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Authority and Its Discontents

Asking What Is Authority?

Contemporary politics has become paralyzed before two conflicting views. On the one hand, politics in the post–World War Two period is frequently taken to be a question of technocratic administration. On the other hand, citizens also believe that contemporary politics has an ineluctable psycho-social component best understood on the terms of personal identity.[1] The result is a citizenry caught between tendencies toward overstabilization and self-disintegration. Any response to the current paralysis needs to acknowledge the hold that these views have on current political

[1] One of the early reviews of *Nomos 1: Authority* nicely captures early understandings of this dilemma: "In a world of 'Hidden Persuaders' by television, radio, and press and in the age of what has been termed 'Organization Man,' the problem of the nature and extent of authority is a fascinating one; indeed it may well be one which must be solved if society is not to be replaced by the anarchy of liberalism," (p. 205). B. A. Wortley, "Review, *Nomos 1 Authority*" *International Affairs* 35.2 (April 1959): 205. Some thirty years later, in *Nomos: Authority Revisited*, another reviewer will note the paradoxical implications of Frederick Schauer's analysis – namely that "the absence of shared values makes the indeterminacy of our ideals, our laws, and our political process necessary and valuable. Yet that very ambiguity tends to increase the latitude of those in authority, thereby at least potentially endangering the flexibility [so] … prize[d]" (p. 163). James T. Kloppenberg, "Review: Nomos 29: Authority Revisited," *Ethics* 99.1 (October 1988): 163–4. More recently, the 1970s debates between Habermas and Niklas Luhmann attest to the contentiousness over the place for "system" and "rational political steering" in contemporary politics; Foucault's work on governmentality and biopower turned to the increasing significance of techniques of "managerial administration" to manage "populations"; and more recent scholars, across a range of interpretive traditions, identify an eviscerated politics that leads each to charge the other with offering "a rather bloodless conception of participation" (Norval, p. 239). Aletta Norval, "Democratic Identification: A Wittgensteinian Approach," *Political Theory* 34.2 (April 2006): 229–55.

practices, and to take them as the starting point for the reconstruction of something new.

Freud and Foucault are not often associated with this challenge; indeed they are most readily recognized as diagnosticians of the political and cultural processes that have created it. Counterintuitively, then, this book will draw on both thinkers toward thinking beyond the impasse surrounding political judgment and agency just outlined. I locate two models for such practices of self-formation in Sigmund Freud's writings on psychoanalytic technique and Michel Foucault's unpublished lectures on the ancient ethical practices of "fearless speech," or *parrhesia*. My goal with these models is not, in a literal sense, to argue that all moderns should seek the authoritative intervention of a psychoanalyst or "truth-teller." Rather, these culturally salient figures of psychoanalyst and truth-teller are the nodal points between self-governance and political governance; the educative relationships they sustain actually nourish the psychological, ethical, and cultural dimensions of *political* authority. By analyzing the practices that underlie political authority, this book thus engages classic concerns about subject-formation, to argue that authority derives from a risky exchange modeled on that between educator and student. It is a model that prepares for a no less dynamic exchange between rulers and ruled. The book seeks a more supple understanding of the modern ethical subject and new grounds on which to revisit the seemingly bankrupt concepts of political authority, trust, and truth-telling.

Contemporary thinkers of the post-war period have become habituated to raising these questions of subject-formation and agency in the context of "power" rather than of "authority." The post-war period grappled with the increasingly incontrovertible evidence that boundaries between different domains of knowledge, justification, and order had become blurred. Not only was there no singular order to draw together law, morality, and politics, but the bodies of authoritative knowledge that sustained these (science, literature, history) strained against one another.[2] Appeals to "authority," then, often read as efforts to ignore these disjunctures and instead to appeal conservatively to prior authorizations. Where

[2] This gloss of modern authority draws on several accounts, but especially that of Jacques Rancière. In casting "the crisis of authority" as one in which authority can no longer move easily between domains of justification, I draw on Rancière's *The Names of History*. Rancière broadly characterizes the crisis of authority in terms of a crisis of evidence. He broadly identifies two epistemologies – scientific modes, that seek intelligibility; and literary modes, that explore opacity – and argues that the discipline of history and the practice of politics are pressed to adjudicate their claims. Jacques Rancière, *The Names of History: On the Poetics of Knowledge*, trans. Hassan Melehy (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994).

the concept of "authority" often implied a relatively fixed and unchanging order, the vocabulary of "power" was made for cutting: cutting through the pettifoggery of elite politics, through the veneer of a normal politics, through the sediment of unexamined modes of political thought and practice. "Power" also spoke to a palpable sense of constraint (implicit or explicit) often inadequately addressed by classically liberal theories of consent most often associated with political authority.

As a result, the concept of authority has fallen out of fashion. Its prognosis in the twentieth century was bleak from the beginning: the first volume of *Nomos*, devoted to its study, opened with Hannah Arendt's asking "What *was* Authority?" Although she later changed the title of her essay in response to the consternation of her colleagues, she preserved her thesis that with the demise of religion and tradition, authority had lost two legitimizing bulwarks key for its survival in the modern world. She mourned modernity's untethered condition, and the world in which religion and tradition were to be unavailable as anchors. Both within that essay and in the Preface to its publication in *Between Past and Future*, Arendt casts the demise of authority in terms of the ethical ambiguities it provokes. *Our history was left to us by no testament*, she writes, citing poet and Resistance fighter René Char's words penned in the aftermath of World War Two.[3] Religion and tradition once provided a framework by which we could elevate constraints (such as those posed by people, events, imperatives) above the mundane level of necessity. Such constraints are constraints on the freedom of our actions, our thoughts, our will; transgressing such constraints can provoke blame, while respecting them provokes responsibility. Bereft of any clear terms of entailment from these previous frameworks for order, Arendt urges that we must take on a new way of "settling down in the gap between past and future."[4] Through

[3] Readers may know of René Char because of his participation in the French Resistance, during which he gave up writing poetry. Others may recognize this epigram as the sentence that opens the Preface of Arendt's *Between Past and Future*, or Char's reference to "lost treasure" that closes her *On Revolution*. Fewer likely know of Char's personal connection to Foucault. Foucault cites Char in his earliest writings, and on the back inside cover to the final two volumes of the *History of Sexuality* series reads the inscription "The history of men is the long sequence of synonyms for a single term. Contradicting it is a duty." The two were also personal friends. Four lines from the "Demi-jour en Creuse," a poem that Char penned four days before Foucault's death, and dedicated to Foucault, were read at Foucault's funeral. I reference this epigram because its content resonates with Foucault's own preoccupations with history and because its association with Arendt brings this pre-occupation more clearly in line with American political theory.

[4] Hannah Arendt, "Preface: The Gap Between Past and Future," in *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), p. 13.

"constant practices and exercises," Arendt suggests, we can perhaps recalibrate our ethical and political responses to history and constraint and begin the slow, patient labor of building a new relation to authority. What these practices and exercises might be, how they come to be collectively authoritative, and the substance of the ethics and politics they offer is left for others to determine. Arendt claims only that they might help us moderns with "the elementary problems of human living-together"[5] – suggesting that these practices back away from any grand political program.

The post-war juncture shared by Arendt and Char crystallized a problem that has since become more diffuse: the challenge of making ethical judgments of power and politics in the absence of shared public contexts. A crisis of authority emerged as the incongruities among different domains of justification (and most notably science, literature, law) became more apparent. With no singular domain of authority to which to appeal, ethical judgments faltered before incompatible standards of evidence and criteria of evaluation.[6] Vichy France, with its ineluctable disjunct between official and unofficial public space, became an instructive example. As Arendt tells the story, Char and his fellow members of the French Resistance "without premonition and probably against their conscious inclinations… had come to constitute willy-nilly a public realm where – without the paraphernalia of officialdom and hidden from the eyes of friend and foe – all relevant business in the affairs of the country was transacted in word and deed."[7] Arendt's characterization of this extraordinary politics is of a politics reduced to its elemental components of words and deeds, but one that leaves open the question of how such words and deeds might be evaluated without the interpretive frameworks offered by political institutions, public openness, and ethical principle. In short, it leaves open the question of authority and authorization in the modern world. Post-Vichy, the absence of clear public space persists. The Vichy period suggests that authority cannot be equated either to public office or to moral puritanism; few political moments offer such clarity of political or moral purpose. Where political theory – even much of twentieth century thought, broadly speaking – has faltered is in framing authority

[5] Arendt, "What is Authority," p. 141.

[6] In making these broad claims, I have relied on the original essays to the *Nomos* volume on authority, but especially Carl Friedrich, "Authority, Reason, and Discretion," and Charles Hendel, "An Exploration of the Nature of Authority," *Nomos I: Authority* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1958). From the more recent *Nomos: Authority Revisited*, I draw on Frederick Schauer, "Authority and Indeterminacy."

[7] Hannah Arendt, "Preface: The Gap Between Past and Future," in *Between Past and Present: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), p. 3.

on terms other than those of positive political program. Unconvinced that distinctions between legitimate authority and illegitimate power do anything beyond conserving the status quo, contemporary scholars have abandoned the language of authority. Instead, the dominant turn has been to relations of power: to conceive of the contemporary world as so saturated with relations of power that people, claims, and events cannot be understood on any other terms.

In a political context fixated on power, practices of trust and truth-telling would seem to have no clear place. And indeed, claims to trust and truth-telling – claims that would normally sustain the legitimacy of authority – have become empty markers, mere veiled invocations of power. Where trust generally sustains social interactions in the face of generational change, unpredictability, and despite the momentary ruptures from the occasional broken promise or betrayal, it permits us to regulate attachments broadly speaking. Irreducible to simple instrumentalism, trust smooths over the uncertainties of exchange by reminding those involved that trusting behaviors enable them to pursue other shared values of community. For trust to achieve this effect, individuals need to be able to regulate not just attachment but claims to speak truthfully. Absent such trust, an approach to politics in terms of "power" could draw on the clarifying force of contest. Where a contestatory politics relies on the stark potency of claim-making, not all political exchanges are or ought be adversarial nor can they always rely on fair "rules of the game" to adjudicate contest. Cultivating a politics rich in texture and generative in project requires equally cultivating political strategies of negotiation, imagination, revision, and critique. To reduce truth claims to power is to truncate the potential for an ethical cultivation of person or community. As practices of trust and truth-telling become eviscerated through suspicion, it becomes impossible to speak meaningfully about authority, the process of legitimation, or even the collective of political community. Losing the vocabulary of authority narrows the possible relationships for ruling and being ruled into ones of simple command and obedience. And yet as the wartime Resistance made poignantly and painfully apparent, trust and truth-telling are the conditions of political freedom.

What I, following Arendt, have termed the challenge of "settling in the gap between past and future" has since been taken to characterize a larger swath of the western world than just post-war France. To reiterate the dilemma posed in the Preface, contemporary social and political theory has reached an impasse about a problem that had once seemed straightforward: how can individuals make ethical judgments about power and politics? Despite the ethical urgency that inflected political thought in the

wake of World War Two, critical social and political theory – from the Frankfurt School to radical pluralists to Foucault – has offered a largely pessimistic response. Uncertain of what might serve as foundations for governance, however provisional, political theorists have instead used the attention to power to focus more narrowly on questions of identity and self-formation. Ever-mindful of politics' capacity for violence, most accounts of identity-formation have come to focus on individuals as thoroughly defined by injury, trauma, or loss; as a result, such persons are mired in the suspicion that claims to truth merely mask claims to power. Despite the impressive critiques offered of concepts central to liberal politics – freedom, equality, justice – and their political instantiations, contemporary politics still struggles to adapt these critiques for political practice in a way that does not deliver them back into the pathologies of liberalism. A new set of "constant practices and exercises" has yet to coherently emerge within the shells of these increasingly hollow structures so as to give them new force and meaning. As the extraordinary context of the post-war period fades, the trust and truth-telling necessary to a democratic politics seem foreclosed in advance.

For scholars thinking in terms of power, two responses initially seem possible. First, it might appear that individuals need new or better knowledge of what it means to speak of "ethical responsibility"; with new and sufficient self-knowledge, self-examination, or empathetic self-extension they might re-attach themselves differently to the world and claim ethical responsibility for their actions rather than sinking into nihilism or apathy.[8] Or, second, it might appear that the challenge is to liberate individuals

[8] Those who, in different ways, emphasize the need for greater knowledge of self and context include Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms* (Boston: The MIT Press, 1986); Seyla Benhabib, *Situating the Self: Gender, Community and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics* (New York: Routledge, 1992); and Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1992). This is the audience most clearly claimed by Foucault whose death interrupted plans for a public debate "Answering the Question: What is Enlightenment?" involving himself, Habermas, Charles Taylor, Richard Rorty, Hubert Dreyfus, and Paul Rabinow. Among those thinkers who turn to different forms of self-examination include scholars writing in the perfectionist tradition, such as Stanley Cavell, David Owen, and Tracy Strong. And those who advocate an empathetic self-extension are generally grouped under the aegis of "cosmopolitanism," including Martha Nussbaum, *Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenist Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996); and Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2006); *The Political Philosophy of Cosmopolitanism*, eds. Gillian Brock and Harry Brighouse (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); and critiqued by Seyla Benhabib, *Another Cosmopolitanism: Hospitality, Sovereignty, and Democratic Iterations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

from exhausted taboos, impediments to transgression, or the discipline of expertise.[9] These two responses suggest either a renewed commitment to ethical responsibility or a radical politics that would make a strong break with the past. The drawback with either response is the heavy burden placed on individuals to disavow what came before and to begin anew.

Neither response adequately addresses the present rupture between truth-telling and ethics that impedes political action, and so each leaves individuals at a loss as to where to begin. Both responses are in some ways necessary: they school citizens to various "readings" of politics that are readings of critique and resistance. They chart the distinction between ethical person and persona; between political actuality and legal fiction; between ideology and truth-telling. But by leaving political resistance bottled between these various conceptual distinctions they fail to teach individuals how to leverage and direct this resistance into political transformation. To do so would require a more fine-grained analysis of what might serve as Arendt's "constant practices and exercises" necessary to settle in the gap between past and future.

More than an incidental ethical uncertainty or political instability, settling in the gap between past and future evokes a completion of the Pythian transfer of responsibility for human deeds from some external – God, Nature, tradition, custom, and so forth – to human community. This transfer does not leave the substance of ethics and politics untouched. Giving up on external sources of authority means turning to human relationships instead for the resources that might identify some claims to authority as legitimate and others not. The utter failure of Vichy France underscores the need to identify relations of authority not reducible to

[9] Such a tradition, defined genealogically, varies in its juxtaposition of taboo and liberation. It might claim heritage in J. S. Mill's and Nietzsche's very different arguments against the moral and political implications of social conformity. Early interlocutors with Freud emphasized the reading of psychoanalysis as an ambivalent tool for liberation. See, for example, Christopher Lasch, *The New Radicalism in America* (1965) and *The Culture of Narcissism* (1979); Paul Roazen, *Freud: Political and Social Thought* (New York: Knopf Books, 1968); Jeffrey Abramson, *Liberation and its Limits* (New York: Free Press, 1984). In subsequent and critical response came those who write in the post-structuralist tradition – thinkers with whom I will be arguing both with and against over the course of this book. These include Wendy Brown, *States of Injury* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 2nd edition (New York: Routledge, 2002); Shoshana Felman, *The Scandal of the Speaking Body,* 2nd edition (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002). Still others have concentrated on the effect of expertise on public institutions, including James Chriss, *Counseling and the Therapeutic State* (New York: Walter de Gruyter, Inc., 1999); James Nolan, *The Therapeutic State: Justifying Government at Century's End* (New York: New York University Press, 1998); Andrew Polsky, *The Rise of the Therapeutic State* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

those of power, to elaborate practices that are more than just personal ones, and to achieve these while breaking with a present that defends itself with the presumed legitimacy of the past. The language of "practices of the self" reframes these relationships and their sense of interpretive agency. Over the course of this book I will argue that we should rethink authority as drawing on three, imperfectly overlapping relationships – relations to oneself, to others, and to truth-telling – that compose the context in which ethical and political engagement will unfold. That these tasks should be undertaken in a democratic political community, in which claims to rule must be balanced against the formal equality of all members adds another challenge: to ensure that any asymmetry in these relationships does not entrench harm and hierarchy.

Asymmetrical relationships thus offer the best context in which to disaggregate and analyze those practices that bind trust, truth-telling, and authority. This book takes as its premise the notion that ethical selfhood is not displayed through a solitary confrontation of self and order. Instead, selfhood emerges through personal relationships toward others, relationships that gain in cultural significance as they are refracted through symbolic authorities such as doctors and educators. Sometimes these relationships cause harm. But, under certain conditions, they nourish. They are at their best when they draw on those "practices of the self" that educate individuals in a self-authorship resistant to being overwritten by cultural narratives.

Toward this end, this book first analyzes those relationships to cultural figures of authority from which might arise a new ethical subjectivity and political engagement. Surprisingly, I find resources for theorizing such relationships in two unlikely thinkers – Sigmund Freud and Michel Foucault – who are most often assimilated to the posture of hermeneutic suspicion. These authoritative relationships – namely, Freud's figure of the psychoanalyst and Foucault's ancient truth-teller – make risk and resistance productive of relations of trust and truth-telling (and so of ethical subjectivity) rather than injurious. I thus offer a claim different from previous thinkers: that individuals are not passive subjects of injury, but rather that their selfhood emerges from their ability to risk authority themselves. By "risk authority" I mean that individuals exercise the capacity to risk the authorship of their own words and deeds, despite uncertainties of context and consequence. Risk becomes not a generic quality of circumstance but part of a structural dynamic that sets these relations to symbolic authorities apart from others more quotidian. To

work through these structural dynamics, I examine in turn the relationships to authority and to oneself offered first by Freud and then Foucault; the second part of this book then considers how these relations open onto ones of truth-telling, and the extent to which they might be adapted – or not – for politics. The language of adaptation suggests that the practices used to author ourselves might, with some adjustment, be deployed toward the interpretation of people, claims, and events in politics as well. More than a philosophic approach to authoring and reading texts, such interpretive authority enables us to read and authorize the political context in which we find ourselves.

Arendt herself would never conceive these practices of the self on quite these terms, and certainly not through reference to Freud and Foucault.[10] After all, in *The Human Condition* she associates the abandonment of the political realm with the flight outward beyond human community (through over-reliance on science and technology) and the flight inward (towards a self-absorption masquerading as self-reflexivity). Any "practices of the self" associated with Freud – known for his embrace of science over religion – would seem complicit in the flight outward; Foucault's turn to the ancient world of the Hellenists – a time of evaporating public space and corrupted empire – would seem complicit in the flight inward. Yet I would argue that Arendt's own dismissal of what she terms "the social," as well as her historical situation before the emergence of contemporary identity-politics, prevented her from recognizing that any response to the seeming loss of authority would need to confront

[10] Hannah Arendt was notoriously dismissive of Freud and psychoanalysis; both could be considered complicit in the "flight inwards" of personal retreat from politics, or with the "flight outwards" towards scientific mastery of the world. In opening this book with Arendt, then, I am not flat-footedly claiming that Freud anticipated Arendt's thought nor that Foucault concluded it. I am, however, proposing that when read alongside one another, Freud and Foucault offer a surprising engagement with Arendt's own concerns about authority, legitimacy, and liberty. I would also note that her dislike for Freud notwithstanding, Hannah Arendt was awarded the 1967 Sigmund Freud Prize awarded by the Deutsche Akademie für Sprache und Dichtung for those adepts at German prose. I would further remark that my reading of Freud and Foucault alongside Arendt on questions of authority echoes some of the reflections raised in Julia Kristeva's 2006 address to the award committee at Bremen upon receipt of the Hannah Arendt Prize for Political Thought. Kristeva, herself a psychoanalyst, uses "Hannah Arendt or Refoundation as Survival" to bring Arendt and Freud together on questions of the in-between space of human interaction, the use of narrative to structure and reflect on these interactions, and the sense that truth-telling is more than a retreat into individual worlds of meaning. These are also the themes to be teased out in the pages that follow.

exactly the phenomena whose existence she so lamented.[11] Some fifty years after *The Human Condition*, it is now easier to concede that contemporary identity politics has had a powerful influence on contemporary western politics. Nonetheless, it has also reached a philosophic dead end in framing identity as caught in a stand-off between self and political order. Backing out of the current political paralysis, however, and reinvigorating practices of trust and truth-telling can no longer *begin* with the reinvigoration of the public realm – although such practices seek, optimistically, to end there. Instead, it begins with the recognition that the history entailed to us presently includes the widespread conviction that politics is a question of technocratic administration, and the somewhat conflicting view that politics has an ineluctable psycho-social component associated with personal identity. Any response to the current paralysis needs to acknowledge the hold that these views have on current political practices, and to take these as the starting point for the reconstruction of something new.

Psychoanalysis and *Parrhesia* as Authoritative Practices

On these questions of speech, trust, truth-telling, and politics, Sigmund Freud and Michel Foucault have come to be paradigmatic figures in twentieth-century political thought. As they are standardly read, Freud has provided a confessional account of how psychology takes on moral content; Foucault, a powerful critique of how this psychology has become

[11] Arendt's uneasy relationship to "the social" is treated in Hanna Pitkin's *The Attack of the Blob* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000). Pitkin – no stranger to psychoanalysis – argues in the final pages that "the problem of the social, however, is that people *are* power without *having* it, that even the 'powerful,' whose decisions affect hundreds of thousands, are unable to alter the inertial drift as long as everyone keeps doing as we now do" (p. 282). While I have my quarrels with Pitkin's reading of Arendt, Pitkin's book has become a common reference for subsequent reflection on Arendt and the social. A number of thinkers have since sought to incorporate various concerns for social identity into an Arendtian framework of politics. For an interesting reading of Arendt through psychoanalytic categories, see Linda Zerilli, "The Arendtian Body" in ed. Bonnie Honig, *Feminist Interpretations of Arendt* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995). Others who have engaged with Arendt on this point include Margaret Canovan, *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of her Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); the contributors to *Feminist Interpretations of Hannah Arendt*, ed. Bonnie Honig (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995); Dana Villa, *Politics, Philosophy and Terror* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999); Norma Claire Moruzzi, *Speaking through the Mask: Hannah Arendt and the Politics of Social Identity* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001).