# THE CRISIS OF AUTHORITY

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"The ruler bears witness to the meaningfulness of reality, and in doing so he *augments* its meaning, opening up the world to the dimensions that would allow a properly human existence to unfold."

There has been much talk of a "crisis of authority" in the West, especially since the end of World War II.[1] For the most part, the concern has been the fading of authority as an effective principle, not only in politics, but perhaps even more evidently in the various institutions that constitute what is generally known as "civil society." To some, this loss of authority has seemed to be an inevitable consequence of liberalism as a political form, a consequence that in their judgment is just something we have to endure as the shadow side of all of the evident goods liberalism has appeared to provide.[2] More recently, concerns have arisen from certain quarters that the experience of this crisis is generating an

1. Robert A. Nisbet, *Twilight of Authority* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975); Gérard Mendel, *Une histoire de l'autorité: Permanences et variations* (Paris: Editions de la découverte, 2002), 7. Augusto Del Noce says that "the eclipse of authority presents itself as the true *result of the World War*." See "Authority versus Power," in *The Crisis of Modernity*, trans. Carlo Lancelotti (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2014), 199.

2. Laurent Joffrin and Philippe Tesson, *Où est passée l'autorité* (Paris: Nil Editions, 2000).

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overreaction. Far from fading away, authorities are beginning to assert themselves in what is felt to be an "overweening" manner. Rusty Reno has described the current moment in history as marking the "return of the strong gods."[3] It seems that a growing number of people, increasingly in the mainstream, have come to believe that the loss of authority has been too high a price to pay for the supposed benefits of liberalism, and they are calling for a genuinely radical change of course. We are thus witnessing the rise of postliberalisms of various sorts, often with little in common beyond a shared enemy.

It may very well be that we stand on the brink of an exceedingly rare phenomenon: an actual turning point in history. In any event, it is no longer controversial to say we live in what the ancient Chinese proverb calls "interesting times," a moment of real volatility that reaches astonishingly deep into the foundations of our common existence and calls into question things that have appeared up to this point unquestionable. In such a moment it is especially important—indeed it is vital to our humanity—to keep our bearings set by the memory of ultimate things. According to Augusto del Noce, it is in fact the very purpose of authority to safeguard this memory. The principal role of authority, he explains, is to bear witness to transcendent truth, to allow the light of eternity, as it were, into the cave of time in order to give the activities of the political sphere a depth and a genuine human reality they would not otherwise have.[4] In describing authority thus, del Noce is appealing to an older sense of the term that, we will argue in this essay, has largely been forgotten. When people today complain about the threat of "authoritarian" figures taking over government, they clearly do not mean to express a worry about the inbreaking of the light of truth. So what *do* they mean?

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3. Rusty Reno, *The Return of the Strong Gods: Nationalism, Populism, and the Future of the West* (Washington, DC: Regnery Gateway Press, 2021).

4. As del Noce puts it, "the confusion between authority and power arises whenever the idea of authority is not linked to the metaphysics of the primacy of being over becoming and, as a consequence, the super-human foundation of authority is not taken into account" ("Authority," 194); and "due to the metaphysical necessity of eternal truths, authority differs from power because its essence is to set in order" ("Authority," 203). Del Noce revealingly explicates revolution thus: "Revolution means radical liberation from authority, but such a rejection implies also the rejection of tradition, and the rejection of tradition implies the rejection of metaphysical-religious thought" ("Authority," 217).

The urgency of perceived threats tends to eclipse the fact that there is a fundamental confusion regarding the essential matter. In our discussions of the crisis of authority, we worry about not having enough of it, or having too much of it, but we rarely pause in a properly reflective way to inquire into the *nature* of authority, to ask what it *is* in reality.

As Byung-Chul Han has so compellingly observed,[5] such an experience—the capacity to reflect, to consider some reality in a disposition of contemplation that allows a thing to stand forth in its truth, without regard for immediate practical effects, to engage in what the young Nietzsche called an "untimely meditation" (*unzeitgemäße Betrachtung*)—has become all-but-inaccessible to us in the contemporary world. The thesis we wish to propose here, and at least begin to defend, is that this very disinclination to stop and think, to enter into the contemplative spirit that would allow us to consider matters in depth, and inspire us to seek an understanding of things that reaches to their roots, is itself a fruit of the loss of authority. As we will argue, authority is not just a political or practical problem, but a fundamental human problem, which bears on every aspect of human existence. Our forgetfulness of authority entails not only a tendency to disorder but also an increasing incapacity to grasp what disorder is. The effects of the disappearance of authority are far more profound than we tend to realize, and, because of this failure to understand the significance of authority, we are especially vulnerable to the many counterfeits, which can never in fact adequately compensate for what they replace. The danger of such counterfeits grows to the extent that we fail to recall the reality of authority, so that a recollection of this reality—precisely because it is "untimely"—remains one of our most pressing tasks.

## 1. AUTHORITY AND POWER

To enter into a reflection on the nature of authority, it is good to begin by considering its difference from mere power, which is the notion that most closely resembles it and that therefore is the notion with which it is most typically confused. If one were

5. See Byung-Chul Han, *The Scent of Time: A Philosophical Essay on the Art of Lingering* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017).

asked to explain the difference today, one would typically insist that authority distinguishes itself from mere power by virtue of legitimacy: while power simply imposes itself, authority claims to do so with justice. At first glance, this distinction appears to be quite illuminating, and one discovers some version of it in virtually all recent philosophical discussions of authority.[6] The light immediately begins to dim, however, the moment we ask what it is that grants power legitimacy and thus transforms it, so to speak, into authority. A sufficient response to this question is elusive, and this inability to find an evident resolution generates real anxiety. It does not require much thought to realize that appeals to the law, or perhaps more basically in the American context, appeals to the Constitution, only defer the question; they do not resolve it. The endless arguments in recent decades about what the Constitution *means* have brought to light a fundamental hermeneutical conundrum: if the Constitution is not self-interpreting, this is because at a more basic level it is not, and cannot be, self-authorizing.[7] More generally, if it is the law that justifies the use of power, what justifies the law? Is the (positive) law the source of authority, or is it not much more evidently true to say that law itself presupposes authority as its ultimate legitimating source?[8] In the relatively long golden age of liberal democracy—which, one explains, is government "of the people, by the people, for the people"—it has generally been accepted that authority is given by popular consent: a ruling body has authority (as opposed to mere coercive power) if those who are

6. The *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* article on "Authority" begins with the sentence, "When is political authority legitimate?," Thomas Christiano, "Authority," available at plato.stanford.edu/entries/authority/.

7. I provide a longer argument regarding this point in *Politics of the Real* (Steubenville, OH: New Polity Press, 2021), 41–67.

8. As is well known, Aquinas argues that positive law ultimately derives from natural law (*ST* I-II, q. 95, a. 2), and natural law has its foundation in the eternal law of God (which ultimately means in God himself) (*ST* I-II, q. 93, a. 3). Stephen Smith brought the problem of self-justification that remained implicit in the American legal system to the surface in his book, *Law's Quandary* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007). The book stirred up some controversy when it first came out, perhaps because it appeared to put its finger on a sore spot.

to be governed agree to recognize it as such.[9] However sufficient this criterion may have seemed to be, for all intents and purposes, until recently, it has become increasingly clear that consent, too, can be essentially manufactured by those who have power. If the "appetite" for liberal democracy appears to be in such shocking decline these days, it is no doubt in part because people would prefer to be ruled by powers they *can* see than by powers they *cannot*. But of course visibility is not sufficient alone to grant legitimacy.

One of the reasons that consent has been able to recommend itself (not to say *impose* itself) as the criterion of authority for so long in the popular imagination is that it has appeared to preserve space for freedom without having to involve the *risk* of an appeal to truth. This is the genius of that great artist of the modern psyche, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who determined that, if we cannot live peacefully together without obedience to law, we can nevertheless remain free in such obedience to the extent that it is to a law we have given to ourselves.[10] But Rousseau's judgment ought to be seen as the fruit of a reshaping of political form that began long before him. Indeed, modern politics originated in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries with the decision to reduce the scope of politics: in the new approach, the political order was no longer conceived as embodying a vision of the good life, requiring a foundation in a substantive judgment about the

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9. The depth of our ignorance is revealed by our nevertheless calling rulers "authoritarian" if they do not exercise rule in a manner that respects the consent of the people. If, as is typically assumed, consent is what grants authority, then this means that the lack of authority is precisely what makes a government "authoritarian." There is clearly a total confusion here, both an ignorance and a lack of interest in the basic meaning of things. Compare this way of speaking to Arendt's observation in her seminal essay, "What is Authority?," in *Between Past and Future* (New York: Penguin, 1977), 97:

> Behind the liberal identification of totalitarianism with authoritarianism . . . lies an older confusion of authority with tyranny. . . . The source of authority in authoritarianism is always a force external and superior to its own power; it is always this source, this external force which transcends the political realm, from which the authorities derive their "authority," that is, their legitimacy, and against which their power can be checked.

10. See Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *On the Social Contract*, bk. I, ch. VI, in *Basic Political Writings* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), 148.

nature and destiny of the human person, but instead as providing for practical needs and regulating behavior. In other words, politics became exclusively a practical affair.[11] The so-called wars of religion motivated the notion that political peace required putting the theological question out of play. It is just this that made the American founding such a decisive moment in the instituting of modernity in the West. While putting religion out of play in the political sphere required significant violence in Europe and Russia, America appeared to provide an opportunity to establish authority in perfect independence from any particular religious tradition, purely on the apparently free act of popular consent. Whether this also meant in perfect independence, not just from a particular faith, but from truth as such, has remained a matter of debate, at least until relatively recently. Can appeals to ultimate and absolute truth be sustained outside of the context of a particular religious tradition? This is a huge, and hugely important, question, which requires a far more nuanced and sophisticated response than is generally supposed—and indeed far more than is possible in the present context. But for our present purposes, we can observe that the debate has in any event been won by default. Appeals to truth in any genuinely metaphysical or transcendental sense have long since disappeared from our legal institutions,[12] and if the other branches of government make such an appeal, it is virtually universally regarded as a supreme power play. Revealing in this regard is the notorious speech J.D. Vance recently gave (2025) at the Munich Security Council meeting. We ought to note that he did not appeal to truth, but only to freedom of speech, which is to say he did not in fact defend the authority of tradition *except* in modern liberal terms; and even this was taken to be an outrageous transgression of the accepted limits of politics. In the contemporary world, both the right and the left

11. Pierre Manent offers a succinct account of this development in his book *An Intellectual History of Liberalism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994). I am here placing emphasis on the word "exclusive"—one ought to raise the question whether the practical sphere can be such without a foundation in truth. Better to say: a pragmatically reduced practical sphere.

12. At best, just "facts of the case." In other words, there may be an insistence on doing justice to the facts that are "true," but there is no longer appeal to things like the truth of nature, of marriage, of education, and so forth, as determinative in legal arguments.

ultimately agree at least on one thing, namely, that the government should not be "in the truth business" in any respect at all.

It is not too much to say that the reduction of governance to a merely practical matter is precisely why we lack any solid ground to distinguish authority from mere power. Indeed, if the transcendent dimension is bracketed out of politics as a matter of procedure, it means, as we will see, that authority is eliminated as a matter of principle. Insofar as the move that distinguishes modern politics from the tradition of politics that preceded it is the effort to restrict the scope of political rule to praxis, we could say in general that politics in the modern era has been an effort to reconceive the project of politics from the ground up without appeal to authority. Instead, we have reduced authority to its practical function, and have contrived a political system that can fulfill the function independent of any embeddedness in a particular religious tradition. Hannah Arendt has argued that authority belongs inseparably to a triad, along with religion and tradition; if *any one* of these disappears, she says, the other two inevitably fall away with it.[13] In America, we have religion without tradition, and tradition without authority, which means that whatever authority there may yet be, unsubtantiated by religion and tradition, cannot fail to be something other than authority. However much legitimacy may be granted to the political power exercised in this new context, it remains power *rather than* authority.

But, as we will argue below, this establishment of politics without appeal to what transcends politics necessarily entails a radical reconception of human nature *tout court*. If America has been a "light on the hill" for the rest of Western nations, we might say it is because America represents in a paradigmatic way an experiment in "politics without authority." As we mentioned above, the pragmatic reduction of politics was thought to be a way of clearing space for freedom. It was recognized that this would come at a cost, but it was a cost thought to be worth paying—or in any event necessary to pay, because the alternative is so dire. But we are beginning to grasp that freedom itself depends on transcendent truth for its actual existence. If this is the case, then even a political regime that is concerned only with

13. See, for example, Hannah Arendt, *The Promise of Politics* (New York: Schocken Books, 2005), 73.

freedom will nevertheless eventually have to come to terms with the inevitably *metaphysical* question of truth. And if truth bears a connection to authority, this implies then that authority is a problem with which we must inevitably contend. It may be that we thought we could best secure human freedom by bracketing out the transcendent sphere from politics, but we are beginning to learn, and have begun actually to see, that there can be no freedom without truth. It is good, then, to consider the meaning of authority in a more robust sense, as we prepare to face the possibility of a turning of history.

## 2. THE CHRISTIAN SYNTHESIS

The distinctively Western sense of authority arose in the Christian Middle Ages through the convergence of three basic cultural sources: the Romans, the Greeks, and the Jews. Let us attempt to gather these sources together in our understanding, first looking at the original appearance of the notion of authority among the Romans. Hannah Arendt took too narrow a view, but offered a profound insight when she argued that authority was not only a peculiarly Roman, but an *exclusively* Roman, phenomenon in the ancient world.[14] The English word "authority" comes from the Latin "*auctoritas*," which expresses in an abstract, universalized way the essential quality possessed by the *auctor*, or "author." *Auctor*, in turn, appears to be derived from the verb *augere*, "to make grow," or "to increase" (as in our English verb, "to augment"). For Arendt, the *auctores* from whom all authority arises were those involved in the Founding of Rome, the Eternal City. For the Romans, the Founding was not just one moment among others, but a world-historical event, the superabundant significance of which was able to continue to reverberate through time. The persistence of this significance was expressed by the fact that those who bore some real connection to the original event—principally the *senatores* whose lines could be traced to the founding families—were able to bestow a special status upon things existing in the present by relating them to this originating event, thus

14. As she explains, the Greeks attempted to introduce something akin to authority, but lacked what made it specifically "authoritarian": see "What is Authority?," 104–20.

drawing on, and so expanding, its power. As Giorgio Agamben has explained,[15] authorities in ancient Rome played a specifically *mediating* role: they did not themselves originate a reality, but instead conferred legitimacy upon a given thing, granting that thing a validity, a public, legal, institutionalized, or "official" significance. The ultimate *source* of this special significance, as Arendt observes, is the world-historical event of the Founding of Rome.[16] It is important to note the extraordinarily robust sense of human action implied in this notion of authority, far beyond our contemporary imagination.[17] This echoes Arendt's more general interpretation of human freedom as a *beginning* (*initium*), a bringing into being of a new reality that reverberates in history *ad infinitum*. For the Romans, the Founding is a human deed; but it is much more than merely human. It is, we might say, filled with gods, an utterly sacred establishment, a worldly absolute, so inviolable that the act of leaping over the established walls was a crime punishable by death.[18] Those who have "author-ality," or "authority," communicate the sacred reality instituted by the original author or authors, beyond the source to a given thing: a law, a person, a contract, and so forth. The original reality thus extends its presence into these things, thereby "augmenting" itself.[19] We might think of this special significance as something

15. Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 76.

16. Arendt, "Authority," 120.

17. We need to recover the sense of will as bringing a *reality* into being. I argue for this in my essay, "The Crisis of Marriage as a Crisis of Meaning: On the Sterility of the Modern Will," *Communio* (Summer 2014): 331–71. This sense of the will introducing a new order of being is implied in Arendt's celebrated notion of natality, which she develops in *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018). For an illuminating exposition and explanation of her notion, which is central to both her political philosophy and her anthropology, see Wolfhart Totschnig, "Arendt's Notion of Natality: An Attempt at Clarification," *Ideas y valores* 66, no. 165 (2017): 327–46.

18. Fustel de Coulanges, *The Ancient City* (London: Simpkin, Marshall, Hamilton, Kent & Co., 1916).

19. Note that Arendt seems to misunderstand this when she says that authority for the Romans grows backwards ("Authority," 123): she is right that it is backward-pointing, but does not acknowledge the fact that this gives it a reality that extends from the past into the present, and in principle into the future.

analogous to the "aura" that Walter Benjamin famously identified in the "authentic" work of art, springing from the hand of the artist himself who remains in some mysterious way present in the work, in contrast to the mechanically re-produced imitations that bear no such presence.[20]

But Arendt is wrong to think that the exclusively Roman concept of authority, which she takes to be incompatible in principle with the Greek spirit,[21] was effectively replaced by a theological-ecclesial notion when Christianity appropriated the Roman Empire.[22] Instead, we ought to see that the Church did not replace what was naturally given by the Romans, but instead presupposed, healed, and elevated it by integrating it with the contributions offered by the Jews and the Greeks, all within the transformative supra-form of Jesus Christ.[23] From the Jews, we come to recognize more directly and explicitly what was only implicit in the Roman understanding, namely, the properly theological origin of authority—"all power comes from God" (Rom 13:10)—which is to say, the ultimate source of legitimacy is the Divine Author.[24] As we see in the Old Testament, the ancient Hebrews understood authority not as something arising principally through a great human deed, but instead as something given gratuitously from above, paradigmatically to one who is *not* humanly great (e.g., David: 1 Sam 16:1–13).[25] This authority

20. One might also think of the sacramental presence of the "laying on of hands" from bishop to bishop through the ages, communicating the *real presence* of Christ's original contact in the flesh with the apostles.

21. Arendt, "Authority," 104–15.

22. Arendt, "Authority," 126–27.

23. I make this argument at far greater length in the book *Authority and Its Counterfeits*, forthcoming.

24. See Rémi Brague's helpful presentation in *The Law of God* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 41–60.

25. Kierkegaard confused this by absolutizing it, i.e., divorcing it from the Roman dimension, which is to say from its properly human and institutional mediation. See Kierkegaard, "The Difference between a Genius and an Apostle," in *The Present Age* (New York: Torchbook, 1962), 87–110. While this seems to be a more modest and humble theory of authority, because it is thus absolutized and abstracted, it turns into its opposite: the human becomes the immediate expression of God, which grants the human act a power beyond all dispute. Kierkegaard is giving expression to Luther's view. See Martin J.

is communicated, so to speak, sacramentally through the ritual of anointing, which establishes the office, most particularly, of the prophet, the priest, and the king.[26] From the perspective of the Hebrews, it is ultimately *God* who rules, or who ought to rule, which is why a shadow of ambiguity hangs over the human authority from the beginning (e.g., 1 Sam 8). If authority ultimately derives from authorship, or originating power, we can say that the Jews bring this dimension to perfection, since God is of course the ultimate Founder, par excellence. But the rooting of authority in God raises the question of the proper role of human mediation. There is no space here to lay out a full argument on this score, but it is crucial at least to point out that those who wish to think that authority is something *exclusively* theological may be said to reduce the New Testament unilaterally to the Old. Moreover, they miss the essential truth that the New Testament is a reality that, so to speak, overflows the borders of the book. It is "incarnated" in the Church and in history, precisely as an extension of the Incarnation of Christ. This in turn is the case precisely because the Word of God is a Person before being a text. Again, we can do no more in the present context than state a thesis on this score: what is *distinctively* Christian is the integration of the Jewish sense with the Greek and the Roman; the isolation and absolutizing of the political form offered in the Old Testament actually coincides with the birth of modern politics

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Lohrmann, "Martin Luther's Theology of Authority," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Martin Luther*, ed. Derek R. Nelson and Paul R. Hinlicky (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017). It is thus apparent how Luther contributes to the rise of modern politics, and specifically the modern nation-state. Modern politics is not a rejection of Christianity simply, but in fact a rejection of the Catholic Church, which is why it can be compatible specifically with the Christianity that is itself a rejection of the Catholic Church. This fact accounts for the continued confusion regarding the American Founding: Is it Christian or anti-Christian? Does the atheism of radicalized secular humanism fulfill the Founding or betray it? The answer is of course: Yes. This is why, in our reassessment of the Founding, we cannot in the end evade the question of its relation to the Catholic Church.

26. For an account of these three distinct offices in the ancient Hebrew culture, see Johannes Pederson, *Israel: Its Life and Culture*, vol. 2 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1940).

and represents one of the most decisive moments in the history of the fading of authority as an effective principle in history.[27]

The Greek contribution to the essentially Western notion of authority is its foundation in the intrinsic goodness, truth, and beauty of *nature*, understood both "physically" (i.e., as expressed in the natural world) and, above all, *meta*-physically.[28] It is this dimension to which del Noce draws particular attention,[29] and it is this that we will dwell on here, because it seems to be the aspect of authority that has been most fully forgotten. In the modern context, we have apparently retained (some aspects of) the Roman and the Jewish (i.e., biblical) dimensions, but no longer as integrated with the Greeks. We are able to acknowledge political and religious authority, but have virtually no sense of the authority of philosophy. In this respect we can be said to have forgotten specifically the Christian synthesis, which integrates all three.

To grasp the significance of the Greek aspect, it is perhaps most illuminating to go to what is no doubt the *founding* work of political philosophy in the West, namely, Plato's *Republic*. As is well known, in the *Republic*, Plato presents a "utopia" of sorts, an ideal city that he constructs "in speech" or "in thought" (τὲ λόγῳ[30]) from the ground up. This is done according to the strict demands of reason as a means of illustrating the nature, and the desirability, of *justice*, which the Greeks generally recognized as the fundamental principle of human community. The work, which lends itself to endless possibilities of interpretation—it is said that there are as many "Platos" as there are readers

27. One need only note here the oft-observed connection between the rise of the modern nation-state and the Protestant Reformation. The Reformers typically justified secular authority by appeal to Scripture.

28. It is interesting from this perspective to consider Hegel's rejection of natural law: he seems to have projected the reduced sense of natural law discovered in the early modern political thinkers (Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau) back into scholasticism, failing to see that nature had a deeper significance in the classical tradition See his early text, *Natural Law: The Scientific Ways of Treating Natural Law, Its Place in Moral Philosophy, and Its Relation to the Positive Sciences of Law* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1975). In other words, he interpreted nature only as (Newtonian) *physis* and not as *meta-physis*.

29. "The idea of authority . . . is inseparable from the philosophy of the primacy of being." Del Noce, "Authority," 197.

30. Plato, *Republic*, 369c.

of Plato—has also never ceased to generate controversy for all sorts of reasons.[31] Rather than enter into an evaluation of any of these matters,[32] we wish in the present context simply to reflect on a curious fact that has received little direct attention in the *Wirkungsgeschichte* of the book: the *Republic* is known as a work in *political philosophy*, but it also happens to be the work in which Plato gives the most substantial and elaborate exposition of his *metaphysics*, his interpretation of the nature of being in relation to the forms and in light of the highest principle of all, the "idea of the good," which lies "beyond being" in its dignity and power[33] (or we might say: in its authority)—the only time this central and all-governing principle appears in this role in the whole of Plato's corpus. We say "happens to be," but in fact the point we wish to make is that this is not at all accidental; instead, it reveals something essential about both metaphysics and political philosophy.

It is the latter that we will focus on here. Plato identifies the ideal ruler as a "philosopher king." It is just this identification that has created anxieties within the liberal political tradition: most famously, Karl Popper (*The Open Society and Its Enemies*) fingered Plato essentially as the father of fascism, the original theorist of totalitarian politics, insofar as he appears to give the ruler the "right" to determine the truth for all. But Popper misses the point, and he does so in a way that helpfully illuminates the essential thesis of this essay. Popper can consider Plato's proposal only from inside a horizon already set by liberalism, which is a horizon, as we said above, from which the very possibility of authority has already been excluded from the outset. In other words, he takes for granted the reduction of politics to the (merely) *practical* ordering of society through the exercise of power. This horizon presumes to leave metaphysical questions to the private realm of civil society, to be determined *by* individuals

31. Perhaps most notoriously this is due to its proposal of the "noble lie" as an instrument of governance. See Plato, *Republic*, 414c. But note that, contrary to customary assumption, the phrase "noble lie" does not in fact appear as such in Plato's text.

32. For a fuller discussion, see my *Plato's Critique of Impure Reason: On Goodness and Truth in the Republic* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2008), 307–18.

33. Plato, *Republic*, 509b: "The good itself is not being but transcends being in dignity [πρεσβείᾳ] and surpassing power."

and *for* themselves alone, or at best for the institutions to which individuals freely choose to bind themselves, a realm that political power exhausts itself in securing. From this perspective, for a ruler to claim truth is for him to extend his power even into the realm that ought to be protected for private individuals—which is to say, he necessarily absolutizes his power by trespassing beyond the limits held most dearly by liberalism. This no doubt explains, at least in part, the ferocity with which criticisms of liberalism are typically met, because the only limit possible for a power that has closed itself off from any intrinsic reference to a transcendent order is a limit that is self-imposed. This sort of limit is *essentially* precarious because it has no real, no substantial, foundation.

But this self-absolutization is not in the least what Plato envisions with the "philosopher-king." As is perfectly clear in the *Republic*, the philosopher-king does not set up a police force to impose a vision of things through the exercise of coercive power, which claims its own legitimacy. Instead, in the parable that Plato articulates, the philosopher-king *descends* into the cave, takes his place *beside* the prisoners therein, and . . . *asks them questions about the things they see*, perhaps in a pestering way, if the *Apology* is any indication, but not backed by the threat of force. Clearly, the figure that Plato has in mind with the notion of the philosopher-king is not the tyrant Dionysius, who as subsequent history amply demonstrated wholly misunderstood Plato,[34] but Socrates himself, whom he calls in the *Gorgias* the *true* statesman, the only one in Athens.[35] The allusion to Socrates is confirmed when Plato has the citizens of the cave lay hands on their would-be teacher (the *maieutes*[36]), and put him to death. As Plato never tires of insisting throughout his dialogues, it is perfectly contrary to the nature of truth to be imposed through coercion, whether it

34. Plato recounts the history of the failed attempt to introduce philosophy into a king (as opposed to elevating a philosopher to a position of rule) in his *Seventh Letter*, which many, if not all, scholars consider genuine; in any event, no one disputes the basic veracity of the story told.

35. See Plato, *Gorgias*, 521d.

36. Plato, *Theaetetus*, 149ff. Socrates's mother, Phaenarete (whose name, he points out, means "she who brings virtue to light"), was a midwife, and Socrates claims to have inherited her trade in a new register.

be direct or indirect. The only way to grasp the truth is through the *free* consent that comes with actual understanding. One can grasp truth as truth only if one does so for no other reason than *because it is true*. It is the very essence of sophistry, by contrast, to misunderstand this point, and to seek to impose a way of thinking by some manipulative technique or show of force.[37]

The secret heart of *The Republic*, in which politics and metaphysics coincide, may be expressed thus: just as the good ultimately founds existence, granting all things their being, their goodness, and their truth (*Rep.*, 508d–509a), so does the philosopher-king, as the highest image of the good, "found the city in speech/reason."[38] The philosopher-king bears witness to truth and goodness and thus allows the city to exist *in reality*.

The reason we have dwelt at some length on this point is that it reveals an often-missed dimension of the nature of authority, and opens up insight into some of the implications of abandoning authority to oblivion. The philosopher-king is a paradigm—perhaps *the* paradigm—of authority, not because he imposes an interpretation of things by means of coercion, but because he lets the light of the highest principles of reality, which as such are essentially transcendent and so by their nature "timeless," into the otherwise closed realm of the cave, which is to say the immanent realm of history, and the inevitably particular location in time and place. In an illuminating history of the notion, Leonard Krieger sums up the ancient sense by saying that, in its origins, "authority was essentially transitional: its function was to bring principles from a higher realm of being to bear

37. This is the heart of the dialogue, *Gorgias*, which begins with the words "war and battle": it is the great battle between philosophy and sophistry, which is to say, between reason and unreason.

38. Note that we are proposing an interpretation that is perfectly contrary to that proposed by Leo Strauss, which has had a lot of influence in American political philosophy, especially among conservatives. Strauss argued that Plato meant the philosopher-king as a cautionary tale, to illustrate the human horrors that arise when philosophy is too directly brought into politics (and he admittedly has strong evidence in the "three waves of ridicule" that Plato discusses in book V: see reference at 472a). But his position arguably leads to an ultimate concession both to liberalism and to coercive force as the essential ordering principles of politics. In other words, for all of his criticism of the moderns in light of the ancients, he ultimately takes the moderns' side, however surreptitiously.

upon the activities of a lower realm of being; ideas of authority modulated the principles so as to make them relevant without divesting them of their superiority."[39] This mediating role thus involves in an essential way a "bearing witness" to the truth of the higher order—a "martyrological" dimension that we see, for example, in Socrates's allowing himself ultimately to be put to death in his fidelity to the gods.[40] This act reveals the absoluteness of the good precisely *as* absolute in an unsurpassable way: Socrates's authoritative act, by which he reveals himself in fact to be the only true statesman in Athens, reveals the good to be that to which everything else in existence (even his own being) is relative. It may thus be said to cast a light into the cave, which allows things to be illuminated in their own reality, as things good in themselves and not *merely* relative to the arbitrary will of those with power. Through authority, the good that exceeds being in dignity and power grants a share in that dignity and power to the things it enables to be, and to be known and loved. As we will elaborate in a moment, it is *just* this martyrological dimension, and indeed *only* this, that finally allows us to see the difference between authority and mere power.

Before we expound this point, it is good to gather the various threads together in an effort to formulate the essence of authority as it has been realized in principle in the Christian West. We have proposed that this essence arises from the convergence of the Jewish, Greek, and Roman currents, not as the piecing together of separate parts, but as the engendering of a new whole in which the distinct contributions are mediated to each other and to themselves by each other: they thus interpret each other and are interpreted in turn.[41] This convergence comes to a perfect symbolic expression in the anointed king of the Middle Ages. As the political philosopher George Sabine explains in his classic history of political philosophy, the king was recognized simultaneously as *chosen by God* (Jews), as *naturally* king by virtue

39. Leonard Krieger, "Authority," in *Dictionary of the History of Ideas*, vol. 1 (New York: Scribner, 1973), 146.

40. Schindler, *Plato's Critique*, 199–216.

41. We have argued that this is the *distinctively* Christian form: see my (unpublished) lecture, "The Form of Christian Thought: A Balthasarian Proposal," available online at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ntr_5Tv1rBw.

of his bloodline (Greeks), and as granted rule by *popular consent* (Romans): "The striking fact about many medieval kings is that, according to the prevailing ideas of their time, they not only inherited rule and were elected, but ruled also 'by the grace of God,' the three titles being not alternative but expressing three facts about the same state of affairs."[42] These principles may seem to be disparate, if not mutually exclusive, but the medieval Christian soul spontaneously affirmed them all at once.

At a deeper level, we can say that the anointing reveals that authority has its ultimate origin in God, but that this authority is truly *given*: it is not *the priest* who rules, but the *king*, to whom the priest has sacramentally communicated authority in the holy oil. In this respect, the king carries the "aura," we might say, of the presence of God in something like a sacramental way (with all the due qualifications).[43] But this divine origin, or "author-ship," does not exclude or replace the human origins. Instead, it not only includes human origins, but grants them, we might say, an infinite depth that they would not evidently possess otherwise. As Aquinas intuited, authority is inseparable from origination, which is to say, from *founding*.[44] A king not only bears witness to the earthly (horizontal) founders of the realm, but in a certain sense (vertically) *re-founds* the realm, now from above: the king recapitulates in his person the origin of his realm, and thus keeps that origin alive, so to speak, and *effectively present*. Here we see the (surprising) fulfillment of the Roman dimension.

Finally, the radiance of authority derives not just from the divine origin or the historical origin, but also from the *inner truth* of authority, its origin from within the real. As we have

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42. George Sabine, *A History of Political Theory*, 3rd ed. (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1961), 210.

43. It is more appropriate to think of the royal anointing as a "quasi-sacrament," or a "sacramental," since it was distinguished from the canonical sacraments in the twelfth century. For a general presentation of the role of the "aura," which is to say the glory, magnificence, dignity, and so forth, of the ruler in the history of political thought (albeit from the perspective of what one might call a hermeneutics of suspicion), see Giorgio Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2011).

44. Aquinas writes that "the very notion of kingly office . . . comprises the establishment of a city and kingdom" (*institutio civitatis et regni*): *De Regno*, I.14.

seen, authority bears witness to the founding of the real in the good. Power might be demonstrated most dramatically through intervention, through the effecting of some change in the way things have been and are. But this is not the proper expression of authority. While the king does indeed possess power, his power-transcending authority is revealed *most basically* in his bearing witness to what is given, *as* given, which is to say as preceding his deliberate will: in the preferential maintenance of custom, first of all, but also in the fidelity to the natural law, and ultimately to the transcendental realities of truth, goodness, and beauty.

We have been describing the essence of authority as expressed in the anointed king, which is of course a figure from the now-quite-distant past.[45] It bears remarking that the essence of authority is not restricted to any particular historical realization (to think it is would be precisely to immanentize, and so eliminate, authority in principle), which is to say that it can take analogous forms in various historical situations. The crucial thing to see is that authority is, before all else, symbolic in the *robust* and (quasi-)sacramental sense. Before *doing* anything, an authority *represents*, in his very person, i.e., in his *being*, a reality that transcends him in several respects at once: to put it succinctly, he represents God, the people, and the truth. More fully articulated, he makes God present *in the world* as distinct from the specifically sacramental, soteriological, and eschatological presence mediated in and through the priest. In this sense, it is natural for the ruler to be considered an official figure *of the Church*, even if this, again, can take analogous expressions at different periods in history.[46] A ruling authority, moreover, represents the people by

45. One of the most evident remnants of this figure can be found of course in the English king. But consider also dal Santo's observations: the king has survived precisely at the cost of surrendering actual political substance, or in other words, only by virtue of the fact that the transcendent, theological dimension has become *merely* symbolic. See Matthew Dal Santo, "The Lion and the Unicorn," *New Polity* (August 2020): 3–8.

46. This is why *Dignitatis humanae*, from Vatican II, ought not to be understood as a replacement of Church teaching, even if it has been interpreted in this way, not only by those who rejected it (most famously, Msgr. Lefebvre), but even by those who affirmed it and defended it as a kind of "development of doctrine." See the discussion by Ian Ker: "Is *Dignitatis Humanae* a Case of Authentic Doctrinal Development?," *Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture* 11:2 (Spring 2008): 149–57. See also the substantial discussion in

reflecting them back to themselves. His very person announces: *this* is who you, who we, are. But it is crucial to understand this exemplificatory aspect ontologically and theologically, and not just sociologically, which is to say to interpret the Roman dimension precisely as mediated in and through the Greek and Jewish dimensions. By showing us who we are, the authority not only exhibits our own distinctive "values," our history and our tradition, but more profoundly in such things he shows us what it means to be human, and demonstrates in himself our God-given end. The ruler is a symbolic presentation of the nature and destiny of the human person. This can only be properly done, of course, if he bears witness to the timeless truth of things, to what is good, what is beautiful, and at the same time to the inevitable reality of our *embodiment*, to the fact that timeless truths are realized in a distinctive way according to the particularities of time and place. We might say that authority *is*, analogously according to its historical conditions and the specificity of the order in which it stands, a lived theology, a lived anthropology, and a lived metaphysics.

## 3. THE SHINING, AND THE DYING, OF THE LIGHT

This description sounds no doubt like an ideal, like a nice image or set of values to which every bearer of authority should aspire, though of course we all recognize he will inevitably come up short in some decisive respects. But we wish to make a stronger claim: the foregoing is not a description of what *ought* to be, but of what every authority *inevitably is*, whether he wishes to be or not, whether he embraces this responsibility or neglects it. Every authority, as authority, according to the particular conditions of the order in which he stands as authority, *just is* a symbolic representation of God, man, and nature, and he either *augments* this re-presencing in his actions, or he betrays it. And if he betrays it, to the extent that he betrays it, he nevertheless continues to

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David L. Schindler and Nicholas Healy, *Freedom, Truth, and Human Dignity: The Second Vatican Council's Declaration on Religious Freedom* (Washington, DC: Humanum Academic Press, 2015) and Jeff Mirus, "Doctrinal Development on Religious Liberty," available online at https://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/doctrinal-development-on-religious-liberty.

play the role of symbol, which means he still sets the horizon of human existence, but now in a dark and distorted way. This means that the modern functionalizing of "authority," which is to say the pragmatic reduction of authority to mere power, now presents this pragmatic reduction as the truth of man and his eschatological destiny.

Reflecting on this point helps us see, perhaps better than anything else, what it means to say that we are in a crisis of what might be called "*Autoritätsvergessenheit*," the oblivion of authority. It was mentioned at the outset that we tend to think of authority principally, perhaps even exclusively, in terms of praxis: the role of authority is to instill, or provide, or even impose, order, to organize communal life, and in a particular way to *keep peace*—which is typically understood principally in negative terms as the absence of violence. Authority from this perspective concerns behavior, especially in its communal aspect.[47] More traditionally-minded people would concede that authority belongs specifically to the order of the *good*, rather than to the order of the true, but would insist that the ruler nevertheless has responsibility to the *true* common good insofar as he is responsible for the human flourishing that the true common good alone makes possible. But we wish to insist that, however valid this qualification may be, it remains inadequate, especially as a response to liberalism.[48] If we remain *simply* within the order of the good, we remain within the realm of power, and we can distinguish at best between good and bad uses of power, legitimate or illegitimate exercises thereof. But we have not yet broken that realm open into the order of truth *as such*, which we are claiming is not incidental (however *necessary* one wishes to insist that it is), but *essential* to authority. Authority includes truth and goodness in their integration, in

47. It is therefore common to separate morality from the law. But Aquinas has a more nuanced view: while the law concerns *all* the virtues, he says, it does not regulate *every act* of virtue (*ST* I-II.96.3); it forbids not all vices, but only "the more grevious" ones (*ST* I-II.96.2).

48. This is one of the major failures of contemporary "integralism": proonents tend to concede, perhaps in spite of themselves, a (specifically modern) pragmatic reduction of politics, which is another way of stating a more common criticism: they do not sufficiently distinguish between authority and power. For a powerful criticism, see Michael Hanby, "Are We Postliberal Yet?," *New Polity* (Summer 2022).

their *unity*, which is to say that authority is a reality that lies *principally in the order of the beautiful*.[49]

To illustrate this point, let us return to *The Republic* and its allegory of the cave. One of the reasons this allegory has enjoyed such a privileged place in the intellectual history of the West is that it manages to capture something about human existence that few other images or metaphors have, namely, that human existence unfolds against what we might describe as a horizon of intelligibility that establishes the setting within which a particular community enjoys a distinct access to the real: let us call it a "realm"—playfully joining together the sense of "real" as a genuine thing (*res*), "real" as immovable property ("real estate"), and "regime" (royaume, realm), the governance that realizes the "straight line," i.e., the horizon, of justice (*rect*), in a distinctive manner. What we mean by "realm" includes but goes beyond what Max Scheler meant by the ethos of a culture, a set of shared values, or, better, *preferences* among values, which trace out the basic landscape of the spirit of a people;[50] and what Charles Taylor meant by the "social imaginary," which is a set of shared beliefs, practices, ways of doing things, a shared understanding of how things work and what they are for.[51] It is closer to what Heidegger means by a "world," which is opened up in one way in language and in another way in the great works of art that enable *things* to show themselves, to reveal what they are in an ever more concrete manner.[52] Beyond all of this (but once again inclusively), what Plato presents in the allegory of the cave is a distinctively *metaphysical* horizon of intelligibility, which gives expression to something like a judgment, open to all, regarding the *being* of things, and specifically the way this being participates in (and thus *images*) the good. Both ultimate

49. For a more in-depth presentation of this point, see the opening two chapters of my forthcoming book, *Authority and Its Counterfeits*.

50. Max Scheler, *Formalism in Ethics and Non-Formal Ethics of Values* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 301–07.

51. Charles Taylor, "What Is a Social Imaginary?," in *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 23–30.

52. See Heidegger's essays, "On the Origin of the Work of Art" and "The Way to Language," in *Basic Writings* (New York: Harper Perennial Press, 2008), 139–212 and 397–426, respectively.

truth and ultimate goodness are at stake here. Aquinas describes the political order as a "conjecture" regarding the highest good to the highest degree[53]—and, of course, the highest human good necessarily includes truth in its fullness. If Plato brings metaphysics and politics together in *The Republic*, it is because man cannot understand things except in the light of the *highest* good (*not* the *second* highest[54]), and he cannot properly be *man* except as understanding. A polis, as a gathering of human beings, can be such only within a setting that opens up the truth of things.

The ruler plays an indispensable role in setting the horizon of intelligibility precisely as breaking in, so to speak, from beyond it. Indeed, there can *be* no horizon, properly speaking, without something visible reaching the eyes from beyond the horizon, something wholly different from what lies within the horizon, of an altogether different order of being, or else we are not speaking of a horizon at all. A fish that has never broken the surface of the ocean would never perceive the water as bounded (and, one might surmise, for that very reason would not perceive the water as such[55]). In Plato's allegory, the philosopher-king opens up the horizon of the cave by descending *into* it from the outside: he thus crosses the threshold, and in doing so he may be said to bring light into the cave, like the sun that breaks over the horizon and so brings the dawn—and in so doing, makes evident the difference between the earth and the sky, which were previously merged as one in the night. The image of light is of course a crucial one in the *Republic*. Plato likens the sun to the idea of the good in the allegory of the cave; prior to his presentation of the allegory, he had proposed a simile using the sun to illuminate

53. Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle's Politics*, Book I, Lesson I, 11. He explains that the political community, "which is the highest necessarily seeks in the highest degree the good that is the highest among all human goods." The Latin is "*maxime . . . coniectatrix boni . . . principalissimum*."

54. Plato affirms that "a measure in such things [namely, in the matter of ordering common existence] which in any way falls short of that which *is* is no measure at all. For nothing incomplete is the measure of anything": 504c.

55. David Foster Wallace recounts a brief joke/story along these lines and reflects on some of the implications in his well-known commencement address at Kenyon College, which was published as *This is Water: Some Thoughts, Delivered on a Significant Occasion, about Living a Compassionate Life* (New York: Little, Brown, and Co., 2009). Of course, fish, lacking spirit, cannot perceive *anything* as such: this is obviously just a metaphor.

(so to speak) the act of knowing, by which the soul enjoys communion with being.[56] Just as the eye cannot see a visible object, in spite of its native capacity to see and the object's natural capacity to be seen, without some third thing to actualize their union, namely, the sun and its rays, so too the mind and being need to be illuminated by the good in order for knowing *actually* to take place.[57] Authority enables the communion with the real by mediating the presence of the publicly accessible good through his official witness, without which the good would remain a private matter (and to that very extent cease to be the good properly speaking). What we need to see in particular here is that the good, in Plato's simile and allegory, does not, or does not *only,* play a practical role, relevant just to moral virtue and action, behavior towards others and the things of the world; more properly speaking, authority plays a specifically *theoretical* role, in the etymological sense of the word: the *presence* of the good allows things to be *seen* for what they most essentially *are*.

It is precisely for this reason that we propose interpreting authority specifically in the order of the *beautiful*. Aquinas will eventually distinguish the beautiful from the good by saying the two are essentially the same, but beauty is the extension of the good, so to speak, into the cognitive order.[58] We have been highlighting the *radiance* of authority (*lumen, claritas*), its revelatory or disclosive role. Many of the words associated with authority express just this radiance: majesty, resplendence, magnificence, glory (which in German is *Herrlichkeit*—literally, "lordliness"). In the contemporary world, often animated by the "hermeneutics of suspicion," these words provoke a cynical dismissal, prompted by anxieties about manipulation and exploitation. We have become almost incapable of seeing their necessity for the intelligibility of the world, which depends on the *presence* of things that is sufficiently impressive as to provoke a genuine wonder. The light of the ruler illuminates the things of the realm. By interpreting

56. Plato, *Republic*, 490b. Plato speaks of the philosopher as one who draws near to and consorts with the really real. "Drawing near to," πλησιάζω, is a euphemism for "having sexual intercourse with" (a note reinforced by "consorts," i.e., "joins" or "mixes with").

57. Plato, *Republic*, 507e–509a.

58. *ST* I, q. 5, a. 4, ad 1.

authority within the order of beauty, we come to appreciate better what it means to say that authority, before all else, is *symbolic* in its very being. As we have just seen, authority is *radiant*, manifestive, precisely as "crossing the threshold" between the immanent realm and the transcendent, between heaven and earth—which is, incidentally, precisely the way that Plato characterizes beauty in *The Phaedrus*.[59] It is also just what is implied by our saying that authority *mediates*, that it represents what is greater than itself (and translates the higher order into terms suitable for the lower). Without a mediator, the transcendent would remain ab-solute, and just so far *separated from*, the immanent realm of this world.

Jesus Christ definitively mediated the Father, which is to say made God effectively present *in* this world, thus definitively establishing the principle of mediation *as such*.[60] The priest—and the sacramental Church—is an extension of this principle throughout history in the work of redemption. We ought, in complementary fashion, to see the king, or analogously every political authority (and, indeed, every authority in every given order), as a symbolic extension of that mediation specifically in the temporal realm of creation. The ruler thus represents, makes present again, the *Founding* in a superabundant way, by recapitulating it in himself, and thus bringing together the Jewish, Greek, and Roman dimensions of authority in his person.

In this respect, prior to the various practical tasks in his charge, the authority is responsible for preserving the memory of the created nature of things, and all that this nature entails: namely, that things are *given* to us, that they are intrinsically worthy and purposeful, that they have a reality of their own beyond our immediate control even as that reality is meant to bring

59. Plato, *Phaedrus*, 250d–e. Plato explains here that "beauty alone has the privilege," among the transcendent forms, of being so radiant, as it were, that it can be perceived even by bodily sight. Beauty thus serves to mediate between the mundane and the heavenly spheres and allows thus a real transcendence. It is also worth reflecting in this context on the interpretation of beauty in classical German philosophy: for Schelling, beauty is the finite presentation of the infinite; for Hegel, it is the absolute present in a sensible mode. One is struck by how much such formulations express the nature of authority.

60. For a longer discussion of mediation as *the* defining principle of Christianity, see my essay, "Mediation: The Distinguishing Mark of Christianity," *Communio* (Spring 2021): 6–29.

about benefit to all, and in short that they warrant gratitude and respect. Authority grants *dignity* to the things for which the bearer is responsible.[61] In other words, the ruler bears witness to the meaningfulness of reality, and in doing so he *augments* its meaning, opening up the world to the dimensions that would allow a properly human existence to unfold. We can be at home only in a world that reflects back to us an image of our ultimate destiny. Authority brings to light the ground of being, and so gives us, and our entire world, a transcendent support.

This description of the nature of authority makes evident no doubt just how much we have forgotten; it also sets into better relief precisely what is at stake in this loss. Hearing the claim that there is a crisis of authority, we tend to think most immediately of the problem of law and order; we think of the chaos that begins to set in when people stop obeying the rules that are meant to govern behavior; penetrating perhaps a bit more below the surface, we might think of a growing spirit of disrespect, not just toward the law, but toward those who are meant in different ways to govern—rulers, policemen, teachers, parents, statesmen, judges, and, more generally, our *elders*, the ones who have acquired a certain wisdom because of their experience. But we tend not to think of our increasingly superficial engagement with things, our inability to pay attention, to take the reality of things seriously, our waning appetite for gratitude, and indeed for prayer. The failure to see these problems as bound up with authority is itself a clear sign of its disappearance. We miss the intellectual, ontological, and theological implications of the crisis of authority when we lose a sense, most basically, for the properly *disclosive* function of authority, as a matter, first of all,

61. A beautiful insight on this point can be found in Schiller, if we replace his phrase "noble soul" with the word "authority" (understood in the sense we have been developing in this essay): "This genial and aesthetically free treatment of everyday actuality is, when we come across it, the sign of a *noble* soul. In general, a nature may be called noble which possesses the gift of transforming, by its method of handling it, even the most limited matter and the pettiest object into an infinite one. Every form may be termed noble which impresses the stamp of self-dependence upon something which by its nature merely *subserves* some purpose (is merely a means). A noble spirit is not satisfied with being itself free; it must set free everything around it, even what is lifeless. But Beauty is the only possible expression of freedom in phenomena": *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2004), 111, n. 1.

of beauty. Let us close with a gesture toward some of the dimensions of its disappearance that tend to go unrecognized.

The loss of authority bears, for instance, on the reality of our faith: if the God in whom we believe is, so to speak, *only* a supernatural concern, relevant only in the age to come; if the presence of God is not mediated in the world precisely in its secular dimension, our faith cannot help but degenerate into something merely private, reductively *personal*, no matter how much we might will it to be otherwise; the personal act of faith will not resonate *into*, and indeed, *from* the very core of our being, from our body and all of its natural relations with others and with the world; it will not be properly *ecclesial* as a real participation in the *faith of the Church*, as a subject herself, beyond the individuals who make her up.

The loss of authority likewise bears on our reason and understanding: it is by the transcendent light manifest in the symbol of the ruler that truth is able to be effectively present in a public way, that is, as a matter of substance that naturally bears on *everyone*. One can say "truth, truth, truth" until one is blue in the face; one can brand one's social media platform with the word, but if the word does not have the ontological grounding provided by the symbolic reality of authority, it can never be received as anything but yet another person's opinion forcing itself on our attention through fear, desire, or engineering. Insofar as authority allows things to be meaningful in an absolute way, rather than merely relative to one practical need after another, it not only anchors our thought in reality but introduces a contemplative element, which means also a spirit of festivity and play. A world that presents itself first of all to be affirmed and celebrated is one we can *actually* understand; conversely, a world that is only to be *used* quickly degenerates into unintelligibility. One cannot in this case shake free of the suspicion that there is nothing ultimately to be trusted and relied on as greater than one's doubts.

But the loss of authority also has ontological consequences: as mediating the transcendent order, and so introducing a real principle of unity that lies beyond the distinct realities of individuals as such, authority is something like the soul of a community, a presence that binds the whole together and gives it life. A community without authority is therefore soul-less and as such cannot in any genuine way be life-giving. To be sure, it

is the *common good* that establishes the reality of a community beyond the multiplicity of its individual constituents, but we have argued that it is precisely the authority that specifically *represents* the common good, making that good effectively present within the community in his person as something more than the sum of individual, "private" interests. In the absence of authority, we thus have difficulty getting "outside ourselves," genuinely "connecting with" what is other than us. A culture without authority will suffer in a special way from loneliness and depression, in spite of the proliferation of medicines and social media technologies designed to make connections with others as easy as breathing. If the substantial reality of connecting with others, as an essential part of the good that we pursue for ourselves,[62] is indispensable for us to find fulfillment as human beings, then authority is necessary for happiness. Again, the most fundamental role of authority is not to "tell us what to do," but effectively to represent the real.

When authority disappears, we therefore lose the ground of our being-with others; we lose the capacity to think and to act *in reality*, which is distinct from mere calculation and behavior; we lose the capacity to say words that resonate with a genuinely ontological depth; and we lose the capacity to believe in—that is, to worship and truly to *rest in* and *to serve*, with the whole of our body and soul—a God who is more than a projection of our private imagination. If all of this is true, then the crisis of authority may be said to be the greatest of all human crises, even if it is one of human making. What we might do to respond to this crisis is a question that we do not wish to trivialize by a facile response in conclusion. But it is perhaps already a not-insignificant advance to realize what we have forgotten by contemplating, and so taking to heart, what we have lost in its disappearance. Simply to *see* this, and to experience its implications, is already a step beyond the merely immanent, and oppressively pragmatic, horizon of mere power. □

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62. *ST* I-II, q. 26, a. 3; *ST* II-II, q. 58, a. 9, ad 3; and *ST* I, q. 60, a. 5, ad 3.