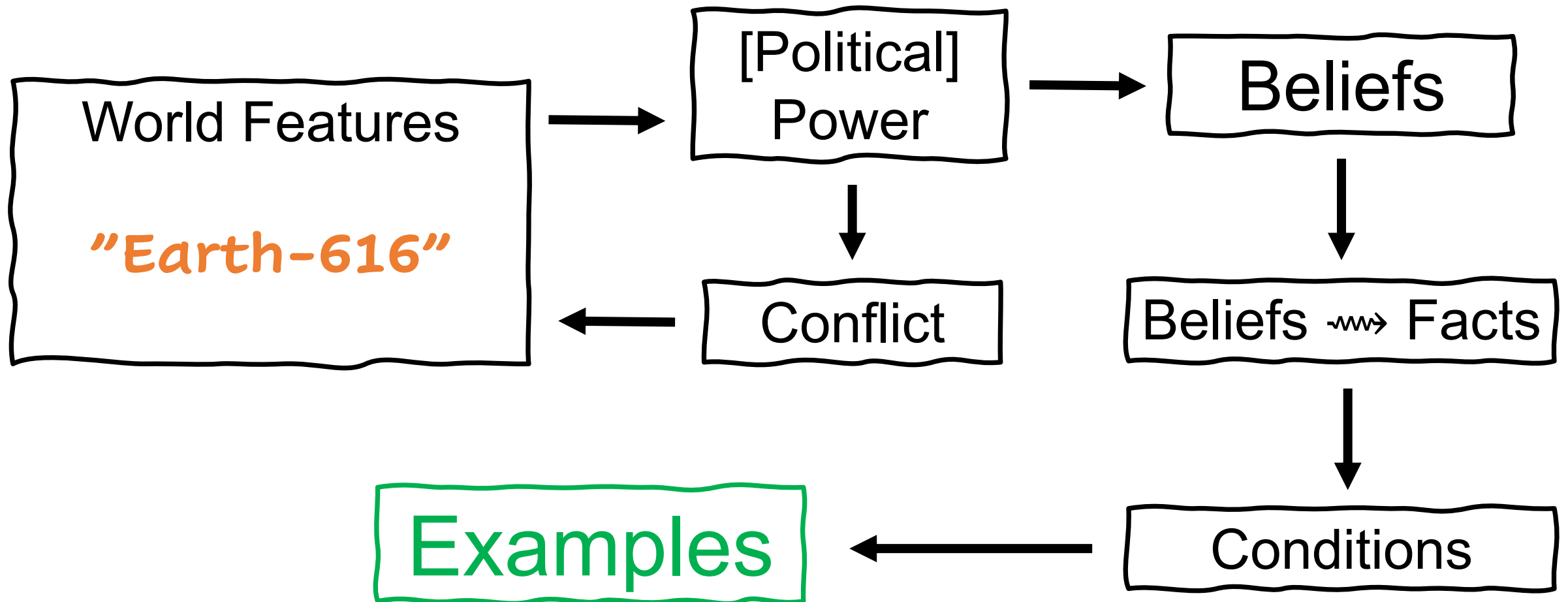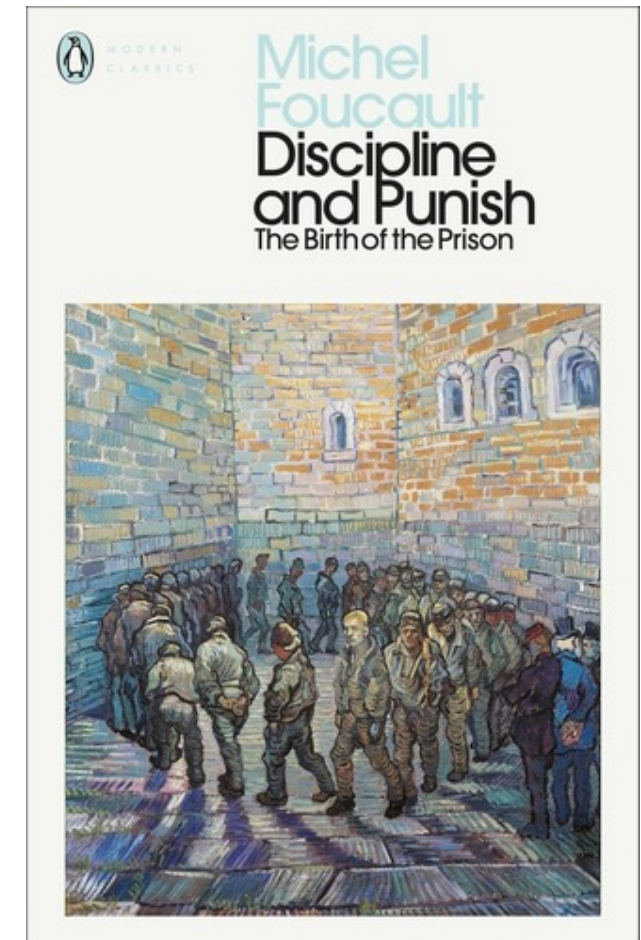
Political power

Ability of **A** to change the behavior of **B**. [**B** would not change this behavior on her own. **B** would not change her behavior without **A**].

Simplification: Identify what is important

Understanding Political Power

❏ Naïve approach: study states

❏ CT approach: study many
simplified cases instead
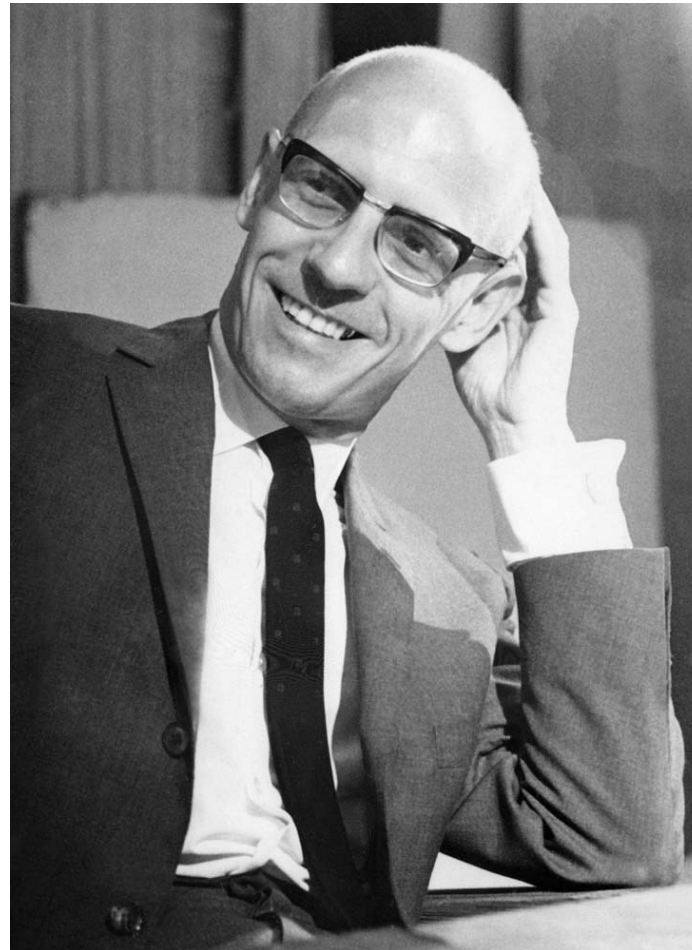
Simplification: Identify what is important

Understanding Political Power

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- Foucault: Study prisons and nuthouses!

Michel Foucault

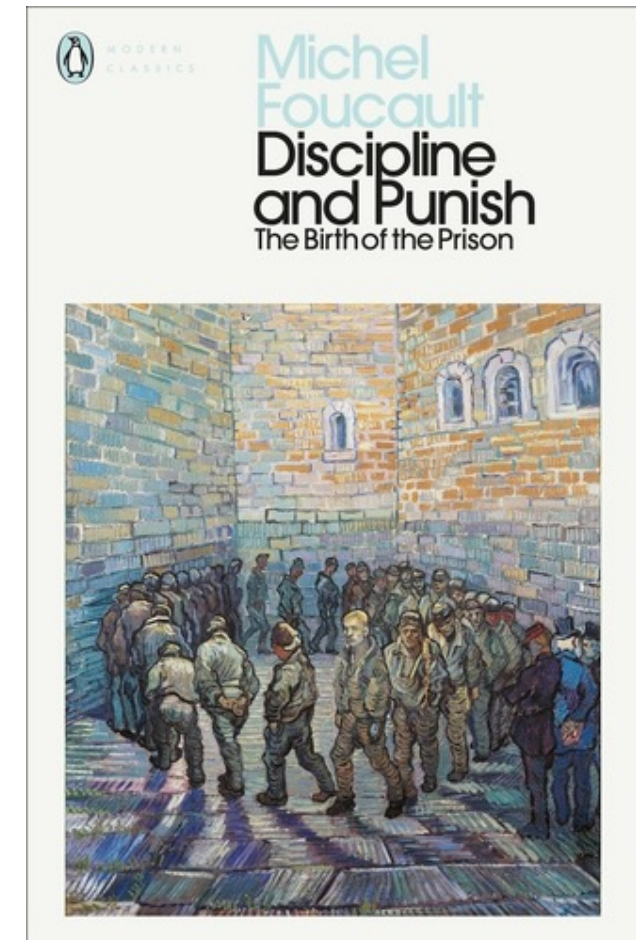# Simplification: Identify what is important

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The most cited computer scientist ever
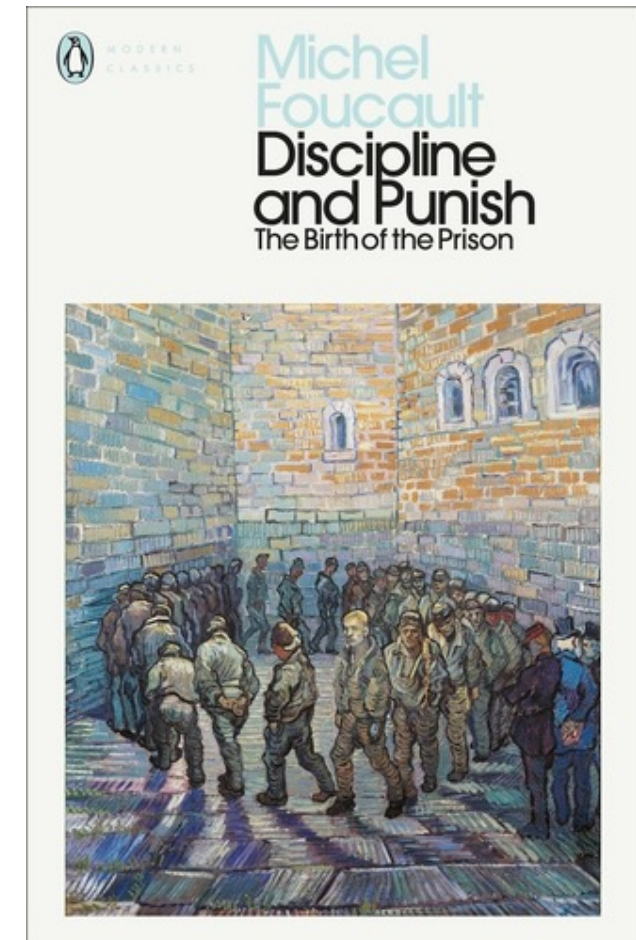
Anil K. Jain
Michigan State University
Verified email at cse.msu.edu
Cited by 241407

Michel Foucault
Philosophy, Collège de France
Cited by 1209266

Michel Foucault

Conflict: Where should we start?

Start with an obvious example:
- ❑ Two men fight each other

Look for aspects [features] that seem important:
- ❑ **Feature-1**: A physical body tries to damage another physical body

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Can we use this features to "identify" conflict in more "primitive" cases?
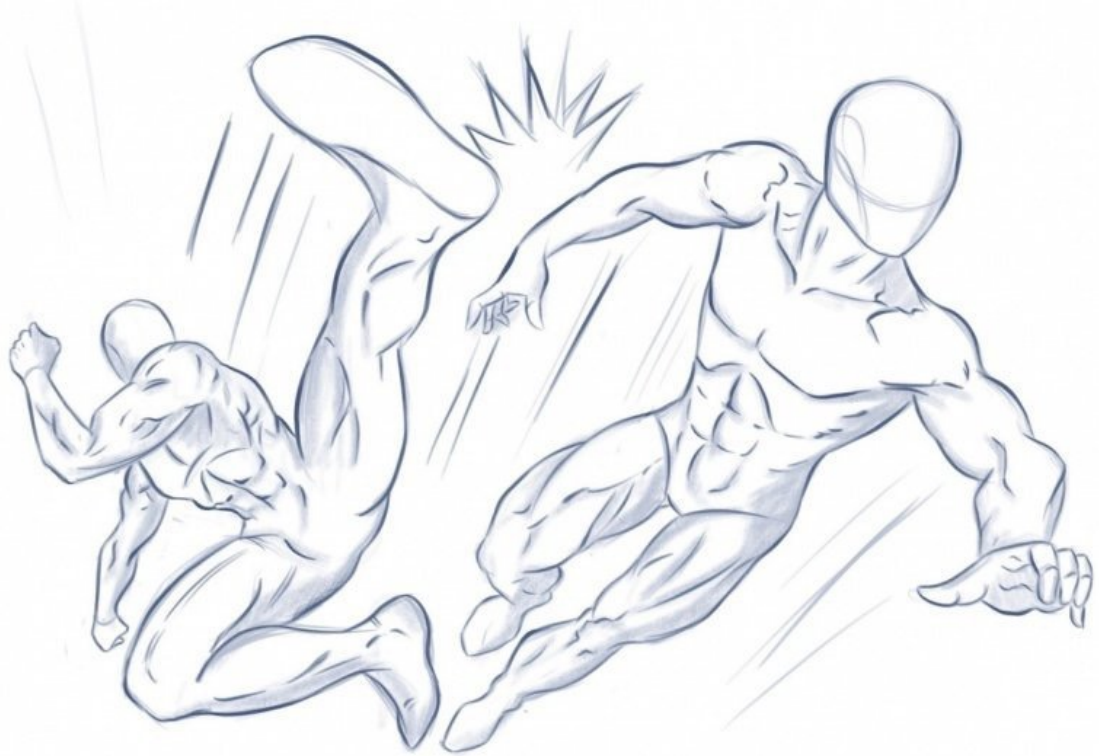
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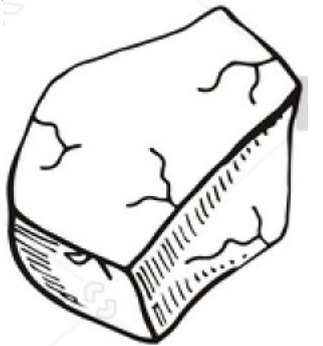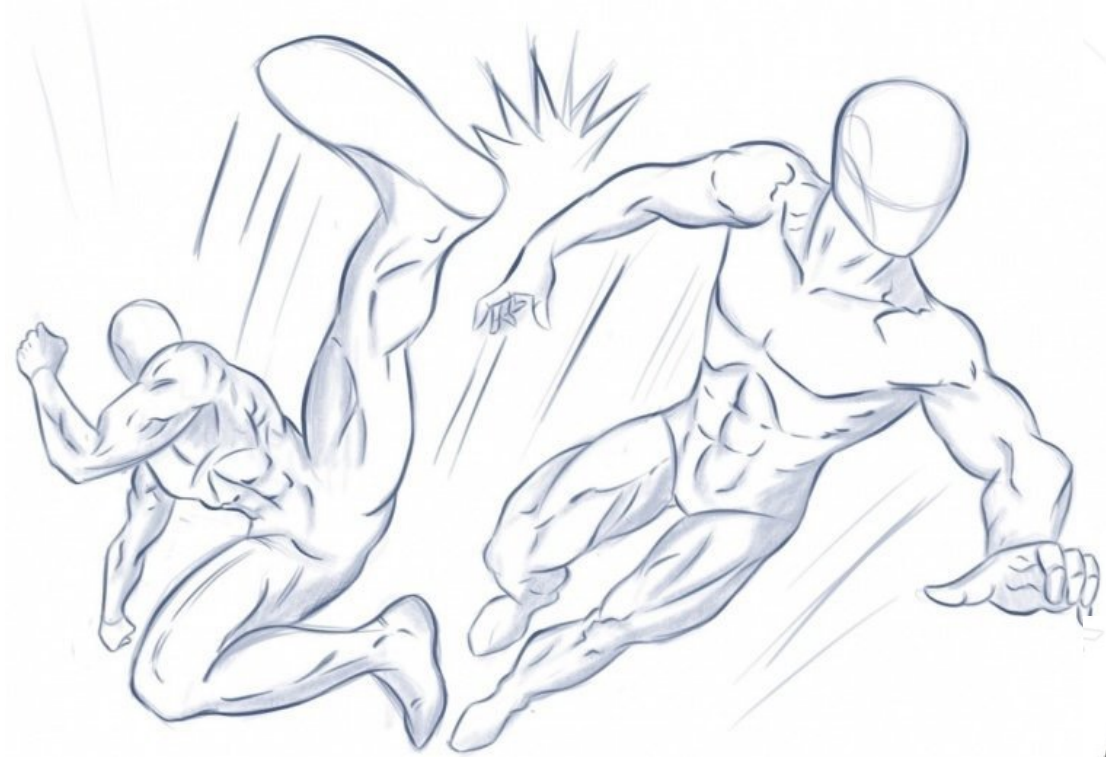
⟿ Observed physical damage is not a necessary condition for the presence/absence of conflict

Conjecture-1:
❑ Sufficient condition for conflict: Threat of violence

Feature-2:
Man-1 tries to prevent Man-2 from a specific behavior
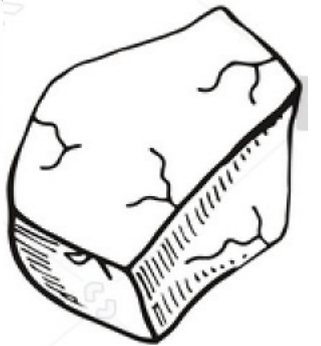
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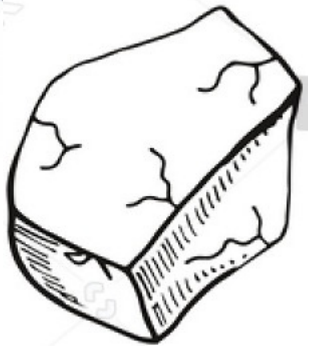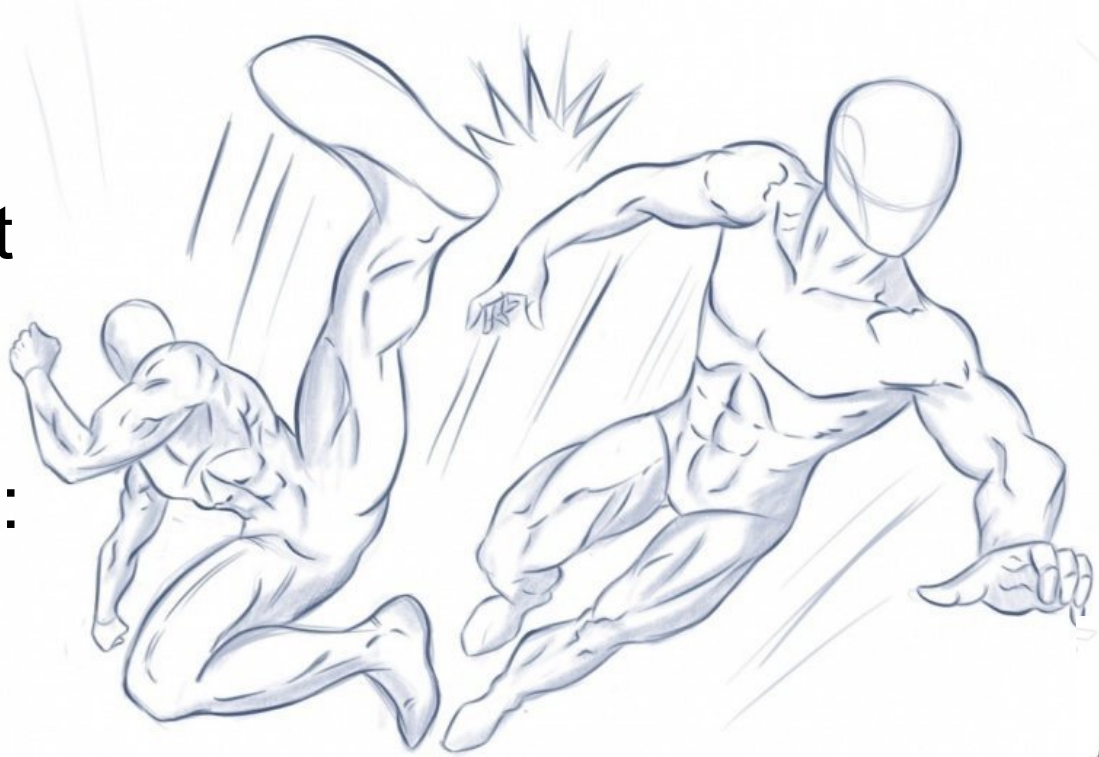
Are **Feature-1** and **Feature-2** equally important?

Feature-2 [Prevent behavior]

Why would Wolf-1 want to prevent
Wolf-2 from crossing his territory?

Conjecture-2:
❑ Control over resources
❑ Resources for biological survival
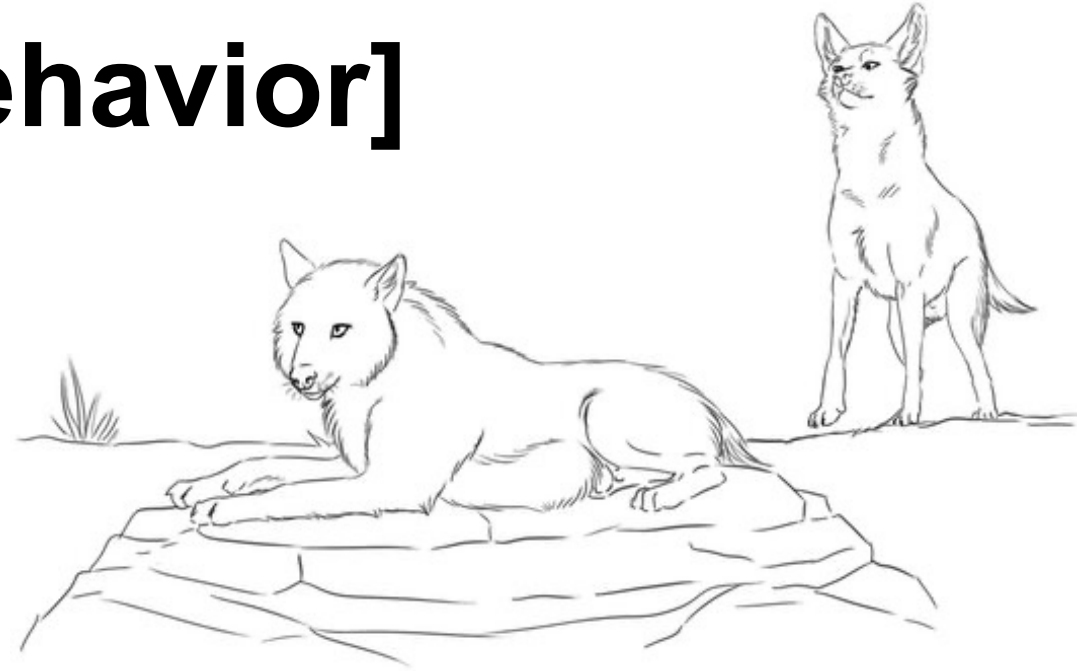
Counterfactuals:
What if the Wolf-1 abstains?
Wolf-1 dies, Wolf-2 survives
What if resources were unlimited?
Both survive, no need to fight for
resources

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**Two necessary conditions
for the conflict to exist**

1. Living Beings exist [Life]
2. Sources are scarce

The very first conflict

Protein – simplest form of life
- ❑ Takes simple chemical elements
- ❑ Builds its own copy [**Needs energy!**]

Protein-1
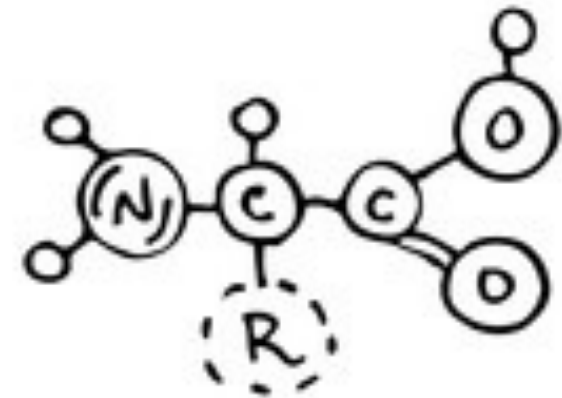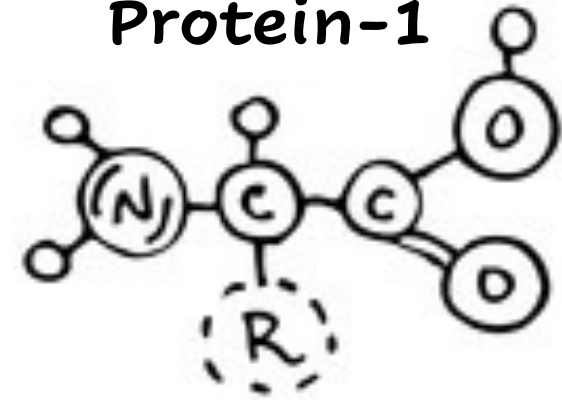
Protein-2

The very first conflict

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- ❑ Takes simple chemical elements
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Working definition
- ❑ *Conflict* – a situation where two or more parties claim control over the same scarce resource
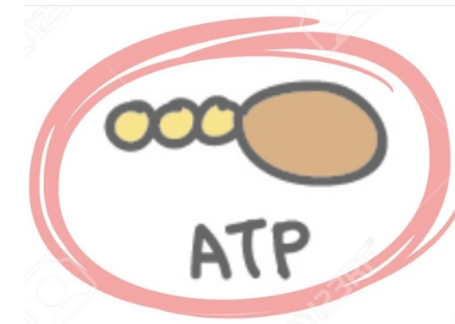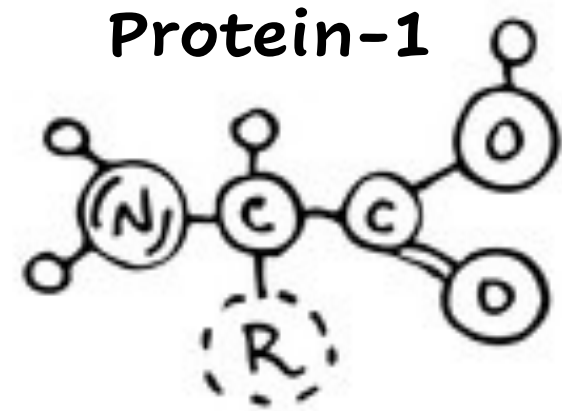
Protein-1

Conflict over energy resources
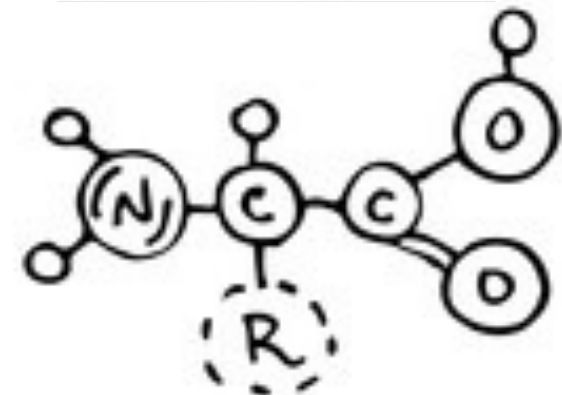
Protein-2

The very first conflict

Protein – simplest form of life
- ❏ Takes simple chemical elements
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Working definition
- ❏ *Conflict* – a situation where two or more parties claim control over the same scarce resource

Obvious examples

Drunk men in bar fight for the last beer

Medieval knights fight for princess' "heart"

US and China fight for Taiwan

Two robots fight for the only power outlet
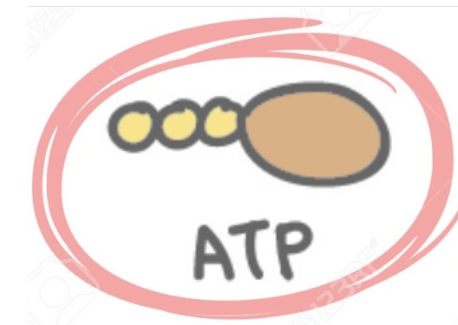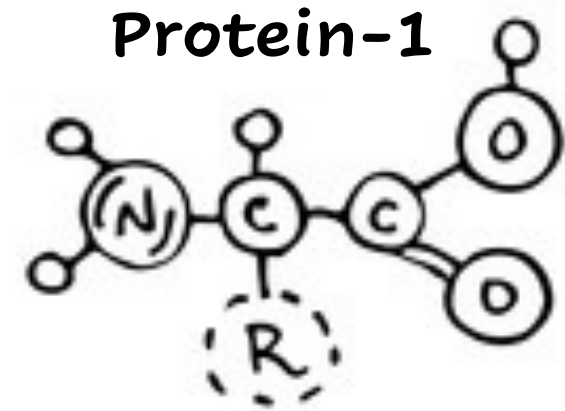
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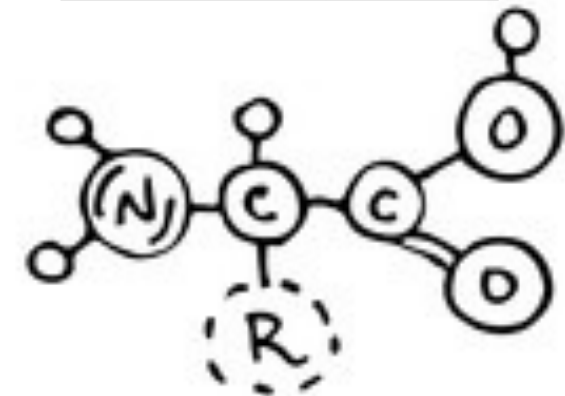
Protein-2

Defining "Political Power": An Update

Recall definition of political:

❑ ***Political power*** – an ability of **A** to change the behavior of **B**. [**B** would not change this behavior on her own. **B** would not change his behavior without **A**].
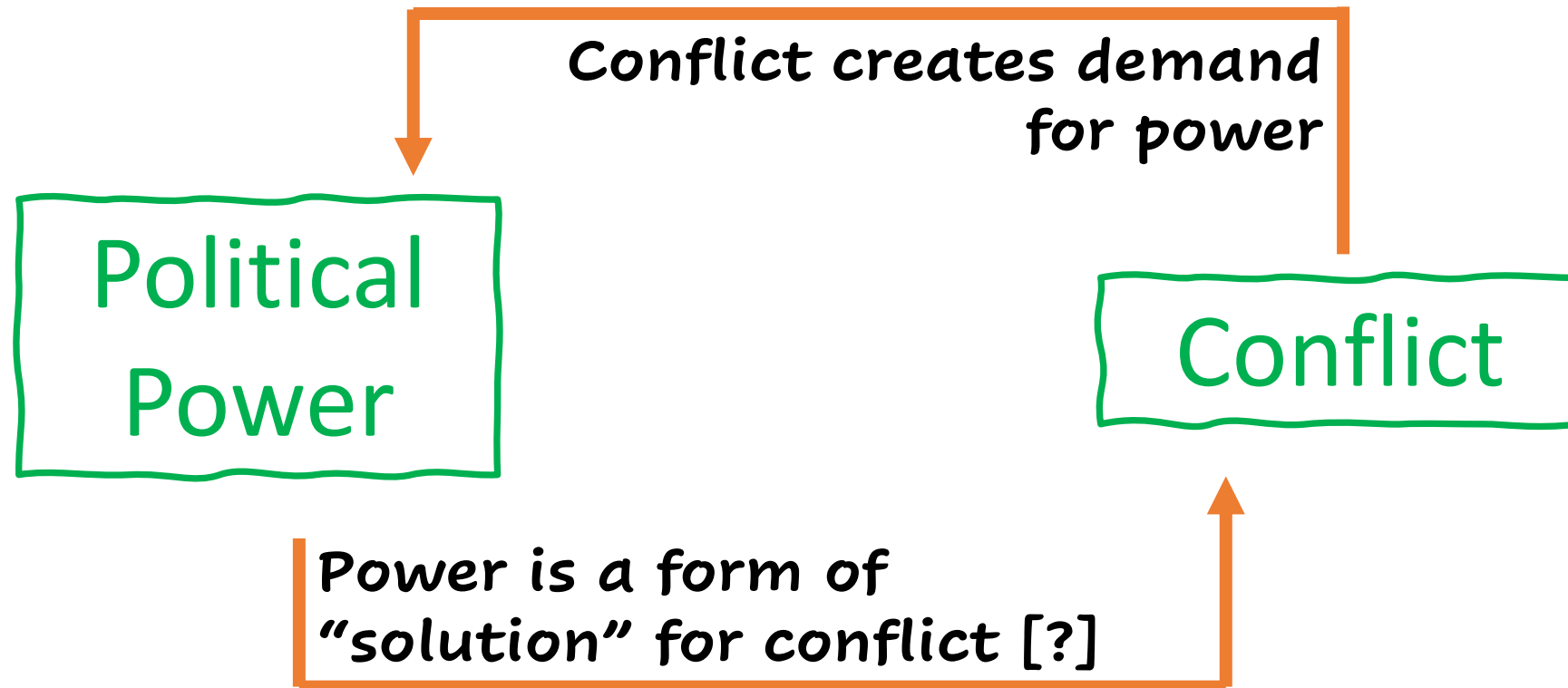
Forms of Conflict

Actualized conflict -- actors actively use scarce resources in attempt to coerce others to follow their command

❑ Actors devote [destroy] part of their resources to coercion

❑ Attempt: to be an active part of the conflict you do not no need to have a political power over others

⤳ **The conflict itself is a problem [** **RESOURCES DESTROYED GUARANTEE OF SUCCESS?]**

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Conflicts are fluid: A → L → A → L

Latent conflict

A dominates the others due to **A**'s advantage in political power
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Tricky!

You **can** exercise power even when you **cannot** *de-facto* physically coerce others

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GAME OF THRONES

You **can** exercise power even when you **cannot** *de-facto* physically coerce others

GoT-1: *Power resides where men believe it resides*

Some tell us that all power comes from the gods. Others say it derives from law. <u>Power resides where men **believe** it resides.</u>

Tyrion: "The king, the priest, the rich man who lives and who dies? Who will the swordsman obey? <u>All depends on the man with the **sword.**</u> That piece of steel is the power of life and death"

Varys: "Yet if it is the swordsmen who rule us in truth, why do we pretend our kings hold the power? Why should a strong man with a sword ever obey a child king like Joffrey, or a wine-sodden oaf like his father?"

GoT-1: Power resides where men believe it resides

What can we learn from this dialogue?
❑ *Tyrion's "*Power belongs to Swordsman"
❑ *Varys'* upside-down perspective:
  ❑ It is not about Swordsman!

GoT-1: Power resides where men believe it resides

What can we learn from this dialogue?   →∿➤   *Why would Strongman follow others' commands?*
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Strongman's potential motives:

❑ *Richman:* Money [= life resources → survival]

❑ *Priest:* Fear of hell [hope for afterlife]

→ Can they coerce Swordsman if he refuses?

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❑ ***Priest:*** Fear of hell [hope for afterlife]

→ Can they coerce Swordsman if he refuses?

NO

But Richman and Priest still exercises power over Strongman

GoT-1: Power resides where men believe it resides

Richman commands

Why would Strongman obey Richman?

❑ Strongman's initial beliefs:
  ❑ "I will die without Richman's resources"

❑ Richman persuades Strongman:
  ❑ "You will die without me"

GoT-1: **Power resides where men believe it resides** — Richman commands

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Definition of Power, update-2

it is not about your de-facto ability to coerce others. It is about beliefs of others and your ability to shape them.

GoT-1: Power resides where men believe it resides

King commands

Why would Strongman obey King?

❑ Tyrion's answer is redundant

    ❑ Why would the other swordsmen have the true power?

Reasons discussed before

❑ Money

❑ Religious fear

Varys "Then these other swordsmen have the true power. Or do they?"

Tyrion "Because these child kings and drunken oafs can call <u>other strong men</u>, with other swords."

GoT-1: **Power resides where men believe it resides** **King commands**

Tradition-based legitimacy
- ❑ "My GF followed King's GF.
  My F followed King's F.
  I'm following King."

GoT-1: Power resides where men believe it resides

King commands

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Why it works
❑ Uncertainty about the world's 'rules' for successful survival
❑ Decision-making requires energy

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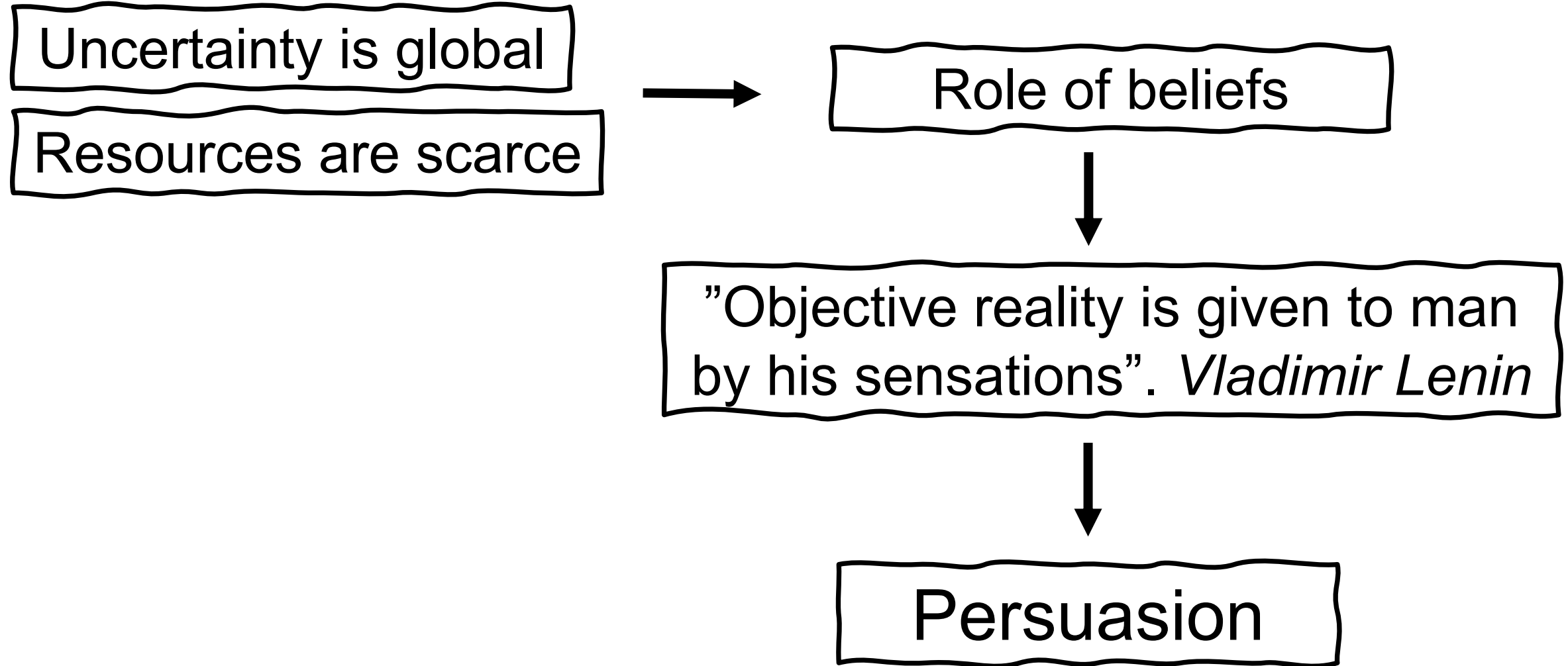
⇝➔

Why it works
- ❑ Uncertainty about the world's 'rules' for successful survival
- ❑ Decision-making requires energy

Rents from status-quo
- ❑ "I enjoy privileges I have. No guarantee I keep them if someone challenges status-quo"

Moving forward

Uncertainty is global

Resources are scarce

→ Role of beliefs

↓

"Objective reality is given to man by his sensations". *Vladimir Lenin*

↓

Persuasion

Conditions: Private Information

Russian trolls' attacks

❑ Discussion of economic performance (-)

❑ Discussions of War in Ukraine (+)

Questions?