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Toward A Common Notion of Authority

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Toward A Common Notion of Authority

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Social Studies
of Bard College

by
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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

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This work is dedicated to all the students who have completed their senior projects through caffeine-saturated tears.

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Introduction

In recent years a great number of established authorities have been called into question. The global pandemic fostered doubt among many about the role and authority of medical research and institutions; these doubts turned into conspiracy theories which further undermined the legitimacy of these establishments. The disputed election of 2020 and Donald Trump's unwillingness to recognize his political competitor, Joe Biden, as victorious served to deal a similar blow to the authority and legitimacy of U.S. political institutions. These occurrences and others like them may be understood as a crisis of authority. Institutions and established processes are being called into question and, with them, the notion of authority in general.

This is far from the first crisis of authority in history. Author and political philosopher Hannah Arendt noticed a remarkably similar crisis within her own lifetime. She went so far as to claim that "authority has vanished from the modern world."¹ In her essay "What Is Authority?" Arendt directly addresses this topic. She believed that scholars must look to the origins of authority and its historical development if we were to have any hope of treating the crisis of authority and establishing a common notion. Arendt's influence on the topic is far reaching in both depth and scope. Noteworthy scholars across many disciplines and countries have engaged her work on authority. Indeed, her name has become so connected to the current conversation of the topic that it seems almost a scholarly sin to discuss the matter without mentioning her. In a sense, Arendt has become an authority on authority.

¹ Hannah Arendt, "What is Authority?," in *Between Past and Future* (New York: Penguin Group, 2006), 91.

This project will investigate, respond to, and extend Arendt's project. It is an attempt to move closer to a common notion of authority: a single notion that can be used to make sense of diverse experiences and perspectives regarding authority, enabling communication between differing groups. In chapter one we shall endeavor to provide an analysis of Arendt's writings regarding key concepts in her work about authority, paying special attention to her essay "What Is Authority?". An examination of Arendt's methodology and exposition of historical examples will reveal points of narrowness and weakness in her conceptualization of authority. Further investigation will demonstrate how these points of weakness limit Arendt's notion of authority and incline her project to contribute to the very crisis of modernity to which she draws attention.

In chapter two we shall seek to overcome the points of weakness in Arendt's methodology by examining the Confucian perspective on authority. The Confucian notion of Virtue as it is presented in the *Analects* will provide unique insights into the personal and moral nature of authority from a linguistic and cultural tradition entirely distinct from Arendt's original considerations, allowing us to move beyond the limitations of Arendt's original project. Contemporary scholarship regarding the historical background and cultural significance of the Confucian notion of authority will serve to further illuminate these insights and reconceptualize authority in a manner that avoids the crisis of "commons" that plagues modernity according to Arendt's analysis.

An approach aimed at grasping the core structure common to authority across a wider variety of historical examples enables us to conceptualize authority in a manner that moves beyond Arendt's perspective and develops a *common* notion fit for posterity. That is to say, by analyzing the common elements of authority across diverse cultures and analyzing the unique

insights offered through each differing cultural perspective, we are better poised to craft a notion of authority that transcends any individual time or place. One might think of this as phenomenological in method. By examining the same phenomenon from differing perspectives, we move closer to understanding the phenomenon and obtaining a sense of objectivity concerning it. The perspective of Confucianism will help to take a decisive step toward a diversity of perspectives regarding authority.

In many ways this work is merely a beginning to a much larger project in which a greater plurality of cultural perspectives would need to be taken into account. In this regard, the conclusion of this project can be seen as a much needed step toward developing a common notion of authority based upon cultural pluralism, but not the final step. With this qualification in mind, it may be best to view the scope of this project as bringing attention to the problematic aspects of Arendt's methodology, offering one possible way to overcome these problematic aspects, and attempting to practice the amended methodology on a new cultural perspective regarding authority. The practical application of the new methodology can and should be applied to a wider range of cultural perspectives. However, the scope of this project and the limitations of time do not permit such an undertaking. Thus, I shall leave this greater task to those readers who are thoroughly convinced by my work here. Or perhaps I shall leave it to those who are so thoroughly unconvinced by this work that they attempt to refute my method, thereby providing a perfect occasion for me to return to this project and make further progress.

Chapter One

Hannah Arendt offers an analysis of the origin and nature of authority in the essay titled “What Is Authority?”. In this work she explores the structure and function of authority, how it differs from other phenomena that might serve a similar function. She examines the Roman Republican origins of authority, and the Platonic attempt to establish a sufficiently powerful alternative to authority. While this essay offers a complete project in its own right, for the readers who are familiar with her earlier works, it is evident that this essay places her notion of authority within the context of the larger project on display in *The Human Condition*, which was published three years earlier.

I propose an examination of Arendt’s method of conceptualizing authority in the essay “What Is Authority?”. A close reading of the way in which she treats the core elements of analysis will reveal an underlying methodology. I take these core elements to be functionalism, Platonic political theory, and Roman Republican political theory. Her treatment of each of these elements will be carefully considered in order to properly construct an accurate model of her methodology. I will argue that these core elements must be understood within the context of certain themes that are present in the essay, but are developed in more depth within *The Human Condition*. For this reason, I will draw upon *The Human Condition* to clarify and frame certain aspects of Arendt’s thought; namely, her notions of commons and human freedom.

After a thorough examination of Arendt’s project of conceptualizing authority, I will turn toward evaluating a tension between her methodology and ultimate goals. In brief, I will argue that Arendt’s methodology actually contributes to the very problem that she believes

characterizes modernity, a loss of commons for society. Further, I will present counter examples to her conceptualization from the source material of each of the essay's core elements. Far from quibbling over historical details and interpretive context, these counterexamples are meant to demonstrate the limitations of Arendt's methodology and provide direction for an alternative approach. Finally, I will briefly sketch the outline of a possible alternative methodology that better accomplishes Arendt's goal of preserving the commons of society.

Preliminary Sketch of Authority

From the outset Arendt draws attention to the crisis of modernity as an occasion to reframe the central question of her essay. In her opening lines, she writes:

In order to avoid misunderstanding, it might have been wiser to ask in the title: What was—and not what is—authority? For it is my contention that we are tempted and entitled to raise this question because authority has vanished from the modern world. Since we can no longer fall back upon authentic and undisputable experiences common to all, the very term has become clouded by controversy and confusion.²

A few customary aspects of Arendt's methodology are on display here. While the concern is the *present*, hence the original present tense of the title, the necessary materials for a solution are only found in the *past*. If authority is lost in the present, then we must go to the past in order to rediscover it. In effect, Arendt captures the pressing urgency of a contemporary problem while largely excluding contemporary sources from the scope of possible solutions.

Arendt also connects this contemporary problem to a central notion of her philosophy, the notion of commons. This notion is developed within "What Is Authority?" to a degree, but it

² Hannah Arendt, "What is Authority?," in *Between Past and Future* (New York: Penguin Group, 2006), 91.

receives much greater attention within the earlier work *The Human Condition*. Within the context of the “What Is Authority?,” Arendt attaches this notion to language and meaning. She argues that many important terms, including authority, have “lost their common meaning.”³ From this standpoint, the crisis of modernity is that “we have ceased to live in a common world where the words we have in common possess an unquestionable meaningfulness...”⁴ Individuals have retreated into private worlds of meaning in the face of this crisis, so that words like “authority” mean vastly different things for different people. This loss of common concepts, common meaning to important terms, seems to lead to the loss of the actual phenomenon referenced by such mental and linguistic tools under Arendt’s view. Thus, we must return to a point of history with common meaning in order to rediscover the phenomenon itself.

Arendt’s grand notion of commons stretches beyond linguistic elements in *The Human Condition*. In this work, the notion of the commons is applied to the broadest level of human public experience. In the context of the book, and Arendt’s body of philosophical thought, the commons or the “common world” enable individuals to move beyond a purely private life and enter into the public sphere of political life. In chapter 7 of *The Human Condition*, titled “The Public Realm: The Common,” Arendt most clearly grounds her notion of the public/private divide in the idea of commons. It is the commons that separate the public and private spheres of human experience from one another.⁵ In this regard, Arendt’s notion of commons plays a fundamental role in her political theories, which correspond to the public sphere. Thus, it plays a fundamental role in her concept of authority.

³ Arendt, “What is Authority?,” 95.

⁴ Arendt, “What is Authority?,” 95.

⁵ Hannah Arendt, “The Public Realm: The Common,” in *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018).

In *The Human Condition*, Arendt constructs a notion of commons through a remarkably phenomenological method. She argues that “the reality of the public realm relies on the simultaneous presence of innumerable perspectives and aspects in which the common world presents itself...”⁶ This sounds remarkably similar to the phenomenological objectivity found in the writings of Husserl, the intersubjective constitution of objectivity. Through the perception of many individuals from many perspectives, the core aspects of the object being observed can be better discerned. This seems to be precisely what Arendt argues when she refers to the commons as “the reality rising out of the sum total of aspects presented by one object to a multitude of spectators.”⁷ It is through many diverse experiences and perspectives that we come to learn the sum total of aspects present in one object. Thus, a multitude of diverse experiences and perspectives is essential to developing the commons.

The condition that spells the end of the commons according to Arendt is the final important takeaway regarding commons from *The Human Condition*. There is exactly one condition that results in the end of commons, and Arendt states this definitively. She writes, “the end of the common world has come when it is seen only under one aspect and is permitted to present itself in only one perspective.”⁸ Again, here the phenomenological method presents itself. Under one aspect and one perspective, there is no intersubjectivity, and therefore, there is no sense of objectivity. There is only pure subjectivity under one perspective. In this sense, a single perspective leads to the loss of commons and forces the retreat into private worlds of meaning mentioned earlier.

⁶ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 57.

⁷ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 57.

⁸ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 58.

The importance of maintaining the public realm and the commons that substantiate it cannot be understated in Arendt's project. The loss of the commons ultimately leads to the breakdown of Arendt's tripartite paradigm of the human condition, labor, work, and action. It leads to the collapse of the distinct public and private realms of experience, resulting in the inability to act politically. For this reason, the condition that precipitates the end of commons will play a vital role in understanding Arendt's treatment of authority. If Arendt's methodology isolates the object of authority under the lens of one perspective, then it lends itself to the deterioration of a common notion of authority. The method of modeling the concept of authority after a single instance in Rome isolates the object under one perspective, the Roman perspective. It seems like we will have to evaluate a diverse multitude of perspectives on authority in order to construct a common notion.

Returning to the essay regarding authority, we see that while Arendt characterizes the crisis of modernity in broad terms early in the essay, speaking about the "breakdown of all traditional authorities," she quickly qualifies the specific type of authority with which the essay is concerned.⁹ More precisely, it is "a very specific form [of authority] which had been valid throughout the Western world over a long period of time."¹⁰ In this regard, we see another customary aspect of Arendt's approach. It is, by her own admission, Western centric. Arendt's linguistic and historical analysis openly reflects this scope, as she exclusively draws upon canonical Western examples.

Canonical Western centrism was far more popular in American and European scholarship in Arendt's time, but this approach has been subject to increasing doubts in more recent years.

⁹ Arendt, "What is Authority?," 91.

¹⁰ Arendt, "What is Authority?," 92.

The increase of globalization and the critical evaluation of assumed cultural superiority has made Western centrism fall out of popularity among many scholars. Nevertheless, it holds an important qualification for the scope of Arendt's methodology. This qualification of scope further contributes to the limitation of perspective mentioned above. Under Western centrism, non-Western cultural perspectives on authority are completely disregarded. It seems like non-Western cultural perspectives must be taken into account if our aim is to construct a common notion of authority that fits a globalized society.

Arendt moves beyond the qualification of scope, further qualifying her notion of authority based upon its limits. In this way she seeks to differentiate authority from common phenomena associated with it. She writes, "Since authority always demands obedience, it is commonly mistaken for some form of power or violence. Yet authority precludes the use of external means of coercion, where force is used, authority itself has failed."¹¹ Many important aspects of Arendt's project present themselves clearly for the first time in the essay here. The seeding of what develops into an argument against functionalism starts here. While Arendt acknowledges that obedience is a key aspect of authority, she clearly does not think that any phenomena that entails obedience is necessarily authority. Stated another way, simply because two things serve the same function, this does not make them the same thing. One cannot define a notion based upon its function alone.

Arendt dismisses the functionalist approach to definitions with a banal example, in a philosophical maneuver reminiscent of G.E. Moore. She demonstrates the absurdity of this approach, saying, "it is as though I had the right to call the heel of my shoe a hammer because I,

¹¹ Arendt, "What is Authority?," 92.

like most women, use it to drive nails into the wall.”¹² Although much of her criticism of this approach seems directed toward contemporary liberal and conservative intellectuals, I would argue that this is actually the same erroneous intellectual step that she implies Plato took in his political philosophy. In his search for a way to obtain obedience, she argues that Plato tried to introduce something sufficiently similar to authority. Yet, he only accomplishes finding illegitimate means of accomplishing the same function of authority, obedience.

There is another important aspect that separates authority from other phenomena. This is the aspect of structure and relation. Arendt posits that authority is incompatible with persuasion due to the structural relationship involved in persuasion and its method of accomplishing obedience. She claims that “Authority, on the other hand, is incompatible with persuasion, which presupposes equality and works through the process of argumentation.”¹³ Considering this statement's logically equivalent premise, Arendt seems to be arguing that authority precludes equality. This conclusion is further illustrated by the associated shapes she uses to describe different types of government. Through these shapes, Arendt provides models of the structural relationships present in different types of government. In the egalitarian government, individuals stand side-by-side on an equal level, but in the authoritarian government, individuals occupy higher and lower positions on a pyramid. This entails an hierarchy essential to authority. Arendt recognizes as much when she explains that members of an authoritarian structure always have at least one thing in common. She writes, “what they have in common is the hierarchy itself, whose rightness and legitimacy both recognize and where both have their predetermined stable place.”¹⁴

¹² Arendt, “What is Authority?,” 102.

¹³ Arendt, “What is Authority?,” 92.

¹⁴ Arendt, “What is Authority?,” 93.

Here the hierarchy establishes the essential relationship between members of an authoritative structure.

The Human Condition enables us to better understand Arendt's specialized notion of equality and its relation to freedom. Arendt derives her notion of freedom and equality from specific ancient Greek sources. She argues that "Equality... was the very essence of freedom: to be free meant to be free from the inequality present in rulership and to move in a sphere where neither rule nor being ruled existed"¹⁵ Under this notion of freedom, the master is unfree by the same disqualification as the slave. If freedom consists of equality, then those unequals in a higher, more beneficial position of power are kept from freedom. Indeed, this is precisely what Arendt concludes, saying, "Hence, neither the despot nor the tyrant, the one moving among slaves, the other among subjects, could be called a free man."¹⁶

Arendt recognizes that these notions of freedom and equality may seem odd to contemporary audiences. She also recognizes that this notion of freedom inherently relies upon inequality on a more foundational level. She writes:

To be sure, this equality of the political realm has very little in common with our concept of equality: it meant to live among and to have to deal only with one's peers, and it presupposed the existence of "unequals" who, as a matter of fact, were always the majority of the population in a city-state.¹⁷

Here we see that this notion of freedom pertains to those individuals who have all claimed equality together through the subjugation of the majority of the population. Freedom becomes the privilege of those who occupy an equal space together, a privilege that is acquired at the price

¹⁵ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 33.

¹⁶ Arendt, "What is Authority?," 105.

¹⁷ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 32.

of subjugating others.¹⁸ Thus, under Arendt's Greek notion, structural inequality gives rise to the political sphere, which in turn gives rise to a privileged equal class, the class of free men.

Analysis of Plato

Despite claiming that “Neither the Greek language nor the varied political experiences of Greek history shows any knowledge of authority and the kind of rule it implies,” Arendt dedicates a great deal of “What Is Authority?” to Plato's political theories.¹⁹ She does this because of the immense influence Plato's philosophy has had over western political theory in general, and Roman political theory in particular. Under Arendt's analysis, Plato's philosophy represents a failed substitute for authority. Nevertheless, his philosophy influenced the original Roman notion of authority. We might understand Arendt's analysis of Plato as consisting of three parts: Plato's goal, his attempted substitution for authority, and the political motivation for this project.

According to Arendt, Plato's goal was simple. He hoped to discover a means of obtaining obedience in the city without eradicating freedom.²⁰ Recall that obedience is one of the prime functional qualities of authority. In this regard, Plato's goal was to find a functional substitute for authority. This relates Plato's project to Arendt's earlier polemic of functionalism. Hence, it subjects Plato's project to the same criticism. Thus, Arendt says that Plato “tried to introduce

¹⁸ Arendt explores the foundational inequality that gives rise to the few privileged equals in *The Human Condition*. She describes the structural inequality of the private sphere as a “prepolitical force.” It is only through the domination of slaves that individuals are able to move beyond the necessities of natural life into the equality of the public sphere. Only those individuals who dominate others ever obtain the privilege of freedom and equality. This is a brutal but real implication of this view. (Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 32-33).

¹⁹ Arendt, “What is Authority?,” 104.

²⁰ Arendt, “What is Authority?,” 105.

something akin to authority into the public life of the Greek polis.”²¹ However, in the absence of any valid political experience from which to derive genuine authority, Plato was forced to turn to the relations present in the Greek household and family. In Arendtian terms, he moved from the political sphere to the private sphere.

In the course of detailing Plato’s goal, Arendt makes an interesting claim. She posits that “authority implies an obedience in which men retain their freedom.”²² It is the legitimate phenomenon that accomplishes Plato’s goal. However, this claim seems to be in tension with earlier claims. If authority is necessarily hierarchical as Arendt describes, and if freedom entails equality, then how can authority imply obedience while retaining freedom? Stated another way, how can an individual enjoy the freedom of equality while they are simultaneously being ruled from above and ruling those below?

Arendt does not address this tension in the course of the essay; however, we can offer a possible explanation. Recall that the Greek notion of freedom which Arendt adopts relies upon a structural inequality between the free men and the slaves who take care of the natural necessities of life, enabling the free men to participate in the public sphere of freedom and equality. In this regard, the very essence of freedom relies upon a hierarchy. Thus, the pyramid of authority follows the structure of political freedom in general. However, this entails some problematic implications. Under this conception, freedom only exists in the relationship between individuals who occupy the same position on the hierarchy, as freedom is an individual's “ability to move among his equals... .”²³ We might conclude that slaves are free among other slaves, heads of

²¹ Arendt, “What is Authority?,” 104.

²² Arendt, “What is Authority?,” 105.

²³ Arendt, “What is Authority?,” 105.

households among other heads of households, and senators among other senators. However, this implication reveals the fragility and artificiality of this notion of freedom. It entails that individuals are free depending upon the room they stand in and the company that they keep. It seems that the point of tension between Arendt's claims about freedom, equality, and authority can not so easily be undone.

Armed with an understanding of Plato's goal to obtain obedience without the loss of freedom, let us look at his means of accomplishing it. Picking up her narrative of Plato's search for a substitute for authority, Arendt writes, "Very early in his search he must have discovered that truth, namely, the truths we call self-evident, compel the mind, and that this coercion, though it needs no violence to be effective, is stronger than persuasion and argument."²⁴ Notice the middle ground between violence and persuasion. Arendt's word choice and syntax reflect the same structure from the quote above (p. 5). Authority stands between coercion and persuasion. However, Arendt is characterizing the effect of self-evident truths as coercive, making this substitute fall outside of the necessary bounds of proper authority. The peculiarity of deeming self-evident truth as coercive does not seem to occur to Arendt, as she never explains how or why self-evident truth is coercive. It still remains a puzzle at the end of the essay. In the same section Arendt characterizes Plato's method as "coercion through reason."²⁵ This formulation becomes a key focus for Arendt.

According to Arendt, there is a problem with coercion through reason. Namely, she says that "only the few are subject to it, so that the problem arises of how to assure that the many, the people who in their very multitude compose the body politics, can be submitted to the same

²⁴ Arendt, "What is Authority?," 107.

²⁵ Arendt, "What is Authority?," 107.

truth.”²⁶ Here it seems like Arendt is appealing to the irrational behavior of the masses. The limit of coercion through reason is found at the limit of an individual's behavior to be formed by rational consideration. Thus, Plato must find another way to obtain obedience from the population that will not be compelled by rational considerations.

Arendt proposes that “Plato solved this dilemma through rather lengthy tales about a hereafter with rewards and punishments, which he hoped would be believed literally by the many.”²⁷ Under this interpretation, Plato designs a mythos of the afterlife in which obedience to the rule of reason is rewarded and disobedience punished. This mythos is his secondary method of obtaining obedience, and it is designed specifically to deal with the population that will not be compelled by rational consideration. Speaking about the mythos of the afterlife, Arendt writes, “They are simply an ingenious device to enforce obedience upon those who are not subject to the compelling power of reason, without actually using external violence.”²⁸ Again, we see the intentional avoidance of external violence which brings this substitute closer to the proper nature of authority. Yet, it still falls short due to its coercive nature.

Before turning her focus to Rome, Arendt analyzes the political motivations for Plato’s project. In order to do this, she provides a narrative meant to explain Plato’s intellectual evolution and explain major themes in *The Republic*. Under Arendt’s interpretation, the element of rule in Platonic thinking “can be traced to a conflict between philosophy and politics.”²⁹ For Arendt, this conflict is key to understanding *The Republic* and Plato’s intellectual evolution. This conflict comes from Arendt's understanding of the original nature of Plato’s ideas. She argues

²⁶ Arendt, “What is Authority?,” 107.

²⁷ Arendt, “What is Authority?,” 111.

²⁸ Arendt, “What is Authority?,” 111.

²⁹ Arendt, “What is Authority?,” 113.

that Plato's ideas originally only pertained to contemplation, a purely private affair for Arendt, and were not considered as measurements for human activity.³⁰ Thus, the ideas had no original application in politics. However, the death of Socrates at the hands of the city and the realization of his own life threatening danger spurred Plato to engage in “the transformation of the ideas into measures... .”³¹

Arendt offers an interpretation of the cave analogy understood in terms of Plato's life threatening danger. She writes:

The ideas become measures only after the philosopher has left the bright sky of ideas and returned to the dark cave of human existence. In this part of the story Plato touches upon the deepest reason for the conflict between the philosopher and the polis. He tells of the philosopher's loss of orientation in human affairs, of the blindness striking the eyes, of the predicament of not being able to communicate what he has seen, and of the actual danger to his life which thereby arises. It is in this predicament that the philosopher resorts to what he has seen, the ideas, as standards and measures, and finally, in fear of his life, uses them as instruments of domination.³²

Notice the emphasis on life threatening danger. Under this interpretation, the philosopher engages in a sort of Hobbesian, preemptive aggression in the presence of danger. Also notice the extremely strong response, according to Arendt. The philosopher does not merely defend himself. Rather, he dominates the polis through the use of reason in order to maintain his own safety. In the presence of life-threatening danger the philosopher uses the fruit of his contemplation in order to tyrannically dominate the polis. This is precisely what Plato attempted to do, according to Arendt. His search for the best government became one “in which

³⁰ The division between contemplation and activity is developed at greater length in *The Human Condition*. There Arendt adapts the traditional distinction between *vita activa* and *vita contemplativa* to closely follow her distinction between the public and private realms. Contemplation occurs in private, making it unpolitical; however, activity is necessary between individuals, and therefore political for Arendt.

³¹ Arendt, “What is Authority?,” 111.

³² Arendt, “What is Authority?,” 109.

philosophers have become the rulers of the city—a not too surprising solution for people who had witnessed the life and death of Socrates.”³³ With this remark she ties Plato’s experience of the trial and death of Socrates with the cave analogy, effectively implying that Plato stands in the same position as the philosopher in the analogy.

The interpretation of *The Republic* and narrative of Plato’s intellectual evolution that Arendt provides are remarkably critical. There are significant counterexamples to this interpretation across *The Republic*, namely that philosophers do not want to rule according to Plato. Instead of dominating the polis, Plato describes the philosopher as a reluctant ruler who is duty bound to give up his desired life of pure contemplation in order to help the polis. Arendt never accounts for these disconfirming descriptions. Much more could be said about this tension. However, it is our purpose to evaluate Arendt’s textual analysis as it relates to authority and not our purpose to evaluate Arendt’s textual analysis generally. In regards to the former goal, a few things can be said.

Arendt’s characterization and criticism of Plato’s political thought offer several important insights into her method of addressing the topic of authority. As explored above, Arendt’s characterizes platonic political thought as being motivated by fear for personal safety, and she offers a criticism of Plato’s government in *The Republic* on the basis of self-interest. It is the philosophers who are placed at the top of the polis, and this government is laid out by none other than a philosopher himself. If these attributes of Plato’s political thought are considered questionable, and serve to show the illegitimacy of his substitution for authority, then the presence of these same attributes in the political thought of others is grounds for doubt. Stated another

³³ Arendt, “What is Authority?,” 114.

way, the grounds for criticism that Arendt offers against Plato ought to be consistently applied across examples.

It is worth summarizing the key points of analysis regarding Plato before moving on. First, we saw how Arendt describes Plato's political thought as a search for the means to bring about obedience. By looking for something to serve the same function of authority, Plato's attempted substitutions are subject to Arendt's criticism of functionalism. After this, we noted the way in which Plato attempts to establish obedience. Arendt describes Plato's use of "self-evident truths" as coercive means "to establish a tyranny of reason."³⁴ This analysis from Arendt informs us that obedience established by these means is inconsistent with proper authority in her understanding. Finally, we briefly analyzed Plato's motivations according to Arendt. We saw that the motivation of fear for personal safety and the formation of a government that places its founder at the top of the city are strong grounds for doubting the legitimacy of the presence of proper authority in such a government. With these things in mind, let us turn our attention toward Arendt's treatment of Rome.

Analysis of Rome

Rome is key to understanding authority for Arendt. Speaking of Roman culture, she claims "It is in this context that word and concept of authority originally appeared."³⁵ This claim is not without clear support. As Arendt points out, the word authority derives from the Latin term "*auctoritas*." She provides a brief etymology for the term, explaining that "the word *auctoritas* derives from the verb *augere*, "augment," and what authority or those in authority

³⁴ Arendt, "What is Authority?," 108.

³⁵ Arendt, "What is Authority?," 121.

constantly augment is the foundation.”³⁶ Here we see the linguistic origins of authority directly connect to an original political experience. The foundation Arendt refers to is the very foundation of Roman society. She argues that “The foundation of a new body politic... became to the Romans the central, decisive, unrepeatable beginning of their whole history, a unique event.”³⁷ Thus, the founding of a new body politic that was conceived as unrepeatable serves as the original political experience for authority, according to Arendt.

There are several particular qualities that contribute to the uniqueness of this political experience under Arendt’s interpretation. She explains:

At the heart of Roman politics, from the beginning of the republic until virtually the end of the imperial era, stands the conviction of the sacredness of foundation, in the sense that once something has been founded it remains binding for all future generations.³⁸

Here we are introduced to two important aspects of the political experience that relate to authority: religion and tradition. It is the sacredness of the foundation that endows it with such unique importance. For the Romans, the founding of Rome was not just the founding of a city. It was the founding of *the* sacred Roman city. This effectively endows the political foundations of the city with a deep religious significance. So much so that Arendt argues “religious and political activity could be considered as almost identical... .”³⁹ The sacred, religious nature of the foundation directly establishes its “binding” power. Due to the occurrence of the sacred foundation in the past, tradition becomes a religiously binding aspect of politics for future generations. Both religion and tradition relate so deeply to authority in this context that Arendt

³⁶ Arendt, “What is Authority?,” 121.

³⁷ Arendt, “What is Authority?,” 120.

³⁸ Arendt, “What is Authority?,” 120.

³⁹ Arendt, “What is Authority?,” 121.

dubs these elements “the Roman trinity.”⁴⁰ The way that each of the two preceding elements relates to authority will enable us to better understand authority in Arendt’s thought.

The connection between religion and authority within Rome creates an important division between power and authority in Arendt interpretation. She claims that “the most conspicuous characteristic of those in authority is that they do not have power.”⁴¹ While such an absolute separation may appear unintuitive to us, Arendt appeals to a comment from Cicero in *De Legibus* for evidence of this division. Cicero states that “while power resides in the people, authority rests with the Senate.”⁴² For Arendt, the separation of power and authority actually keeps those in authority from falling into coercion. Elaborating on this point, she writes, “The authoritative character of the “augmentation” of the elders lies in its being a mere advice, needing neither the form of command nor external coercion to make itself heard.”⁴³ Here we see the familiar bounds of authority from earlier sections in the essay. We are also shown that the key to falling within these proper bounds lies in the separation of authority and power.

According to Arendt, the separation of authority and power follows directly from the religious beliefs and practices of Rome. She argues

The binding force of this authority is closely connected with the religiously binding force of the *auspices*, which... does not hint at the objective course of future events but reveals merely divine approval or disapproval of decisions made by men. The gods too have authority among, rather than power over, men; they “augment” and confirm human actions but do not guide them.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Arendt, “What is Authority?,” 128.

⁴¹ Arendt, “What is Authority?,” 122.

⁴² Arendt, “What is Authority?,” 122.

⁴³ Arendt, “What is Authority?,” 123.

⁴⁴ Arendt, “What is Authority?,” 123.

The emphasis here is clearly on the division of power and authority. However, there is another important aspect of Arendt's understanding of authority present. According to this interpretation, original authority belongs with the gods, who surprisingly do not have power over men. Rather, the Roman gods seem to hold the same relation to humans as the senate holds toward Roman citizens. It is not a relation entailing "command nor external coercion," but "mere advice" and "augmentation."⁴⁵ Thus, the divine order of Roman religion serves as the model for proper authority in Roman politics.

The final element of the Roman trinity is tradition, which intimately ties authority and religion together. According to Arendt, the source of Roman authority and religious significance lies in the past with the founding of Rome itself. This impresses the past with immense importance. As Arendt accurately notes though, "tradition and past are not the same... ."⁴⁶ Elsewhere Arendt describes tradition as "the thread which safely guides us through the vast realms of the past... ."⁴⁷ However, for the Romans tradition does more than merely guide. Arendt describes the role of tradition, writing

The past was sanctified through tradition. Tradition preserved the past by handing down from one generation to the next the testimony of the ancestors, who first had witnessed and created the sacred foundation and then augmented it by their authority throughout the centuries.⁴⁸

Here tradition sanctifies and preserves the past. Its role in sanctifying the past connects it to the core religious elements of Roman politics. Its role in preserving the past directly connects it to the elements of authority in Roman politics. It is precisely through this preservation that

⁴⁵ Arendt, "What is Authority?," 123.

⁴⁶ Arendt, "What is Authority?," 93.

⁴⁷ Arendt, "What is Authority?," 94.

⁴⁸ Arendt, "What is Authority?," 124.

authority was passed down. In fact, this preservation was absolutely necessary to maintain legitimate authority. As Arendt describes, “as long as this tradition was uninterrupted, authority was inviolate... .”⁴⁹

The necessary preservation of the past in tradition also serves a limiting aspect for authority. If those in authority hold the ability to augment the foundation of Roman politics, then tradition creates limits for such augmentation. To use authority in a manner that greatly breaks tradition interrupts the preservation and, therefore, renders that act of authority invalid. This is because of the dependence of authority on tradition to give it weight. This is precisely why Arendt argues that “all authority derives from [Rome’s] foundation, binding every act back to the sacred beginning of Roman history, adding, as it were, to every single moment the whole weight of the past.”⁵⁰ This “weight of the past” is the weight bestowed upon authority through tradition. Without this weight, authority does not exist for the Roman.

The profound emphasis on foundational beginnings and tradition leads Arendt to reinterpret the shape of authority provided earlier. She explains:

If one wants to relate this attitude to the hierarchical order established by authority and to visualize this hierarchy in the familiar image of the pyramid, it is as though the peak of the pyramid did not reach into the height of the sky above (or, as in Christianity, beyond) the earth, but into the depth of an earthly past.⁵¹

Here we see Arendt applying the logic of authority structures laid out earlier to the Roman order. If the source of authority for Rome’s lies in the past, then those individuals closer in time to the founding of Rome hold more authority. However, the emphasis on a specifically “earthly” past does seem to create tension between her earlier comments about the religious origins of

⁴⁹ Arendt, “What is Authority?,” 124.

⁵⁰ Arendt, “What is Authority?,” 123.

⁵¹ Arendt, “What is Authority?,” 123.

authority. If the gods' relation to humans in the *auspices* serves as the model for the relation of the senate to citizens, then it does seem like the source of authority lies beyond a merely earthly past. Indeed, Arendt directly agrees with Mommsen that "all auspices were traced back to the great sign by which the gods gave Romulus the authority to found the city."⁵² This seems to imply that authority originally came directly from the gods, and it was bestowed upon the founder and first king of Rome. This origin seems to complicate the neat separation of political elements surrounding authority, namely the separation of authority and power. It also brings Rome's origin of authority dangerously close to mythological elements criticized by Arendt in Platonic thought. These points of tension lead directly into our criticism of Arendt's interpretations and method in "What Is Authority?".

Before fully devoting our attention to criticism, it will be useful to recall Arendt's notion of commons discussed earlier in the essay. While Arendt discusses the notions of commons early on in "What Is Authority?," the theme is curiously absent from her analysis of Greek and Roman thought. This absence obscures a tension present in Arendt's method and goal. If Arendt's project is to trace the historical source of authority to help correct the loss of a common notion of authority in modernity, then it stands to reason that her method must be conducive to reestablishing a common notion of authority. However, it is my contention that Arendt's method of modeling the concept of authority solely on the basis of the Roman perspective inhibits her from establishing a common notion of authority. This broad criticism of Arendt's method along

⁵² Arendt appeals to interpretations from Theodor Mommsen's book *A History of Rome* at several points across "What Is Authority?," always in agreement. This particular quote comes from *A History of Rome*, book I, chapter 5, page 87. Arendt directly quotes this passage on page 123 of "What Is Authority?".

with a few counter arguments regarding specific details of her project will be explored in the next section.

A Brief Criticism and Alternative Approach

I propose a criticism of Arendt's "What Is Authority?" on three grounds which are telescopic in nature, moving from local issues to broad methodological concerns. On the local level, there are significant historical and textual details that pose strong counterexamples to Arendt's interpretations within the essay. While such counterexamples are present for all sections of the essay, I will restrict my attention to counterexamples relating to Arendt's most important historical source, Rome. On a broader level, the critical grounds on which Arendt dismisses alternatives to authority are curiously absent from her analysis of Rome. I will demonstrate that Rome actually fails the core requirements of authority that Arendt develops across her criticism of alternatives. Finally, on the broadest level, Arendt's method of constructing a concept of authority on the basis of a purely Roman perspective violates her own criteria for establishing common notions. Thus, her project of reestablishing a common notion of authority in the essay "What Is Authority?" is ultimately undermined by her methodology.

It is best to begin with the broad level of Arendt's core requirements which will naturally lead to more focused historical counterexamples. Throughout "What Is Authority?" Arendt develops a method of defining authority and criteria for differentiating it from unsatisfactory, functional substitutes. As has already been examined, a great deal of her essay is dedicated to showing the inadequacy of functionalist alternatives to authority in both modern political debates and classical platonic thought. In these sections Arendt develops core requirements for proper

authority which she uses as a basis for dismissing alternatives to authority. Let us examine how Rome relates to these core requirements.

Arendt claims that authority obtains obedience without violating freedom. From her criticism of Plato we see that self-evident truths, the elevation of reason, and mythological narratives that establish normative conduct all violate freedom for Arendt, as these are among her primary reasons for dismissing Plato's functional substitute. However, as alluded to earlier (p. 9), this requirement of authority creates a problem for Arendt's notion of authority in general. The problem also applies directly to her description of Rome. First, the very structure of authority entails a hierarchy which unequally distributes authority across a population. The Roman hierarchy privileged those closer to the founding of Rome. Thus, previous generations and living elders always held a higher position in the hierarchy than younger individuals. Even within the senate of Rome, elders were afforded more authority in political discussion than younger members. Thus, an inner hierarchy existed within the seat of authority for Arendt. Recall that Arendt bases her notion of freedom upon what she calls the Greek concept of equality. Under this notion equality is the essence of freedom. Individuals who are free exist amongst equals. However, this is clearly not the case in Rome based upon Arendt's description of its hierarchical structure. The Roman notion of authority appears to equally fail this requirement as the platonic substitute.

Arendt also fails to consider that the senate, the bastion of authority in her conception, historically employed reason and appeals to self-evident truths in order to form political actions. There is a wealth of philosophical and educational literature from the Roman Republican period that bears witness to this. Such major works include Cicero's *De Oratore*, Marcus Fabius

Quintilianus' *Institutio Oratoria*, and *Rhetorica ad Herennium* of disputed authorship. Each of these works emphasizes the importance of rhetoric in Roman political life and the importance of logical argumentation in rhetorical practices. Indeed, in Cicero's *De Oratore* the act of rhetorical debate in the political formation of laws is considered the height of statesmanship. The Roman emphasis upon rhetoric, debate, and logical argumentation also creates a problem for Arendt's earlier claim that authority and argumentation are incompatible (p. 9). The Roman emphasis upon rhetoric in the senate stands as a great counterexample to the incompatibility of authority and argumentation. If there is to be a notion of authority derived from the Roman political experience, then this conflict must be accounted for.

The mythological origins of Roman authority also pose a problem. Recall that Arendt dismisses Plato's use of mythological narratives as "ingenious devices to enforce obedience..." which she concludes was coercive in nature.⁵³ However, the mythic figure of Romulus brings the Roman source of authority dangerously close to the same problem. If mythological narratives are viewed as coercive devices to enforce obedience, then the mythological narrative of Rome's founding becomes suspect. Under Arendt's interpretation, the original source of authority in Rome came from the gods. From the gods it was passed down to the founder and first king Romulus who eventually bestowed it upon the senate. Here a mythological narrative serves as the source of authority. Thus, it is through mythological narrative that the Roman notion of authority ultimately obtains its original influence to enforce obedience.

The origins of Rome also provide another problem for one of Arendt's claims regarding authority. While it is true that Cicero separates power and authority in *De Legibus*, the goal of

⁵³ Arendt, "What is Authority?," 111.

this dialogue is to arrive at an understanding of the ideal order for law and society. It is inaccurate to portray Cicero as describing the actual order of Roman society with his comment regarding power and authority. Furthermore, the monarchic origins of Rome, both in the legendary figure of Romulus and in the historically verifiable kings, demonstrates that power and authority were not necessarily separate in Roman society.⁵⁴ Indeed, it is not just the origins of Rome that pose a problem for the strong separation of power and authority. In the Roman imperial period beginning with Augustus, the emperor held the highest positions of power and authority simultaneously, being the chief official of the senate, religious institutions, and military institutions. At best, the separation of power and authority only occurred for a short time during the Roman republican period. However, even here it was more in idea than practice.

With these textual and historical considerations, it is evident that Arendt's Roman conception of authority breaks down under the weight of her own criteria of criticism. It fails in many of the same aspects that lead Arendt to dismiss the substitute present in Plato's political theory. If the core requirements laid out by Arendt are consistently applied to both Roman and Platonic political thought, then both must be dismissed for many of the same reasons. Or, the core requirements must be reevaluated, providing the opportunity for both of these traditions to overcome the failure of Arendt's original requirements. This dilemma pushes us to undertake a reevaluation of the core aspects of authority which will play a significant part in the next chapter

⁵⁴ The first book of Pliny's *The Early History of Rome* titled "Rome under the Kings" provides ample examples of the mingling of power and authority, including "how Romulus obtained the sole power" through military conquest (p. 37) and how he "created a hundred senators" endowed with some of his authority (p. 40). There is also a remarkable passage about how the senate bestowed some power upon the people in a maneuver to retain authority and the dominant power in Rome (p.50). (Livy, *The Early History of Rome*, trans. Aubrey De Selincourt (New York: Penguin Group, 1971)).

of this work. However, we must first look at the ways in which the broadest level of our criticism regarding Arendt's methodology will further inform the project of our next chapter.

As has been alluded to throughout the paper, there is a broad methodological tension in "What Is Authority?". I am referring to the tension between Arendt's method of solely basing the legitimate concept of authority on the Roman perspective and her goal to reestablish an unquestionable, common notion of authority. According to Arendt this is the problem of modernity, "we can no longer fall back upon authentic and undisputable experiences common to all, the very term has become clouded by controversy and confusion."⁵⁵ In order to overcome this problem, she proposes "to reconsider what authority was historically and the source of its strength and meaning."⁵⁶ As demonstrated in our analysis, this practically amounts to returning to Rome as the sole legitimate source of real authority. This singular focus runs contrary to the process that she believes establishes a notion "common to all."⁵⁷

Recall that in *The Human Condition* Arendt describes how the commons are established phenomenologically out of human experience. They are "the reality rising out of the sum total of aspects presented by one object to a multitude of spectators."⁵⁸ The reality of the commons is clouded and confused without this foundation. Eventually the commons will vanish from the world without the sum total aspects and multitude of spectators. As Arendt says, "the end of the common world has come when it is seen only under one aspect and is permitted to present itself in only one perspective."⁵⁹ However, this is precisely the condition in which Arendt places

⁵⁵ Arendt, "What is Authority?," 91.

⁵⁶ Arendt, "What is Authority?," 92.

⁵⁷ Arendt, "What is Authority?," 91.

⁵⁸ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 57.

⁵⁹ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 58.

authority when she only permits it to present itself under the Roman aspect and Roman perspective. Despite all the grandeur and glory of Rome, the Roman perspective is merely one perspective, and the Roman aspect of authority is merely one aspect. Thus, Arendt's methodology of modeling the concept of legitimate authority on the basis of one historical example runs contrary to her own basis for establishing a common notion of authority.

I propose an alternative method for establishing a common notion of authority, a notion that more conclusively accounts for the authentic experiences of authority common to all. Instead of modeling a notion of authority on the basis of a single historical example, we ought to follow Arendt's phenomenological basis for establishing commons. In order to establish a common notion of authority we must view it under diverse aspects and a multitude of perspectives. This can best be accomplished by evaluating authority from other cultural perspectives outside the linguistic and historical tradition of Rome. An even greater diversity of perspectives can be accomplished by pushing beyond the western-centric scope of Arendt's project. For this reason, I propose an examination of cultural perspectives on authority that come from non-western linguistic families and political traditions. Then, in true phenomenological fashion, the sum total of aspects of authority revealed from the diverse cultural perspectives can be used to construct a common notion of authority. Such a common notion developed from diverse cultural perspectives is uniquely suited to overcome the crisis of commons in modern globalized society. Indeed, it seems highly likely that the combination of globalization and the lack of notions constructed from a plurality of cultural perspectives is a key contributor to the loss of commons in modernity described by Arendt.

The proposed alternative project is in danger of committing at least one major error illuminated in Arendt's work. While I have emphasized the multiplicity of perspectives necessary for common notions, there is another equally important aspect of establishing common notions, the presence of a single object. A multiplicity of perspectives does not contribute to the establishment of a common notion if each viewer is observing a different object. Thus, it is well and fine to explore different cultural perspectives on things *similar* to authority, but these similar objects are in no way the same thing referred to by the Roman term *auctoritas*. The alternative project will bring us no closer to a common notion of authority if each cultural perspective is focused on similar phenomena to authority; rather, each culture must focus upon the same phenomenon. Several important comments may be offered in response to this danger.

It is equally intellectually dangerous to conflate terms, concepts, and phenomena. A single phenomenon may give rise to many concepts, and a single concept may be expressed through many different terms. Most would agree that the terms black, *Schwarz*, and *'aswad* all refer to a single perceptive experience. Yet, they all carry different culturally significant conceptual values for each of the respective languages.⁶⁰ The same could be said for authority. Indeed, Arendt herself implicitly accepts this to a degree by acknowledging that the English term authority and the Latin term *auctoritas* properly have the same phenomenon of reference. My alternative method of conceptualizing authority simply pushes the linguistic scope beyond the rigid western boundaries, examining other linguistic terms and cultural traditions that hold the same reference.

⁶⁰ Here I am assuming a culturally specific adaptation of Gottlob Frege's notion of linguistic sense as presented in "Sense and Reference." Under this notion, different linguistic terms might have the same referent while each contains a unique nuanced meaning. This latter aspect is what Frege calls the "sense" of a term.

There is a paradoxical tension generally present in any attempt to construct a conceptual definition based upon historical phenomena. In order to conceive of a definition one must carefully analyze the relevant historical phenomena. Yet, in the act of choosing which historical phenomena are relevant there is already a sense of definition present. One must have an idea of what is being sought before reasonably attempting to find it. In this case, it seems that we must already have an understanding of what authority is before looking for historical examples of it. But if we already have an understanding of what authority is, then why consult historical examples in order to establish a conceptual definition? Perhaps it is best to understand historical analysis as a refining process. We might have a vague idea of what authority is, but the close examination of historical examples can help to clarify and sharpen our understanding. In this process we want to avoid rigidly imposing our understanding of authority too harshly upon historical examples. This will only lead to such a strict criteria that even the most worthy examples are disqualified, as I argue Arendt's criteria does for Rome. Rather, our understanding ought to guide us to relevant historical phenomena, then we ought to humbly allow the phenomena to reshape our understanding. In this way, we place priority on the phenomenon in accordance with phenomenological tradition.

It is also worth noting that while Rome may appear like the obvious origin of authority in the western tradition, there are cultures and civilizations prior to and apart from Rome that display many of the characteristics of authority described by Arendt. If these characteristics are sufficient to denote the presence of authority, then other cultural phenomena that embody them must contain authority in some form. Thus, the same object of reference is present across cultural perspectives that share the key characteristics of authority described by Arendt. However, we

must not forget that under our evaluation even Rome failed many of Arendt's key characteristics of authority. With this in mind, we might conclude that the characteristics described by Arendt are enough to alert us to the presence of authority as she describes it, but they should not be taken as binding regulations for the phenomenon of authority. This is why in the next chapter of this work we will reevaluate the core aspects of authority, taking into consideration what we've learned from Arendt's analysis and the disconfirming counterexamples of our analysis along with a wider scope containing an entirely different cultural perspective on authority.

Much about the nature of authority and approaches to understanding it has been revealed by Arendt's analysis. Her analysis of Plato and Rome serve to underscore some of the key dynamics of authority and obedience. Despite the criticism leveled against certain aspects of "What Is Authority?", the alternative project which I propose is actually deeply formed by Arendt's work. Instead of viewing it as an attempt to do away with Arendt's project, one might view it as an adaptation and expansion of Arendt's project. The alternative approach retains the same purpose of Arendt's project, establishing a common notion of authority. In this regard, the heart of Arendt's work remains. We are still concerned with the crisis of commons that defined modernity in Arendt's understanding. The next chapter of this work will reflect this Arendtian concern, tracing other elements of authority that may help address this problem.

Chapter Two

By stepping outside the western scope of Arendt's original project and examining one of the great political traditions of eastern Asia we can take a decisive step toward developing a common, global notion of authority. Confucius, one philosopher from this great tradition, offers a unique philosophical perspective on the moral nature of authority that is not present in Arendt's analysis of the Roman tradition. In order to understand Confucius' contribution to our project, we will first explore his historical and linguistic context. The vast wealth of literature and cultural traditions of any civilization would pose an impossible amount of material to cover within the limits of this essay. Such limits of coverage are further emphasized in the case of a civilization as old and enduring as that of China. In order to focus the analysis of this chapter upon a more moderate goal, we shall limit our historical examination to the way early traditions in the Western Zhou dynasty relate Confucius' thought. We shall also limit our textual analysis of Confucius' own work to the *Analects*.

While Confucius' *Analects* are by no means the only relevant source to consider in the pursuit of understanding Classical Chinese notions of authority, this text is one of the earliest and most widely regarded contributions to philosophical literature in this cultural tradition. Further, Confucius' influence can be traced across dozens of major schools of thought and many important scholars across Chinese history—some of which we will draw upon in order to better understand Confucius' notion of authority. For these reasons, the *Analects* of Confucius will provide the sufficient material to lay the foundation for a more common understanding of authority.

Historical Background

It is important to consider early traditions regarding the origins of Chinese civilization and the historical context of Confucius' life in order to properly understand the significance of his philosophy. Like Rome, the origins of political order in China are steeped in legendary narratives. Prehistoric Chinese tradition holds that civilization began and developed under the guidance of a series of sages, who are collectively referred to as the Three Sovereigns and Five Emperors.⁶¹ Rather than focusing on the founding of a single city, these semi-divine rulers are said to have instructed humanity in the skills and arts necessary to establish an entire civilizations and dynasties. These instructions range from survival practices like teaching people to hunt, farm, and develop medicine to the creation of complex institutions like marriage, judicial systems, and military organization.⁶² The earliest traditions on record hold that these legendary figures raised the Chinese people out of a primitive condition by endowing them with technology, rituals, and culture. The importance of these latter two, rituals and culture, endure through early historical records and play important roles in Confucian thought.

The legendary dynasties of prehistoric China eventually gave way to the first historically documented dynasties, the Shang dynasty and the Zhou dynasty. The first period of the Zhou dynasty, often referred to as the Western Zhou dynasty, is particularly important for our purposes. Remarkably, the Western Zhou dynasty actually predates Rome.⁶³ Some of the earliest concepts relating to political authority are revealed within surviving documents from this period. In a

⁶¹ Bryan W. Van Norden, *Introduction to Classical Chinese Philosophy*. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2011), 2.

⁶² Van Norden, *Introduction to Classical Chinese Philosophy* 3-4.

⁶³ The historical tradition of Livy dates the founding of Rome in 753 BCE. However, the period emphasized by Arendt in which Rome was considered a republic spans from 509 to 27 BCE. In contrast, The Western Zhou dynasty spanned from 1040-771 BCE. (Van Norden, *Introduction to Classical Chinese Philosophy*, 14).

document that substantiates the rise of the Zhou dynasty and its authority to replace the Shang dynasty, we see a philosophically nuanced approach to governmental structures and the nature of history. The document details how the previous dynasty was granted the “Mandate of Heaven” (tiānmìng 天命) due to the rulers’ obedience to Heaven, but in the course of time there arose rulers who were no longer obedient to Heaven.⁶⁴ The document describes how the final ruler of the Shang dynasty “proceeded in such a way as at last to keep the wise in obscurity and the vicious in office.”⁶⁵ In contrast to this vicious ruler stands King Wen, the first Zhou ruler, who made “bright his Virtue (de 德)... He appointed those worthy of appointment and revered those worthy of reverence.”⁶⁶ Due to King Wen’s Virtue, he was given a charge by Heaven “to exterminate the great dynasty of Shang and receive its great mandate, so that various states belonging to it and their peoples were brought to an orderly condition.”⁶⁷

There are several important aspects of this document for our purposes. First, the key terms of “Heaven” (tiān 天), “Mandate of Heaven” (tiānmìng 天命), and “Virtue” (de 德). The use of “Heaven” varies with historical period and individual thinkers, but in the Western Zhou dynasty the term most commonly refers to “a higher power that is thought of more or less anthropomorphically.”⁶⁸ Such anthropomorphisms are made clear by volitional and humane activity throughout the documents of the time. Apart from Heaven commanding the obedience of kings and choosing on whom to bestow its mandate, Heaven also has “compassion on the people” and rejects vicious rulers.⁶⁹ Indeed, the term “Mandate of Heaven” greatly relates to

⁶⁴ Van Norden, *Introduction to Classical Chinese Philosophy*, 8.

⁶⁵ Van Norden, *Introduction to Classical Chinese Philosophy*, 7.

⁶⁶ Van Norden, *Introduction to Classical Chinese Philosophy*, 7.

⁶⁷ Van Norden, *Introduction to Classical Chinese Philosophy*, 7.

⁶⁸ Van Norden, *Introduction to Classical Chinese Philosophy*, 8.

⁶⁹ Van Norden, *Introduction to Classical Chinese Philosophy*, 7.

these activities. It is through conferring the Mandate of Heaven upon a ruler that a dynasty is born. In this regard the Mandate of Heaven refers to the act of Heaven appointing a legitimate ruler or authority figure over a population. Here we see a sort of transcendent or extramundane source of authority. As long as the individuals within a dynasty remain obedient to Heaven, the mandate passes from one generation to the next. However, as the Zhou document reveals, the mandate may be revoked and given to another individual who will found a new dynasty.

The concept of “Virtue” (de 德) plays a key role in an individual’s relationship to Heaven and the possession of Heaven’s mandate. As we see with the final Shang ruler, it is through the proliferation of vice and disobedience to Heaven that the mandate is lost. Conversely, King Wen is given the Mandate of Heaven precisely upon the basis of “his Virtue.”⁷⁰ In this context the term Virtue refers to a sort of “ethical charisma” which naturally enables a person to bring order to the world around him.⁷¹ Here we find another important term for understanding authority. If the Mandate of Heaven grants a dynasty legitimate rulership, then Virtue is the precondition to such legitimacy. It is also the limit of such legitimacy, as a dynasty will lose the Mandate of Heaven upon losing its Virtue. One of the essential aspects of Virtue is obedience to Heaven, which reveals the foundation of an important relationship in Classical Chinese thought. It is through obedience to Heaven and the development of Virtue that order is brought into the world. As shall be demonstrated, the integral relationship between Heaven, Virtue, and order plays a key role in the philosophy of Confucius. However, the use of these terms and the foundation of

⁷⁰ Van Norden, *Introduction to Classical Chinese Philosophy*, 7.

⁷¹ Van Norden, *Introduction to Classical Chinese Philosophy*, 8.

this relationship come from the Zhou Dynasty and predate Confucius.⁷² When Confucius uses these terms he intentionally draws upon the Zhou tradition and arguably develops his philosophy around these notions.

There is one final historical consideration necessary to situate Confucius before directly focusing on his philosophy. While the three terms discussed above play key roles in establishing the Zhou and Confucian notions of authority, none of these terms directly translates to authority. There is in fact a different term that scholars translate most directly to authority. Huang Weijia argues that “The character 权 (quán) is the ultimate symbol for power and authority in Chinese. Such power, or 权力 (quánli), may stem from an incredible amount of wealth or prestige and reputation.”⁷³ Weijia further argues that if we follow the root character back to its historical uses, then we come across another important term. “With the same root, the word 权衡 (quánhéng) originally referred to the sliding weight of the steelyard.”⁷⁴ He argues that due to the authoritative or standardized measurement of this instrument, it became a common metaphor for authority and gave rise to the Chinese linguistic tradition surrounding authority across the ages.

Interestingly, neither the documents from the Western Zhou dynasty nor the *Analects* of Confucius emphasize these terms. Instead, both of these sources of literature focus upon the notion of Virtue. As was already mentioned in the context of Zhou documents, it is Virtue which provides the foundation for receiving the Mandate of Heaven and, with it, the legitimate right to rule. As will be demonstrated, Confucius also follows this tradition. It is my argument that the

⁷² According to translator and scholar Edward Slingerland the use of the term “Virtue” stretches even further back to the Shang dynasty. (Edward Slingerland, introduction to *Analects* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2013), xvii.)

⁷³ Huang Weijia, “The Right to Rule” China Daily, 12 May 2014, Accessed 27 Feb. 2022, europe.chinadaily.com.cn/epaper/2014-12/05/content_19028828.htm.

⁷⁴ Weijia, “The Right to Rule.”

explicit departure from the use of power or 权力 (quánli) and the intentional use of Virtue (de 德) distinguishes Confucius' notion of authority as fundamentally moral in nature. Sections from the *Analects* will serve to illuminate the specific nature Confucius envisioned.

The skeptical reader may still wonder why we ought to consider this notion of Virtue as having to do with authority at all. Does this not seem like imposing a foreign category onto the original language and concept? As will be demonstrated, Confucius' notion of Virtue directly parallels the same political experience described by Hannah Arendt regarding authority. She states that authority brings about “an obedience in which men retain their freedom.”⁷⁵ I will argue that Confucius' notion of Virtue refers to the same political experience, but provides additional insights into the nature of this political experience. Further, due to the fact that both the Western Zhou dynasty and Confucius used the term Virtue to refer to this experience hundreds of years before Republican Rome, the basis on which Arendt founds this political experience, gives the term at least equal claim to naming the experience—if not an even greater claim.

Analysis of Confucius' *Analects*

According to historical tradition, Confucius lived from 551–479 BCE under the Eastern Zhou dynasty.⁷⁶ The *Analects* records the sayings of the Master, Confucius, and his conversations with disciples and historical figures from the period. The sayings and conversations are organized into twenty books. Some books more clearly center around a single theme while others

⁷⁵ Hannah Arendt, “What is Authority?,” in *Between Past and Future* (New York: Penguin Group, 2006), 105.

⁷⁶ The Eastern Zhou dynasty, which immediately followed the Western Zhou dynasty, spanned from 770–221 BCE. (Van Norden, *Introduction to Classical Chinese Philosophy*, 14).

are loosely connected by occasion or obscurely related topics. There are remarks across almost every book that relate to Virtue, rulership, and harmony with Heaven. We shall explore a few key entries that enable us to establish the Confucian notion of authority.

At the beginning of the second book of the *Analects*, Confucius offers the paradigmatic metaphor for rulership through Virtue. He says, “One who rules through the power of Virtue is analogous to the Pole Star: it simply remains in its place and receives the homage of the myriad lesser stars.”⁷⁷ A clear influence from the Western Zhou can be seen here. The strong associations between Heaven, light, and Virtue that are present in earlier historical documents which describe king Wei making “bright his Virtue” are also on full display in this analogy.⁷⁸ In this manner, Confucius carefully retains the traditional connection between Heaven and Virtue. If one desires to see how Virtue orders the world, then he only needs to look to Heaven for the original model—quite literally the stars, or heavenly bodies, in this example. However, Confucius moves beyond merely transmitting traditional notions of authority in this quote. He also introduces a robustly developed version of a concept that is only hinted at in Western Zhou documents. Notice that the Pole Star is remarkably inactive in the analogy. It does not actively enforce order upon the lesser stars; rather, its ordering influence is brought about simply by remaining fixed and being brighter than the other stars. Confucius draws his disciples attention to how Virtue works in the same manner.

The influence that Confucius refers to in the quote above comes from the state of “non-doing” (wuwei 無為). According to Edward Slingerland, while wuwei literally translates to

⁷⁷ Confucius, *Analects*, 8.

⁷⁸ Van Norden, *Introduction to Classical Chinese Philosophy*, 7.

“non-doing,” it may be better understood as “effortless action.”⁷⁹ This is to say that the term denotes when an action “is spontaneous, unselfconscious, and perfectly efficacious.”⁸⁰ In this sense wuwei represents a state of harmonious, natural order which stands in direct contrast to conscious, forced action. In the context of the example above, the Pole Star accomplishes the responsibility of rulership by counterintuitively not focusing on rulership and not enforcing order upon the lesser stars. Instead, the Pole Star spontaneously brings about harmonious order in lesser stars simply by remaining in a state of greater Virtue than lesser stars. Thus, with the concept of wuwei Confucius advocates for a method of rulership that decentralizes the conventional activities of ruling. He replaces these activities with the careful cultivation of Virtue. It is on the basis of Virtue that a ruler will succeed or fail.

Confucius, a teacher who consistently values practicality within the *Analects*, moves beyond analogies and speaks about the direct application of these principles in stately affairs. He explains:

If you try to guide the common people with coercive regulations and keep them in line with punishments, the common people will become evasive and will have no sense of shame. If, however, you guide them with Virtue, and keep them in line by means of ritual, the people will have a sense of shame and will rectify themselves.⁸¹

There are several important details contained within this quote. First, notice the language. Rather than using the typical language of power, Confucius speaks about *guiding* the common people. This description of leadership frames the position of authority in a new light. An individual with true authority does not impose order upon the common people through “coercive regulations.”⁸²

⁷⁹ Edward Slingerland, introduction to *Analects*, xix.

⁸⁰ Edward Slingerland, introduction to *Analects*, xix.

⁸¹ Confucius, *Analects*, 8.

⁸² Confucius, *Analects*, 8.

Instead, an individual with true authority guides the common people through the demonstration of his own Virtue. Again, we see a reference to the Pole Star. The Pole Star does not command, but provides a fixed point which serves as a guiding standard for others.

This quote also contains the binary division of internal and external order which runs throughout Confucianism. This division is an important key for understanding how Virtue establishes the Confucian notion of authority. Coercive and forceful actions only serve to impose an illusion of authority. Rulership through these means does not penetrate into the internal life of the common people. As Confucius says, they will merely “become evasive” to external force and never develop an internal “sense of shame.”⁸³ It is through the exemplification of one’s own Virtue and the careful observations of the rituals, a practice which we will see greatly relates to cultivating Virtue, that a ruler can establish order at the internal level of the common people. Establishing order at this level exemplifies the wuwei state, as individuals “rectify themselves” purely based upon the ruler's guiding example.⁸⁴ Thus, coercive power without Virtue does not establish the true authority which brings harmony between the internal and external elements of society.

Other entries within the *Analects* focus on the dual nature of Virtue source and development. Confucius commonly attributes an individual's Virtue and its development directly to Heaven. Nowhere is this clearer than when Confucius takes himself for example. He tells his disciples that “it is Heaven itself that has endowed me with Virtue...”⁸⁵ By establishing Heaven as the source of his own Virtue, Confucius effectively draws upon the Western Zhou tradition of

⁸³ Confucius, *Analects*, 8.

⁸⁴ Confucius, *Analects*, 8.

⁸⁵ Confucius, *Analects*, 71.

the Mandate of Heaven. If Heaven is the source of Virtue, then an individual's Virtue becomes a sign of one's relation toward Heaven. Those who exemplify great Virtue can be said to possess the favor of Heaven and claim to its mandate. Thus, the Confucian notion of Virtue effectively establishes authority on the basis of one's relation toward Heaven.

There are times when Confucius emphasizes the role of the individual in developing Virtue. When asked by one of his disciples about how to accumulate Virtue, Confucius replied "Make it your guiding principle to be dutiful and trustworthy, and always move in the direction of what is right. This is what it means to accumulate Virtue."⁸⁶ Confucius gives us two important details for understanding Virtue here. The first is that Virtue is not arbitrarily bestowed by Heaven and passively received by an individual. Rather, an individual can accumulate Virtue based upon one's behavior. Second, the behavior that leads to the accumulation of Virtue directly connects to Confucius' moral teachings. The charge to be dutiful and trustworthy can be found throughout the *Analects*. These are two fundamental characteristics of the moral individual. By integrating these ideals into the individual's development of Virtue, Confucius crafts a moral basis for authority.

One might wonder how an individual's ability to accumulate Virtue is compatible with the statement from earlier in which Heaven is the source of Virtue. Confucius gives us a legendary example which reveals the harmonious relationship between the two statements. He directs his disciples' attention to one of the Three Sovereigns and Five Emperors from early Chinese tradition. Confucius states, "How great was Yao as a ruler! So majestic! It is Heaven that is great, and it was Yao who modeled himself upon it."⁸⁷ Again, we see that Heaven is the source

⁸⁶ Confucius, *Analects*, 130.

⁸⁷ Confucius, *Analects*, 84.

in this example. By demonstrating this point in reference to one of the legendary rulers of early China, Confucius is boldly stating that Heaven is the source of Virtue and greatness even in the case of an absolute exemplar of Confucian ideals. Furthermore, it demonstrates that the exemplar shares in this greatness only to the degree that he models himself upon Heaven. This is the harmonious relationship between an individual's accumulation of Virtue and Heaven as Virtue's source. An individual accumulates Virtue by properly ordering oneself upon the model of Heaven. Then, once an individual has conformed to the model of Heaven, Heaven's favor and Virtue will flow naturally toward him.

Traditional Social Hierarchy and Authority

There is an element of social tradition in Confucianism that complicates the discussion of authority. Some passages in the *Analects* draw attention to the structural hierarchy of Chinese antiquity. Confucius often emphasizes the importance of this hierarchy in maintaining order and harmony in society. In one entry Confucius is asked about the proper way to govern by Duke Jing, currently charged with the task of governing the province of Qi. Confucius responds with "Let the lord be a true lord, the ministers true ministers, the fathers true fathers, and the sons true sons."⁸⁸ Many scholars have interpreted this remark as emphasizing the demarcated limits of social hierarchy. Under this light, the passage seems to imply that the proper way to establish order is through a rigid hierarchy in which members focus upon perfecting their allotted roles rather than developing skills that provide upward mobility across hierarchical levels. Furthermore, the latter portion of Confucius' response demonstrates that the hierarchy stretches

⁸⁸ Confucius, *Analects*, 130.

across governmental aspects of society into familial relations. It appears that order relies upon this hierarchy at every level of society.

The strict separation involved in the social hierarchy of the time receives more explicit validation elsewhere when Confucius tells his disciples, “Do not discuss matters of government policy that do not fall within the scope of your official duties.”⁸⁹ Under this principle it becomes disrespectful, and perhaps even immoral, for one to discuss matters of government that fall under the responsibility of individuals higher in the hierarchy. If we extend this to the familial level mentioned earlier, then it appears that there is a strict authoritarian order built into the traditional hierarchy of society. Following Confucius' example, we might say that ministers must not question the authority of their lords, nor sons the authority of their fathers. However, if this is the case, then one might wonder what role is left for Virtue in the Confucian notion of authority. If the traditional hierarchy of society establishes unquestionable positions of authority, then how does Virtue relate to this hierarchy?

The tension between the external enforcement of social hierarchy and the internal fostering of Virtue has echoed throughout the history of Confucianism. This tension is the one of the central points of disagreement between later Confucian philosophers Mengzi and Xunzi. Following the lines of dispute between these two philosophers, many scholars have argued that the key to understanding this tension lies in differing views regarding human nature. If human nature is fundamentally good as Mengzi argues, then one need only encourage Virtue in order to establish and maintain order. Yet, if “people’s nature is bad, and their goodness is a matter of deliberate effort,” then a rigid social hierarchy becomes essential to order.⁹⁰ While I acknowledge

⁸⁹ Confucius, *Analects*, 82.

⁹⁰ Van Norden, *Introduction to Classical Chinese Philosophy*, 164.

that this disagreement plays a central role in the writings of later Confucian scholars regarding the relationship between Virtue and externally enforced social hierarchy, I want to offer an alternative approach to this issue by considering particular remarks within the *Analects*, analyzing the relationship between remarks, and drawing upon the scholarship of Joseph and Elton Chan.

One way to better understand the tension between social hierarchy and Virtue in establishing authority can be learned from recognizing the literary characteristics of the *Analects*. For many readers it may be tempting to read the *Analects* in the mode of modern analytic philosophy, expecting each entry to fit together with mathematical precision. However, there are good reasons to avoid this temptation. It is common in the *Analects* and other classical wisdom literature to present general teachings that are better understood as guiding principles rather than mathematical axioms. Further, the *Analects* teach through dialogue in which the interlocutor's identity holds great significance.

A set of conversations between Confucius and three of his disciples demonstrates both of the characteristics of wisdom literature well. Confucius is asked the same question, “upon learning of something that needs to be done, should one immediately take care of it?” by two disciples at different times of the day.⁹¹ To the first disciple, Zulu, he replies “As long as one’s father and elder brothers are still alive, how could one possibly take care of it immediately?”⁹² This seems to reinforce the importance of the social hierarchy. A student’s father and older brothers hold a higher social station than him. Thus, he must not pursue a course of action without their consent. However, to the second disciple, Ran Qiu, Confucius replies “Upon

⁹¹ Confucius, *Analects*, 119.

⁹² Confucius, *Analects*, 119.

learning of it, you should immediately take care of it.”⁹³ A third disciple, Zihua, observes both of these exchanges and questions Confucius about the blatant contradiction. Confucius responds, “Ran Qiu is overly cautious, and so I wished to urge him on. Zilu, on the other hand, is too impetuous, and so I sought to hold him back.”⁹⁴ Thus, this entry presents a prime example of how Confucius' teachings, while they may appear like general principles, often must be understood within the context of those involved in each conversation.

If we keep in mind the importance of the speaker's identity in the *Analects*, and return to our earlier example (p.10) regarding social hierarchy, then we can begin to better understand Confucius' reply. Confucius' advice that each person ought to focus upon truly fulfilling their current station in the hierarchy of society was given to the Duke Jing of Qi. According to Edward Slingerland, Confucius visited the duke when his province was in a state of chaos, as “his nominal minister, Chen Qi, had usurped control of the state.”⁹⁵ This means that the duke's court fell into disorder through the political maneuvering of someone lower on the dynastic hierarchy. Confucius' response takes on a new meaning under these contextual details. Confucius' comment was likely not meant to restrict the duke from fostering Virtue above his station in the hierarchy; rather, the purpose of the comment was to draw the duke's attention to his lack of Virtue and how this makes him responsible in the matter. This interpretation of the passage is further supported by examining the surrounding entries within the same book. Both the passage immediately preceding the duke's inquiry and the passage directly following relay conversations regarding the accumulation and enactment of Virtue.

⁹³ Confucius, *Analects*, 119.

⁹⁴ Confucius, *Analects*, 120.

⁹⁵ Confucius, *Analects*, 131.

There is another passage a few entries after the duke's inquiry which provides further insight into the relationship between the social hierarchy and Virtue. In this instance Ji Kangzi, one of the heads of the leading family which usurped rule in Confucius' home province of Lu, presents the master a supposed moral dilemma, "If I were to execute those who lacked the Way in order to advance those who possessed the Way, how would that be?"⁹⁶ Confucius cuts directly to the heart of the matter and replies,

In your governing, Sir, what need is there for executions? If you desire goodness, then the common people will be good. The Virtue of a gentleman is like the wind, and the Virtue of a petty person is like the grass—when the wind moves over the grass, the grass is sure to bend.⁹⁷

With the identity of the questioner in mind, we might understand this response as emphasizing a few important details. First, it emphasizes that external force will never grant true authority. Ji Kangzi was a member of the de facto ruling family, but his family had usurped rulership and held no legitimate claim. As Ji Kangzi's family rose to power the province descended into disorder. With this information we can see Ji Kangzi's question as a facetious request for advice on how to bring the province back into order. Confucius' reply emphasizes that Ji Kangzi's family does not belong in this position. They have no true authority despite occupying the ruling office. Confucius emphasizes this not by appealing to the social hierarchy of legitimate rule, but by directly appealing to Virtue.

The metaphor Confucius uses in his reply to Ji Kangzi actually provides a blueprint for the proper harmony between social hierarchy and Virtue. The comparison of the gentleman's Virtue to the petty person's being like the wind that bends the grass offers an ideal relation that

⁹⁶ Confucius, *Analects*, 134.

⁹⁷ Confucius, *Analects*, 134.

can exist within the social hierarchy. Confucius uses the metaphor to propose that an individual with greater Virtue will naturally have a stronger influence over others with lesser Virtue. In an ideal society this dynamic would directly map onto the social hierarchy. Individuals higher on the hierarchy would possess greater Virtue than those below them. The social hierarchy would exist in total harmony with the greatest exemplar of Virtue in the highest position and lesser exemplars filling subordinate roles. Thus, true authority is found in Virtue in the ideal order. However, this is not merely a remote ideal for Confucius. As the metaphor suggests, the dynamic brought by Virtue actually brings about this ideal order in the same natural fashion that wind bends grass.

There are other entries within the *Analects* in which Confucius subtly prioritizes an individual's Virtue over his given position within the social hierarchy. One passage reads:

The Master said, "Those of my disciples who were first to enter into study of ritual and music with me were simple rustics, whereas those who entered later were aristocrats. If I had to employ them [in public office], I would prefer the first."⁹⁸

Here Confucius seems to imply that the "rustic" disciples, people lower in the social hierarchy, outperform natural-born aristocrats in the study of ritual and music, two fundamental practices of a gentleman in the cultivation of Virtue. Thus, through their study and application of the arts surrounding Virtue, they are more fit to occupy public office than those merely born with claim to the role. Notice, however, that Confucius does not go so far as to say that these preferable disciples "ought" to take the public offices of others. By stating the final sentence as a hypothetical, Confucius emphasizes the role of Virtue without entirely overriding or abolishing the social hierarchy.

⁹⁸ Confucius, *Analects*, 111.

There are some occasions when Confucius shows how an individual's Virtue might lead him to breach the order of social hierarchy. Book Fourteen contains several examples of this. Many of the passages in this book relay Confucius recounting historical instances of political corruption in which subordinates assassinate their superiors or usurp offices beyond their rank. At one point the conversation turns to the rise of the current ruling families who usurped the public offices in Confucius' home province of Lu. After Confucius demonstrates the lack of Virtue in the leadership of these corrupt families, one of his disciples, Zilu, asks about properly serving one's lord. Confucius replies, "Do not deceive him. Oppose him openly."⁹⁹ In context this is a bold statement. Zilu is one of Confucius' earliest disciples who serves as a military officer under the corrupt families being discussed.¹⁰⁰ There are two common ways of interpreting this statement in light of Zilu's position. It's possible that Confucius is subtly implying that corrupt politicians who lack Virtue should be openly opposed through military means. A more moderate interpretation places less emphasis on Zilu's position as a military officer, and takes Confucius' statement to mean that a subordinate can openly contradict a superior verbally when his superior is lacking in Virtue.

Regardless of which interpretation we take, the instance with Zilu demonstrates that there is a certain degree of respect that one ought to have for the position itself within the social hierarchy, but ultimately the authority of the position is greatly reliant upon the Virtue of the individual occupying it. The respect for the position itself dictates that the subordinate, in this case Zilu, should not deceptively work against his superior. However, the lack of Virtue on the part of Zilu's superior does take away the authority of the one holding position. That is to say, the

⁹⁹ Confucius, *Analects*, 163.

¹⁰⁰ Confucius, *Analects*, 246.

lack of Virtue nullifies the superior's ability to exact obedience. Thus, Confucius states that Zilu can "oppose [his superior] openly."¹⁰¹

There is only one instance in the *Analects* in which Confucius seems to completely override the social hierarchy. In Book Fifteen, a book composed almost entirely of Confucius' sayings without any dialogue context, one entry reads, "When it comes to being Good, defer to no one, not even your teacher."¹⁰² Here there are clear limits set upon the obligation to defer to or obey one's superior. The key to this limit is moral in nature. The character ren (仁), which Slingerland translates as "Good" in this quote, refers to the highest Confucian virtue.¹⁰³ According to Slingerland, this term denotes a special aspect of Virtue which refers to "empathy or kindness between human beings—especially for a ruler toward his subjects... ." Under this light the quote becomes a conclusive remark regarding the relationship between Virtue and social hierarchy. The careful cultivation of ren, which is embodied in the effortless action of Virtue, overrides all obligations of social hierarchy. Ultimately, when the social hierarchy comes into conflict with Goodness and Virtue, it is the moral quality of Virtue which has final authority.

Contemporary Confucian Perspective

Joseph Chan and Elton Chan, two modern scholars renowned for contemporary applications of Confucianism, offer further insight into how authority relates to the social hierarchy and institutional structures. Echoing the position of earlier Confucian scholars, they argue that "External Forces such as sheer power will not give a ruler true authority. Even an

¹⁰¹ Confucius, *Analects*, 163.

¹⁰² Confucius, *Analects*, 188.

¹⁰³ Confucius, *Analects*, 238.

institutional office of authority cannot guarantee the office-holder true authority.”¹⁰⁴ Joseph and Elton believe that this reflects a unique commitment for Confucianism. It leads Confucians to prioritize the virtuous characteristics in rulers and deem institutional structure as secondary—similar to the way Virtue outweighs official position in the case of Zilu explored above.¹⁰⁵ Joseph offers a more mundane explanation for this commitment. He argues that, “Confucians understand that institutions are formed by rules that, in themselves, are nothing but words. Without the faithful compliance of incumbents, and adequate enforcement, the rules imposed by institutions may be easily circumvented or manipulated.”¹⁰⁶

Under Joseph and Elton’s analysis, there is an inherent reservation on the part of most Confucians to trust the efficacy of institutional structure. As they conclude, this decisively shapes the political landscape:

Thus, the key to good governance is not to focus on refining and perfecting institutions, something Confucians deem impossible, but to identify, select, and promote virtuous people as leaders and equip them with a wide range of discretionary powers to correct matters as they see fit.¹⁰⁷

Again, it is the virtue of an individual that provides the basis for discretionary powers here rather than the institutional or social position. A person is identified, selected, and promoted on the basis of Virtue alone. This establishes an individual's Virtue as prior to and necessary for legitimate institutional authority. According to Joseph and Elton, the institutional component simply mirrors the dynamics of Virtue in imperfect and less effective ways.

¹⁰⁴ Joseph Chan, Elton Chan, “Confucianism” in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Leadership*, ed. R. A. W. Rhodes and Paul ‘t Hart (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 58.

¹⁰⁵ Chan, Chan, “Confucianism,” 60.

¹⁰⁶ Chan, Chan, “Confucianism,” 59.

¹⁰⁷ Chan, Chan, “Confucianism,” 60.

Joseph and Elton offer an additional reason for the personal focus of Confucian notions of authority. They explain,

From a Confucian perspective, when the people follow their leaders, they are not merely taking orders from them but also deferring to their judgment; and they do so because they believe that the leaders are more virtuous than they are themselves. The leaders, therefore, exercise not only an institutional authority over their followers, but also a moral one.¹⁰⁸

We might understand this statement as expressing the same observation as the wind and grass analogy in the *Analects* explored earlier, only this time it is in contemporary terms. Under this interpretation, Joseph and Elton offer one way to understand precisely how a ruler's Virtue brings about obedience. It is through the willing deferment of judgment from one individual to another more virtuous individual that authority is established on this view. As Joseph and Elton justifiably conclude, this makes the Confucian notion of authority inherently moral in nature. In deferring to the ruler's judgment, the people recognize and follow the moral conduct of the ruler. This places responsibility upon the rulers for the moral conduct of their subordinates.

The notion of authority based upon Virtue does not rely upon, but rather serves to establish the social or institutional hierarchy that accompanies authority in Confucian thought. That is to say that authority does not come from an individual's position within the social hierarchy. Instead, authority comes from an individual's Virtue which naturally establishes a hierarchical structure of influence in which an individual's position in the hierarchy is determined by his Virtue relative to others. The social structure of society or the hierarchy within institutions derive legitimacy from this natural flow of Virtue, and they maintain legitimacy insofar as they reflect the natural order established by Virtue.

¹⁰⁸ Chan, Chan, "Confucianism," 63.

Based upon our analysis of the *Analects*, Virtue's relation to social hierarchy, and the scholarship of Joseph Chan and Elton Chan, we are now in a position to sketch the outline of Confucius' notion of authority. From the *Analects* we can see that an individual receives the Mandate of Heaven, or the right to rule, on the basis of one's Virtue. That is to say, an individual's Virtue establishes his authority on the basis of his relation toward Heaven. The development of one's Virtue and the proper relation toward Heaven is characterized by the Confucian moral characteristics of dutifulness and trustworthiness. The moral nature of Virtue is fundamental to the Confucian notion of authority. Under the Confucian understanding, one may quite literally gain or lose authority based upon moral conduct. This is integral to the notion of Virtue as authority. The practice of Virtue as authority is characterized by establishing oneself as an exemplar of moral conduct in such a way that draws others to follow the behavior. There is no place for forcefully imposed order or coercive methods. Wherever coercive methods are present, the ruler has failed to accumulate Virtue and maintain authority.

Conclusion

A great deal of ground has been covered in this work. We have ventured from the world of Hannah Arendt, the political and scholarly turmoil surrounding authority in her own time, to the ancient foundations of Roman society and the founding of a distinct cultural perspective on authority. We did not stop there. Moving beyond the boundaries of Arendt's western focus, we became acquainted with the Classical Chinese notion of authority as it is presented in the *Analects*, a cornerstone of Confucian literature. Such diverse and ranging materials deserve some amount of synthesis and unification before drawing final conclusions.

Hannah Arendt's project of recovering the common notion of authority gave us a necessary understanding of the core aspects of authority. She demonstrates that authority is a distinct political phenomenon that brings "obedience in which men retain their freedom."¹⁰⁹ Further, Arendt argues that the political phenomenon of authority relates so closely with tradition and religion that the three constitute a kind of Roman trinity. According to Arendt's analysis, the Roman perspective on authority was inherently rooted in the past. It was time, tradition, and the sanctifying nature of religion that endowed the decisions and actions of early Rome with true authority. But we saw that Arendt's approach was not without flaw. The Roman perspective on authority may be invaluable in recapturing the western origins of such an influential notion of authority. However, the Roman perspective is merely one perspective, and as such it is incapable of accomplishing the goal of establishing a common notion of authority, one founded upon diverse experiences and perspectives.

¹⁰⁹ Hannah Arendt, "What is Authority?," in *Between Past and Future* (New York: Penguin Group, 2006), 105.

The Confucian notion of authority was analyzed in order to obtain greater progress toward a truly common notion of authority. Many common aspects of authority under Arendt's analysis were present within the Confucian perspective. We saw that the Confucian notion of authority is both rooted in the tradition of the Western Zhou Dynasty and sanctified by the mythical, religious notions of Heaven and the Mandate of Heaven. In this regard, the Confucian perspective provides a viewpoint which reveals sufficient similarity to the same phenomenon discussed by Arendt. However, the Confucian perspective also illuminates the nature of authority through the ways in which it departs from Arendt's paradigm. The Confucian notion of Virtue offers unique insights into the personal and moral nature of authority. With this notion, Confucians decentralize the structural and institutional aspects of authority and reveal that a great deal of authority relies upon the moral conduct of the individual.

The Confucian Virtue based notion of authority can offer insight into the crisis of authority in our own time. Systemic and institutional issues have long plagued the United States, and it is common in contemporary discourse to advocate for systemic and institutional changes as solutions to these issues. There is certainly progress to be made via this avenue. However, the Confucian notion of Virtue based authority may serve to remind us that progress through structural and institutional change has limits. No matter how sound institutions may seem, even the greatest institutions are liable to abuse through flawed leadership. Perhaps this is what has greatly contributed to the crisis of authority in our time. We no longer trust in the sound structure of our institutions nor in the virtuous conduct of those in leadership. This is an observation that escapes Arendt's analysis, but is made abundantly clear with the cultural perspective of Confucianism. This is precisely why we need diverse cultural perspectives as we rethink these

issues in a globalized society. In any case, the Confucian perspective helps us understand the moral behavior necessary for establishing true authority through trust in virtuous behavior.

There is certainly more to be learned regarding the nature of authority. This project took a decisive step toward building a common notion of authority based upon a plurality of cultural perspectives. Further progress could be made by continuing to push the boundaries of Arendt's original account. One might examine other cultures from various times and places across the globe. Each cultural perspective has the potential to sharpen and clarify a notion of authority, accounting for commonalities and highlighting each cultural perspective's unique insights. One thing is clear: only by drawing together the diverse cultural groups of society, valuing the unique insights of each, and developing common notions for discourse amidst difference can we address the crises of our time, including the crisis of authority.

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