Introduction

I

Flattery is the subject of one of Aesop's most famous fables, *The Raven and the Fox*. In this tale, a fox, observing a raven in a tree with a piece of meat, is unable to climb the tree to get the meat. He decides to use the only weapon he has, using speech strategically to get what he wants: the meat. His tactic is to engage in flattery:

> Of all the birds you are by far the most beautiful. You have such elegant proportions, are so stately and sleek. You were ideally made to be the king of all the birds. And if you only had a voice you would surely be the king.[1]

Not wanting to disappoint such an earnest admirer, the raven decided to show off his voice and, in doing so, dropped the meat to the ground, giving the fox what he wanted all along. After obtaining the object of his desire, the fox provides the raven with some counsel: "Oh, raven, if only you also had judgment [*phrenas*], you would want for nothing to be the king of the birds." The fable itself provides a timely lesson to "all fools" (*andra anoeton*).

We often tell this story to children, and a child learns many lessons from this story, not the least of which is that a flatterer says things that he does not mean: he is insincere. Not only is the flatterer insincere; the flatterer says things that he does not believe to be true, but that those he flatters believe to be true because, presumably, they don't just lack

[1] *Aesop: The Complete Fables*, trans. Robert Temple and Olivia Temple (New York: Penguin, 1998), 122. The Greek consulted is *Ésope: Fables*, ed. Émile Chambry (Paris: Société d'édition Les Belles Lettres, 1926).

self-knowledge, but they *want* the flatterer's lies to be true. A child also learns *why* flatterers are so dangerous. Through flattery, they can manipulate us into doing what we would not otherwise do – and what we ought not to do. After all, the raven would not have dropped the meat had he not been flattered by the fox. The pathway for this manipulation is self-love, as it is with the raven, and it is abetted by a lack of self-knowledge – were the raven less deceived about his own capacities, he would know that he sings poorly, and would not believe to be true about himself what is in fact false. We encounter, in this story, what I will term the cunning flatterer, an image we will encounter at numerous points in this book. The *cunning* flatterer – the fox – speaks insincerely and with full knowledge of his insincerity, and the cunning flatterer says things that he does not believe to be true in order to get something particular. If the fox had been sincere – if there were a "congruence between avowal and actual feeling"[2] – then this would be a situation of straightforward praise: the fox would have meant what he said, and what he said would have been true insofar as it revealed his beliefs (even if he were mistaken about beautiful singing). If you've got something that someone else wants, then, you should be careful not to be deceived by his praise lest he manipulate you into giving him what he wants through fraudulent appeals to your self-love.

This is a moral lesson, of course; but children also learn more explicitly political lessons about flattery – that is, about flattery that has implications for the exercise of power over others – and this form of flattery differs in important ways from the manipulative behavior of the cunning fox. These differences are demonstrated in Andersen's *The Emperor's New Clothes*, which features an emperor who was exceedingly vain, caring about nothing unless "it gave him a chance to show off his new clothes."[3] When two swindlers – cunning and foxlike flatterers themselves – came to the emperor's city, claiming not only to be able to weave the most beautiful fabrics, but also that their products "had the amazing ability of becoming invisible to those who were unfit for their posts or just hopelessly stupid," the vain emperor immediately decided that he needed to have this clothing.[4]

[2] Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972), 2.
[3] Hans Christian Andersen, *The Emperor's New Clothes*, in *The Annotated Hans Christian Andersen*, ed. Maria Tatar (New York: Norton, 2008), 5.
[4] Ibid., 6.

What unfolds is a fascinating story about vanity and insecurity on the part of superiors and subordinates. The emperor, wondering about the swindlers' progress in weaving the cloth, sent his "honest old minister" to check on them, assuming that he would be best suited to do so because of his "good sense."[5] Seeing no cloth, the minister pretends to do so, lest he be thought unfit for, and hence lose, his position. A second minister fares no better, pretending to see and admire the cloth as well, lest he also be thought unfit. And when the emperor himself goes to inspect their work prior to parading through town wearing his new clothing, in the company of "a select group of people" and his two trusted ministers, he cannot see the cloth either.[6] But he, too, pretends to be able to see it, lest he be thought foolish or unfit for office – as do his courtiers, who were similarly unable to see any cloth. Throughout the entire farce, of course, the swindlers have been pocketing the gold and silk that they had been pretending to weave into the invisible cloth. The emperor, his ministers, and his courtiers all pretend that he is actually wearing the clothing the swindlers pretend to have made, with his courtiers even pretending to carry the train of his garment during the parade; even the onlookers in the town, observing their emperor out in his new clothing, pretend to see his clothing, lest they, too, be thought foolish, or simply depart from expectations. Only "a little child" – one who has no concern for what others think and does not think about whether her speech will endanger her position or esteem – is able to say what everyone else is thinking: "he isn't wearing anything at all."[7] Once the child has spoken the truth, the townspeople echo her observation, yet the emperor persists in his parade, thinking to himself, "I must go through with it now, parade and all."[8]

As opposed to Aesop's fable, in which we are presented with a cunning flatterer in the figure of the fox, we are presented with something else in Andersen's tale. To be sure, the two swindlers are, like the fox, cunning (they know what they're doing, and we know that they know what they're doing), and they engage in flattery. They prey on the vanity and ignorance of the emperor and the insecurity of his ministers in order to get what they want: gold and fine cloth. And the swindlers' flattering play upon the emperor's vanity causes the emperor to do what he ought not to do, all the while securing benefits to themselves. Yet when we turn from the swindlers to the counselors, whose dishonesty occupies far more of the narrative than the swindlers' flattery does, it is not simply their greed

[5] Ibid., 6. [6] Ibid., 9. [7] Ibid., 13. [8] Ibid., 16.

that causes them to behave as they do. Rather, they are afraid of losing their offices, as they are subordinates in positions of dependence on the emperor. Were they to admit that they see nothing, they would, in effect, be admitting that they were foolish and thus unqualified for office, admissions that would not sit well with their superior. They flatter the emperor, naked though he is, through fear of lost position: their dependence on the emperor's favor makes them behave in a servile manner, altering their speech and behavior to maintain their positions due to their status. In doing so, they reinforce their superior's tendencies, reflecting to him what he, in his ignorance, sees of himself.

The fox, to be sure, is in a situation of dependence of a sort – his satisfaction of his desires is dependent upon the raven giving him the meat. But it is not as if the raven will have much power over him once the fox has the raven's meat; there is nothing about the circumstances of the fox that suggests that he will be constrained to flatter the raven outside of this instance, or one that is similar. By contrast, the flattering behavior of the counselors seeks to negotiate the hierarchical relationship in which they find themselves with the emperor, and thus to maintain their positions. The fox's flattery of the raven is, most likely, not going to be repeated absent the right circumstances; the flattery of the emperor's counselors is, by contrast, likely habitual and rooted in the precariousness of their social status. But this habit is less a function of greed or malevolence than of dependence. And whereas the flattery of the raven causes him to make a bad decision in this instance, the habitual flattery of the emperor might well cause him to develop poor habits of choice or to engage in vicious behavior over periods of time. If the fox was a cunning flatterer, we encounter here the dependent flatterer; for him flattery serves a different purpose.

I will often, in what follows, refer to the cunning flatterer, and cunning flattery, as moralistic images, while I will refer to the dependent sort of flattery as demoralized, or at times, strategic images. The prior tends to ascribe vicious motivations to those who flatter; the latter tends to see flattery as a response to conditions of subordination. Turning from these stories to political theory, though, the moralistic image of flattery has been dominant throughout much of the history of western political thought, a proposition evident through a cursory survey of canonic and non-canonic texts; I will, in what follows, revisit many, though not all, of these texts in detail, and my purpose here is simply to highlight the prominence of the theme in the history of political thought, rather than to engage in extended exegesis. Plato, in *Phaedrus*, contrasts the frank

speaker (and true lover) with the flatterer (and false lover), while in *Gorgias*, he develops a critique of conventional oratory centering on its status as a form of flattery, connecting it to democracy and tyranny in that work and *Republic*. Aristotle, in the *Politics*, linked flattery to tyranny and democracy as well, while in the *Nicomachean Ethics* he opposed it to friendship. Cicero, in *On Friendship*, and Plutarch, in his essay *How to Tell a Flatterer from a Friend*, opposed the flatterer to the frank-speaking friend, emphasizing the harms that go along with being flattered. The flattered monarch – and the ill-effects of flattery on monarchs and their subjects – was an important concern for Isocrates, as it was for Pliny and Tacitus, whether the issue was how to deal with flatterers, who abound at court, or the corrosive effect of despotic rule on frank speech. For John of Salisbury and Christine de Pizan, flattery corrupted monarchy, leading to disharmony and even tyranny. In Castiglione's *Book of the Courtier*, those delineating the courtly art are at pains to distinguish between it and flattery, even as they admit the necessity of praise. In Machiavelli's *The Prince*, the ability to detect and prevent flattery is a sign of princely prudence, and Hobbes preferred monarchy to non-monarchy in part because it better resisted flattery. In the *Second Treatise*, Locke wanted even prerogative power to be limited, by contrast, in part because of the danger of flatterers. Monarchs' susceptibility to flattery was an important point raised against monarchy by figures such as Milton and Sidney in the seventeenth century, and the political conditions that gave rise to flattery – along with flattering ministers – were common themes in eighteenth-century Britain and the American colonies, evident in works such as *Cato's Letters*. Rousseau saw flattery as a manifestation of a false and corruptive politeness, in addition to being a sign of servitude, whether in the *First* or *Second Discourse*, while Burke, in his *Speech to the Electors of Bristol*, contrasted his behavior as the electorate's trustee with the flattery of other representatives. Hamilton argued in the *Federalist* that while the republican principle required responsiveness, it stopped well short of the kind of flattery associated with demagoguery, honing in on the danger of the "adulator."[9]

Yet there was – and is – a different way of understanding flattery, an understanding I will be very much interested in over the course of this book. This understanding is what we saw with Anderson: demoralized flattery, a sort of strategic use of flattery put into play by those who are

[9] Alexander Hamilton, John Jay, and James Madison, *The Federalist*, ed. George W. Carey and James McClellan (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2001), 370.

subject to domination and that is particularly interesting from the perspective of non-ideal theory, a point I'll make more fully in the conclusion. For now, though, I'll suggest that it's hard not to sympathize with the emperor's courtiers, who, while they also engaged in flattery, did not do so through cunning or greed so much as through fear and dependence. Similarly, we might view individuals such as the arch-flatterer Sejanus, in Ben Jonson's play of the same name or in Tacitus' *Annals*, differently from someone who flatters autocrats through fear of death or imprisonment. We all say what we do not mean at least sometimes – especially if speaking to those with power over us.

Just as we might expect flattery in instances of power asymmetry, so too is it the case that we cannot always understand flattery in straightforward moralistic terminology. Rarely do we encounter an unambiguously cunning flatterer – that is, one who knows what he's doing, and of whom we know that he knows what he's doing. Roberts-Miller's account of demagoguery is helpful here, for she suggests that "an ethical definition of demagoguery, emphasizing the morals and motives of the rhetor" – a definition by which the demagogue is not concerned with truth and is motivated by personal desires – falls short because "demagogues may be perfectly sincere, and may even pursue their political agenda at their own personal and political expense."[10] Much of the time, we can no more know the true motives of apparent flatterers than we can demagogues.

Take, for instance, one of the classic texts dealing with flattery – Plutarch's essay *How to Tell a Flatterer from a Friend*. Interestingly, this highly moralistic account of flattery (and demagoguery) also posits a very particular target for flattery (a powerful person), and hence a very particular audience of (elite) readers: "where renown and power attend, there do [flatterers] throng and thrive."[11] Plutarch's flatterer – the *kolax* – preys upon the self-love of the flattered and produces very real harms in the flattered:

> For the flatterer always takes a position over against the maxim "Know thyself," by creating in every man deception towards himself and ignorance both of himself and of the good and evil that concerns himself; the good he renders defective and incomplete, and the evil wholly impossible to amend.[12]

[10] Patricia Roberts-Miller, "Democracy, Demagoguery, and Critical Rhetoric," *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 8, no. 3 (2005), 460.
[11] Plutarch, *How to Tell a Flatterer from a Friend*, in *Plutarch's Moralia*, trans. Frank Cole Babbitt (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1949), 49D.
[12] Ibid., 49B.

The flatterer is a false-friend (*philos*), impersonating the friend (Plutarch uses the term *mimesis* to describe the flatterer's enactment of friendship) with full knowledge of what he is doing. For instance, noticing the importance of the "bond of sympathy" to friendship,

> the flatterer takes note of this fact, and adjusts and shapes himself, as though he were so much inert matter, endeavouring to adapt and mould himself to fit those whom he attacks through imitation.[13]

Because the flatterer resembles the friend, though, deploying pleasure to worm his way into the confidence of the flattered, he deprives the friend of the greatest benefits of friendship associated with the practice of frank speech (*parrhesia*).

Plutarch's account, like the ethical account of demagoguery that Roberts-Miller rejects, posits a clarity of intention (purposive imitation and appeal to self-love via pleasure) on the part of the flatterer *and* the ability for an external observer to know this intention. Indeed, Plutarch is clear in his use of the language of intent, likening the flatterer to the demagogue, especially Alcibiades, who made "himself like to" the Athenians, the Spartans, and the Persians, "conforming his way to theirs he tried to conciliate them and win their favor."[14] Alcibiades consciously changed his character to appeal to those with power in the regimes he faced; the flatterer, more broadly, consciously changes his character to appeal to those he seeks to manipulate. Plutarch's account, striking as it is, posits an account of motive and agency that may be difficult, if not impossible, for external observers to ascertain. This is a clarity of knowledge, moreover, that is colored by the perspective of those who risk the most from flattery: the powerful. Those with power would surely look down on flatterers, but the importance of the flatterer's dependence in understanding the flatterer's position – let alone the flatterer being an object of sympathy – is less clear in Plutarch's account.

The ambiguity of morality and motive makes much more complicated what might otherwise seem a straightforwardly immoral behavior. In this regard, we may note, albeit briefly, another flatterer who inhabits stories: Brer Rabbit. Brer Rabbit uses manipulative and overtly kind words to overcome and subvert differences in power and status. In *Brer Rabbit and the Tar Baby*, for instance, Brer Rabbit flatters Brer Fox by emphasizing how much power the latter has over him, such that he is utterly at the mercy of Brer Fox, and wants only not to be thrown in the briar patch.

[13] Ibid., 51C. [14] Ibid., 52F.

Brer Rabbit also flatters Brer Wolf in *Brer Rabbit Gets Caught One More Time*, appealing to Brer Wolf's vanity by urging him "to be polite" and say grace before eating him, which allows him to escape.[15] And in *Brer Rabbit and the Little Girl*, he flatters Mr. Man's daughter to persuade her to open the garden gate for him, telling her that her father "said he had a daughter who would let me in that field of lettuce over yonder, but I sho' didn't expect nobody as pretty as you."[16] In these stories, Brer Rabbit, who is physically weaker than Brer Wolf and Brer Fox, and is literally an outsider when dealing with Little Girl, uses flattery – exaggerating the degree to which Brer Fox has power over him, playing on Brer Wolf's desire to be thought polite, and the little girl's vanity over her physical appearance – in order to negate and overcome differences in power. Brer Rabbit uses flattery to manipulate the behavior of another whom he could not otherwise influence, but does so not simply to get some object of desire or to avoid harm. Instead, the flattery turns power relationships upside down, allowing the physically weak and marginal rabbit to trick and trap his more powerful adversaries.

We can hear an echo of this form of flattery in another work of literature with much more direct political overtones. In Ellison's *Invisible Man*, there is a famous episode in which the narrator tells the story of what his grandfather told his father on his deathbed:

> Son, after I'm gone I want you to keep up the good fight. I never told you, but our life is a war and I have been a traitor all my born days, a spy in the enemy's country ever since I give up my gun back in the Reconstruction. Live with your head in the lion's mouth. I want you to overcome 'em with yeses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction, let 'em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open.[17]

Certainly the behavior described in this passage is flattery – disingenuous deference and praise. Yet this form of flattery is far less concerning than, say, the moralistic account we find in Plutarch. Indeed, our sympathy goes to the flatterer, not the flattered; overt deference, in this instance, creates a protective barrier that surrounds the dominated persons – in this instance, they are dominated as a result of being members of an oppressed racial group – who perform flattery, seeming to be straightforward displays of inferiority to those at the top, while serving as a form of agency. As James Scott remarks, given the asymmetries in coercive and appropriative power

[15] Julius Lester, *The Tales of Uncle Remus: The Adventures of Brer Rabbit* (New York: Penguin, 2006), 37.
[16] Ibid., 75. [17] Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Random House, 1995), 16.

that characterize relationships of domination, subordinate groups will normally engage in public performances that are "shaped to appeal to the expectations of the powerful."[18] In private, however – and even in public, at times – subordinates will often speak quite differently than they do in the normal "performance of humility and deference."[19] When we encounter, then, members of subordinate groups, or those who are enmeshed in the lower end of power asymmetries, engaging in apparently deferential performances, we may infer that these acts are intended "to convey the outward impression of conformity with standards sustained by superiors."[20] What we cannot infer, however, is that they actually accept these standards – or that they reject them, per se. From the perspective of the dominant, deferential acts may seem to be straightforward performances of submission by humble subordinates; from the perspective of the dominated group, it can look "like the artful manipulation of deference and flattery to achieve its own ends."[21] As far as elites are concerned, these performances typically reinforce their understandings of their status; but it remains just as possible that subordinates are engaging in strategic behavior that "looks upward."[22]

When we encounter deferential or ingratiating behavior – and flattery, regardless of the variety, is overtly deferential and ingratiating – we must be alert to the possibility that those engaged in such behavior do so for reasons that might be quite different than they seem, and that do not fall easily into the moralistic category discussed above, a category that has dominated the history of political thought. Indeed, Scott suggests – in an admittedly "crude and global generalization" – that "the greater the disparity in power between dominant and subordinate and the more arbitrarily it is exercised, the more the public transcript of subordinates will take on a stereotyped, ritualistic cast."[23] In certain contexts – especially contexts in which there are great power asymmetries and elites have the capacity to engage in arbitrary acts of coercion – flattery may be a strategy deployed by the weak to control the powerful, a deceptive and convincing performance behind which they try to achieve control they could not achieve overtly. It can be, to borrow a phrase from another of Scott's works by the same title, a weapon of the weak.[24]

[18] James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 2.
[19] Ibid., 11. [20] Ibid., 24. [21] Ibid., 34. [22] Ibid., 93. [23] Ibid., 3.
[24] *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008).

II

Thus far I have suggested that flattery was an important moral and political problem in a variety of works from the history of political thought, that it was understood to be a phenomenon found in participatory and non-participatory regimes, and that it was a topic of both moral and political importance. That it was so, however, is rather puzzling in light of how little attention is given to the topic by political theorists today. An electronic search of the abstracts and titles of philosophy and political science journals through *JSTOR* for the term *flattery* produced only three strong results.[25] And while two English-language books have been published on flattery in recent years, none of these works (which I turn to shortly) is centrally concerned with flattery as a political problem.

If flattery is no longer an important political concern, understanding why this is so is an interesting problem in itself, and much of my argument in this book seeks to show that it is and should be of interest.[26] I will also argue, unlike most accounts of flattery in the history of political thought, that we should not label flattery as morally and politically bad, per se. Before getting to these claims, however, I should say a few things about what recent studies of flattery have had to say, what I take flattery to be, and how it differs from related phenomena, such as hypocrisy, lying, and bullshit.

While two English-language books have appeared since 2000 that center on flattery – Stengel's *You're Too Kind: A Brief History of Flattery* and Regier's *In Praise of Flattery* – neither is centrally concerned with understanding the phenomenon of flattery politically. Stengel's book – aptly described in its title as *A Brief History of Flattery* – is written for a popular audience. Covering an array of sources and periods, ranging from non-human primates to ancient Egypt, to the troubadours, to colonial, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century America, to twentieth-century

[25] The first article is Kevin Williams, "'Only Flattery Is Safe': Political Speech and the Defamation Act 1996," *The Modern Law Review* 60, no. 3 (1997). The second is Yuval Eylon and David Heyd, "Flattery," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 77, no. 3 (2008). The third was written by the author of this manuscript. Three additional pieces were discovered, but two were not scholarly articles, and the third – an Italian article – focused on the figure of the hyena in Renaissance philosophy. The search was carried out on April 21, 2016.

[26] When I first wrote this sentence, Donald Trump was not a presidential candidate, but rather the centerpiece of a reality television show. I'll say a bit more about Trump, flattery, and demagoguery in the last chapter.