

“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 has failed. Authority, on the other hand, is incompatible with persuasion, which presupposes equality and works through a process of argumentation. Where arguments are used, authority is left in abeyance. Against the egalitarian order of persuasion stands the authoritarian order, which is always hierarchical. If authority is to be defined at all, then, it must be in contradiction to both coercion by force and persuasion through arguments.”

- Hannah Arendt in *What is Authority?*

In her 1954 essay ‘What is Authority?’, Hannah Arendt describes authority as something that always demands obedience, however, its influence is neither through means of force nor persuasion. To Arendt, authority “*precludes the use of external means of coercion*” as well as “*is incompatible with persuasion*” and is therefore to be defined in contrast to both of these. However, I find this view of authority incomplete – Arendt seeks out to describe traditional forms of authority that we are all familiar with and that, for most of us, are the first to come to mind when we think of authority; government leaders and officials, but also managers, teachers, or even parents. Arendt asserts that authority, in her definition, presupposes inequality and cannot be argued against – in face of this authority, we are simply to obey. While I am not necessarily attacking this presumption, I would like to point out a different type of existing authority that does not fit Arendt’s definition. A much more implicit – and therefore much more dangerous – one, that may work hand in hand with the first type of authority that we are all aware of.

In this essay, I will first analyse the original quotation with a focus on Arendt’s claim that authority is incompatible with equality. This claim seems rather intuitive at first, yet I would like to proceed by arguing against it, introducing Michel Foucault’s concept of Biopower. I will then argue why I consider it to be a form of authority, and further demonstrate its inherent link to traditional authority. I will further demonstrate how we all are, in a sense, agents of this latent authority. I will claim that this authority can be argued against, and still should be considered authority. Then, I will describe how one of the methods of this authority is, inevitably, persuasion. Before concluding and returning to Arendt’s quote, I will provide examples from recent human history of how this second, latent authority has been and therefore *can be* overcome with persuasion.

Hannah Arendt’s Authority

Let us begin by taking a closer look at the quotation. In in, Arendt operates under the assumption that authority is something that always demands obedience. As this seems to suit our linguistic and social definition of authority, I will proceed with this stance. I would like to note, however, that Arendt uses the word ‘demands’ rather than ‘requires’. I would like to ask the reader to keep this in mind as they read as it will be addressed later in this essay. Arendt further asserts that;

- 1) Authority is a contradiction to coercion by force
- 2) Authority is a contradiction to persuasion through arguments

And thus, the definition of authority lies somewhere outside of both coercion and persuasion, and its tools are neither arguments nor force. In my understanding, Arendt sets out to define how we are to think of authority of the traditional sense. Rulers, leaders, higher-ups, teachers, parents – people that are in relation to us in a position of power. She argues that where people in positions of power use force, their authority has failed and where they use arguments, their authority vanishes. She seems to be seeking an alternative way of exercising power that emulates true authority. She writes this quotation as a survivor of

the Holocaust not long after World War II, as the majority of the world is plunged into Cold war. Questions of traditional authority and political philosophy were understandably commonplace during that time – she is undoubtedly in the position to be examining and questioning traditional authority and I have no arguments against her reasoning in this way. However, I believe that, as it seems in this passage at least, her examination is limited to traditional authority *only*, and arriving at 1) and 2) produces incomplete idea of what authority is in actuality. I would like to focus on claim 2).

Arendt arrives at 'Authority is a contradiction to persuasion through arguments' from the premise that persuasion presupposes equality, and is thus incompatible with authority. The reasoning is rather intuitive. If A is incompatible with B, and C presupposes B, A and C are in contradiction. The only premise we have to accept to arrive to this conclusion is that equality and authority are incompatible. As Arendt states, authoritarian order is always hierarchical, which contradicts equality. In this way, the reasoning is sound. I would, however, like to call the assumption that authority necessarily implies hierarchy into question in the next passage. I will remain to operate within the definition of authority as merely something that always demands obedience.

Self-regulating authority

Let us now consider social constructs. Human-crafted concepts that are a result of thousands of years of development, interpersonal interaction and cultural socialisation. Today's philosophy recognises various such concepts that have priorly been considered 'natural', 'self-evident' or even 'God-given'. The values we share as a society not completely intrinsic to the human condition – rather, they are a staple of our cultural, political, linguistic and socioeconomic history as mankind. The idea of nationality, for example: there is no intrinsic Frenchness or Germanness – merely an idea shared within society that acknowledges inhabitants living between arbitrarily created borders or perhaps speaking the same language as being of one nationality. These concepts are only valid as long as enough people believe in them, the classic example being money: if we all stop thinking of money as having value, it becomes nothing but paper. Similarly, if we all stop ascribing value to a law and stop following it, it is no longer valid. However, this arbitrariness of social constructs does not mean that they have no real consequences, that they cannot be influential, and that they do not hold *power and authority*. The power money is hardly to be questioned, despite being 'just a few slips of paper' or even 'a number in on a computer screen', it is globally the most common motivator in crime, it influences government decisions, wrecks and creates relations. Money is undeniably powerful. Same goes for law – even if I deny its validity by claiming it is a social construct and therefore not real, I will face very real consequences for breaking it, because sufficient number of people do consider it valid (the police, court officials, prison system employees...). Thus, the power social constructs have is dependent on people's belief in them – but that does not make them any less powerful.

Social constructs can be considered on a large scale (countries, money, education system, prison system...) but also a microscopic one. Social norms are an example of a small-scale social construct. One might not face a sentence in prison for swearing in class, but the action will still have very real consequences in other forms of punishment, such as exclusion or removal of privileges. This is the case as swearing in class in breaking a social norm, a social construct of politeness and respect for education. On a similar note, one might have a strong personal preference for wearing sweatpants and other non-formal clothes. However, if they are to abide to social norms, they should dress 'more appropriately' for a formal event. If they do not, they will receive punishment – if they do, this behaviour will be reinforced. These social norms influence our behaviour, dictate what is acceptable and what is not. If one can be swayed to not act in accordance with their own personal preferences in favour of abiding to a norm, we can say that this norm has power over them; it demands obedience. In this way, social norms are a form of authority.

The philosopher Michel Foucault called this type of power Biopower. He argued that our common idea of power is outdated from the times of monarchies and totalitarian regimes (mirroring traditional authority in the terms of this essay). In actuality, power is something we all participate in. Just like social norms, we are simultaneously subject to it and its active reinforcers. We reinforce these norms both by adhering to them (a social construct only holds power insofar as we act as though it does) and enforcing them onto others. We, too, to an extent, place other's behaviour under scrutiny and engage in social punishment. If someone is being impolite, we are less likely to think highly of them or seek out their company. If someone is behaving outside of the norm, society punishes them. So far, it might seem as though Biopower is somewhat harmless – after all, we reinforce desirable behaviour and punish undesirable. If we, in this way, incentivise people to be polite and not swear in class, the outcome will be more politeness and less swearing in class. To this, I would like to ask the reader to consider behaviour that we have previously stigmatised and punished in the past. A mere century ago, it was unacceptable for women to voice their opinions in many parts of the world. Indeed, Biopower, just like any other form of authority, can produce both desirable and undesirable results.

Consider now the concept of the 'perfect prison', the Panopticon. The Panopticon is a prison of a particular architecture. In the very centre stands a watchtower occupied by the prison guards, surrounded by prison cells organised in a panopticon shape. The main idea is that the blinds of the watchtower are designed in such a way that the guards can always see outside on the prison cells, but the prisoners can never see the inside of the watchtower. Jeremy Bentham considered this the perfect prison; the prisoners can always be watched, but they will never be aware of it. The possibility of always being seen and the uncertainty that surrounds it to Bentham presents the perfect incentive for 'good behaviour' in the prisoners. Now, consider that there is no watch tower – that it is not even necessary. Imagine if the social norm was for the prisoners to watch *each other* and regulate each other's behaviour – such prison would be even more effective. In this way, each prisoner is simultaneously an agent of authority and placed under the authority of others. In terms of Foucault's Biopower, this version of the panopticon can be seen as a metaphor for how latent authority works in society. This latent authority is self-regulating, and we are all its active participants to an extent.

In this way, I argue that authority does not necessarily imply inequality. If person A has authority over person B, and person B has an equal amount of authority over person A, on what grounds do we exclude the possibility that persons A and B are equal? Me and a stranger on the bus who is similar to me in background, age, and occupation still have authority over each other. The stranger cannot freely express themselves and partake in activities that they would perhaps personally prefer to do if they do not adhere to social constructs and norms of behaviour in the presence of another person – me. I might very well call the police on them, reprimand them, or socially ostracize them as I uphold these social norms, and the same applies vice versa. In this situation, we are equal. Equal as participants in Biopower, as participants in this latent, implicit, yet almost all-encompassing authority. Similarly, we stand equal ground in terms of social constructs. We both have the equal free will to not adhere to them (to stop believing in them), but no control over the other's views of said social constructs (the other might still believe in the construct, and therefore there will be consequences of some level). However, one might object precisely that we can *choose* not to adhere to the construct, the norm, the authority. I will address this objection in the next section.

On the grounds described in this section, I argue that there can be authority within equality – therefore rejecting Arendt's claim that authority is necessarily in contradiction with it. The next logical step would be to therefore conclude that authority is not in contradiction with persuasion either.

The role of persuasion

Let us consider points from the previous section. Firstly, social constructs are, as heavily emphasized before, only valid as long as enough believe in them. Consider the hypothetical scenario in which I convinced every police officer in the country to stop believing a law. Although highly unlikely, it is not unheard of for great portions of a police force to protest against a law. If I exercise my authenticity and choose to reason with them, I, in theory, have the ability to make a change (persuade an authority, and influence my thrownness). In the case of social norms, I can always choose to not follow them. If I authentically decide that the social punishment, I will receive for doing so is acceptable, I have the free will to. What Biopower does, its main tool, is *persuasion*. However, just like its authority lies in persuasion, I, as its agent, can utilize my portion of authority through persuasion right back.

As for the Panopticon, the first objection that may come to mind when considering it is 'what if the prisoners simply refuse to follow the norm?'. Again, for this to be possible, enough prisoners would have to do so at once. It is difficult and unlikely, but not unheard of – *not impossible*. Let us not forget that the prisoners may very well communicate with each other, and they can reason and argue. Here, what is true for dismantling social constructs stands true as well. Biopower thus can be resisted, it can be argued against. Consider examples from history where major changes in the status quo and the norms we adhere to happened in face of this latent authority. Emancipation movements, to start with, all begin as an opposition to the authority of some social norm; 'women should not be politically and economically active', 'segregation is an acceptable practice' or 'homosexuality should be prohibited, punished, or treated'. At some point, these sentiments were the authority that forced women, people of colour and queer folk into oppression, and the rest of society into complacency with this oppression. It is only thanks to persuasion that they are weakened today. Basic respect in the political sphere was not granted to women because they somehow forced an authority to artificially grant it, but because women's rights activists have *persuaded* enough people for the social construct to be broken, for the norm to be changed, for the authority of Biopower to alter its demands.

Only by exercising one's authenticity and reasoning with the self-regulating authority that reinforced these sentiments social change was achieved. If we as equal agents of a self-regulating authority use the method of *persuasion*, which I have demonstrated we do, it cannot be said that persuasion is not a tool of authority. Indeed, we may look to history for proof of how persuasion is not only a possible, viable strategy to influence authority, but a key one. Persuasion shapes the norms that Biopower authority consists of.

A connection one might make here is the one to traditional authority. Foucault seems to suggest that traditional authority is subservient to Biopower, at least in democratic liberal societies. Law is a good example of this; as the general public was *persuaded* and the social norm became to treat women with greater political respect, the traditional authority of the government granted them the right to vote. I support Foucault's position and argue that traditional authority operates within the framework that Biopower provides for it. In a democracy we hold our traditional authorities accountable as they depend on us for their validity; to elect them. Such is the core principle of the democratic process. That is why I claim that this latent authority of Biopower is more powerful than traditional authority, and consider Arendt's view of authority that excludes it incomplete.

Conclusion; we are both the authoritarian and the subservient

As I have pointed out earlier in the essay, authority always *demand*s, not *require*s, obedience. The authority of Biopower (with its norms and constructs) demands obedience and is difficult, not impossible to resist. Therefore, Biopower is still a form of authority. We are agents of it as much as we are subservient to it. As its agents, we can use persuasion as a form of authority. This is why I believe Arendt claim that authority is

a contradiction to persuasion by argument is untrue; I presume that she was most likely considering a traditional type of authority only. My aim was to add onto this view, as the latent authority of Biopower exceeds the traditional one – therefore its inclusion is necessary for a coherent view of authority.