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Scholarly Power, Being, and Nothingness

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In 1990, Vaclav Havel addressed a joint session of the United States Congress. It was a heady moment in many ways. Not only was his rise the product of stunning—and surprisingly peaceful—political change; not only was he a living symbol of principled political opposition and its force; Havel was also something extremely unusual: a true intellectual who had just entered the halls of power. And he quickly showed that in his visit to the halls of Congress. The new Czech president was not content to give a mere policy address or a string of bromides and platitudes. Instead he actually talked somewhat serious philosophy to the assembled legislators. Before doing so, he did at least promise, he said, to "limit myself to a single idea." He called that idea "a great certainty." What was it? "Consciousness precedes Being, not the other way around, as Marxists claim."

Never before had a speaker to Congress placed the relationship between essence and existence so squarely on the legislative agenda. But no matter—every single member of the assembly knew precisely where to stand (quite literally). The entire Congress of the United States rose to its feet as if one body and gave Havel sustained applause to show they shared his sense of certainty. Some were privately puzzled about what it was they were cheering with such abandon. The *Washington Post* was baffled rather than certain asked the next day in an editorial "What Did Congress Think it Heard?"

A quarter century later, bafflement recedes but amusement remains. We can now see the scene clearly: an intellectual figure given to a life of contemplation attempting to address a powerful group filled with people dedicated to the life of action. It was an unusual moment because an intellectual could speaks truth to power. And power sat and listened—and then stood and clapped. But it was a very common moment in that truth spoke a language that power could not even begin to understand. Both Havel and the assembled body of legislators appear a bit ridiculous. We laugh both

at the Havel's naiveté and the mindless cravenness of the elected officials. Of course they in turn would at our cynicism and irrelevance.

And that sense of our irrelevance is profound. It is widely shared throughout our society. I was once dragooned into providing expert testimony in a major criminal trial. A federal prosecutor began his cross examination of me as follows: "*Professor* Brown [with the emphasis very much on *Professor,* in order to discredit and *not* to flatter me], do you know what the phrase 'ivory tower' means?"

Institutions of higher learning have given our language a host of synonyms for futile intellectualism and irrelevance: to say a question is academic, to describe something as scholastic or an argument as Talmudic; to refer as the prosecutor did to an ivory tower—these are all various ways to suggest utter impracticality. It is even sometime speculated that the word "trivial" refers to the "trivium"—three of the classic liberal arts (though ascertaining whether the etymology is a false one would require years of laborious research).

Those of us from the academy are far removed from those in the halls of power. Many of us like to keep it that distance; the feeling is often returned.

But.

Maybe each one of us here is a bit more powerful as an individual than we realize.

Living in Washington as I do with many others, having the US Department of State and White House as imposing neighbors to my more humble office, scribbling off short pieces without footnotes for a policy-oriented think tank as I have done—these things have sometimes resulted in my being invited for brief visits into the corridors of power for a conversation. Most of those I meet with are mid-level officials. I generally find them very well informed. They seem uncertain (or actually uninterested) in the relationship between being and consciousness. But they are actually far better informed on the matters of policy concern than I can ever hope to be. I feel like a decently-educated tourist, not a bearer of great certainties.

But something else strikes me as well. When I ask mid-level officials for their views, they often give me a scripted, bland institutional answer. They do not give their own views. Instead, they begin by quoting somebody more powerful: "as the president (or the minister or the ambassador) recently said…" And then they quote this powerful person making a very general statement—one that sounds a bit like a platitude itself. It often seems to come less from Olympus than from a protracted, even painful bureaucratic and political process. Sometimes I hear a bit more: the mid-level official might let his or her guard down and actually venture a personal opinion. But in the process the official sounds much more like a spectator rather than a wielder

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of power. They are tourists, just like me, except for one difference: tourists return home. I can say whatever I want without fear of consequences. They are stuck.

Maybe I am looking for power in the wrong place by chatting with such people. Perhaps I should move a bit farther up the chain of command in order to find power.

Well, I would know what happens in those upper reaches less well, but I have been in a limited number of meetings with more senior officials. In one earlier this year, I sat around a table feeling more than a bit out of place. I was fixated on only two things: my lack of a necktie, and my almost debilitating desperation to find something intelligent to say in an intimidating setting. The senior official wore a tie. So he did not share that insecurity. But he closed the session with a confession: "I'd like to keep on talking but I have a meeting at the White House in an hour and I have to think if there is something intelligent I can say."

So self-doubt survives adolescence and roots itself everywhere, even occasionally in the highest levels of government. But was the official in the tie hiding something? Is there power way up there?

Yes, of course, there is power way up there–on an institutional level. But on a more personal level, on those occasions when I have heard them up close, senior officials often speak of power as flowing through them rather than being wielded by them. They speak with confidence and self-assurance at times. And they clearly feel some efficacy but nothing close to omnipotence. Those on top might feel some limited ability to bend the flow of events ever so slightly. But they work with the gradient, never against it. To act more ambitiously, to pretend to be truly powerful would be futile. It would only reveal—well, powerlessness. Some years ago, I met with a very well known academic serving temporarily in a fairly senior policy position. I did something I rarely do—I strongly advocated a very specific policy position on a matter I claimed expertise. He listened carefully to me. He was an academic and understood my language very naturally. Even better, he knew how to translate truth-speak into power-speak. And I could on his face that he was calculating as I was speaking: could my scholarly words could be rendered politically intelligible. And, after a couple minutes it was clear that his unvoiced answer was no. He quickly if politely brought the conversation to an end. A couple months later I had coffee with someone I knew who worked in his office. My friend brought up precisely the policy recommendation I had made—as a good idea whose time had past. And it was one he never remembered I had advocated. He said, "I only wish that someone had suggested this a few months ago." I had suggested the right idea at what

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was only retrospectively the right time, and it was therefore as if I had not spoken at all.

This story is a bit self-serving, and undeservedly so. Truth be told, I think the number of times I have had a policy recommendation that should be heard is fairly small. My modesty on this score is not false; I simply do not easily move from what I think I might understand to what those in power should do. My point is thus a bit different: that even senior officials I have had the rare occasion to speak with often adopt the tone of bureaucrats in Kafka's unfinished novel *Al-Mugamma'* (generally translated into English as *The Castle*). They betray a sense of weariness, overwhelming complexity, and even a bit of confusion and futility.

We scholars, by contrast, do not talk that way.

Power in society exists everywhere but it is not easily personified—at least by government officials. A colleague showed me that there is a way to see power as personified, but it is one that we are unaccustomed to seeing—and it is often personified by us.

A few years ago, I was speaking with Joshua Stacher, my friend from Kent State University. He had been working on the Muslim Brotherhood for much longer than I had been. We compared notes about specific leaders—how Muhammad Morsi (not yet president, much less deposed president) came across as prickly and rigid, Sa'd al-Katatni as gentle but careful, and so on. Khayrat al-Shatir, I suggested, seemed to me to be the most open-minded leader I had met—the most careful listener and the most willing to think on his feet rather than rehearse formal positions. Josh explained to me "That's power. He has nothing to fear from anyone else in the organization. He can say whatever he wants."

Power is just another word for nothing left to fear. And nothing—that is what many scholars feel left by those they often see as the power brokers. But maybe it is each one of us who have tremendous power, as individuals with less to fear than so many others. Tenure, academic freedom, individual scholarly judgment—these are our privileges, these are ways to free us from fear. This freedom may be shaky and circumscribed; it can be taken away by cowardly trustees and craven state legislators on occasion. But when it is granted and honored, it is very real. It gives far more protection than most other people ever have in any area of their lives. In our classrooms we can be like judges whose rulings are difficult to appeal. In our scholarly publications we need be concerned only with the opinion of a few peers.

Our power is like that of Khayrat al-Shatir. His power, just like ours was limited to specific realms and disappears outside of them. It is not omnipotence; Khayrat al-Shatir is currently imprisoned. But like him, within

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the confines of our own realm, there are circumstances or people we do not need to fear.

We ask for—and receive—a tremendous degree of freedom from fear. That autonomy can be relative and precarious. But when it operates, it only increases the need for individual scholars to hold themselves accountable to their own standards. Yes, there are limits to that autonomy that can be sharply encountered. Indeed, MESA members encounter those limits with a rapidity and sometimes a ferocity that keeps our Committee on Academic Freedom much too busy. But despite those, we need to acknowledge that there are few places in our society where individual employment security is as great; where the primary mechanisms of accountability run so extensively through self-policing or through colleagues who are often acquaintances and sometimes personal friends; or where professionals are able to write and enforce their own standards with as much insulation from the concerns of the public or of officials. When we teach in our classrooms or publish in our scholarly journals, we are more insulated than doctors are from insurance companies. We are more protected than artists are from funding agencies and patrons, than lawyers are from courts and clients, than journalists from editors, publishers, owners, and readers, than civil servants from superiors and elected officials, than elected officials from donors and voters. The degree of power we have over our own work—on an individual basis—does not have easy parallels. I mean that not only in a grand sense of whose opinion we must defer to; I mean that even in a quotidian sense: I know of few other professions where people seem to have so much control over their own time.

We consider it outrageous when someone suggests we should spend time in our offices. During my first sabbatical, my then-young son saw me wearing a necktie one day—there was a function I wanted to attend at the University. He asked me where I was going, and I said "to work." He replied, "But I thought you were retired."

If I told my dean to go to hell, nothing would happen. He would not suffer eternal damnation—I am not powerful in that sense. But neither would I suffer any serious consequences. I am powerful in ***that*** sense.

Our institutions may be underfunded or funded in ways we might find troubling. They are enmeshed and even participate in relations of power whose wisdom or justice many of us question. But as individuals, the degree to which we need to fear the consequences of that questioning seem to me to be comparatively low.

I mention our power not because I think that degree of trust and autonomy is misplaced or routinely misused; in the majority of cases where there is an obvious way forward in how to exercise our power ethically, we take

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it. I mention it because the ethical way to wield it is not always obvious. And in such circumstances, we need to remember we can indeed justify our individual power over our own work. But we can do so only by insisting that we are using it to do our jobs as teachers and as scholars more effectively. When we operate in the classroom or in our writings, it is critical to keep in mind that it is we who must hold ourselves accountable to what we see as the interests of students, scholarship, human knowledge, and our disciplines.

And that is not always easy. The issues are sufficiently complex that at times our academic being runs a bit ahead of our ethical consciousness. Our insistence on our own nothingness can run ahead of our academic being. That is, our sense that we are marginal and powerless can make us forget the power we have. It can obscure our freedom from fear. Our power is real but we sometimes do not feel it and we therefore need to work constantly to call it to mind.

I am not talking just about the times we clearly fall short—by returning papers late, delivering a lecture without adequate preparation, skimming a colleague's or a student's work and failing to give it the care that we promise. When we fall short in those ways, we generally are aware we are doing so, though a little more consciousness there would not harm our academic being.

But instead I want to stress that there are more difficult situations where our obligations—our obligations to ourselves and to those who have entrusted themselves to us—are a bit less clear.

In the rest of my address, I will point to four areas where we need to think carefully and consciously how to exercise power ethically.

The first area is the classroom—a particularly difficult place for those who teach about the Middle East. We have tremendous power in our tiny empires in a range of matters that can be extremely sensitive. We teach about religion, identity, and politics and we often do so in particularly edgy ways. We exercise authority over adults, yes, but also young adults rarely exposed to different views before. A careless or intemperate word, a dismissive glance, a gesture of encouragement, or a thoughtful question can have significant effects—and our responsibility to our students is only magnified by the fact that we can at best only guess how our remarks will be heard (as we discover the first time we grade an examination that is based on our lectures). We should not forget the power we wield in the classroom.

Yes, we may be nervous about watchdogs and self-appointed teaching police—there have been particularly pernicious examples of such phenomena in our field. These continue right up to this very moment. But even as we combat or ignore such efforts, we need also think in our own terms; we should fight off those who would police us according to their own political

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agenda, but each one of us should patrol him or herself. Our students are often young adults coming from homogenous communities but operating now in more diverse settings. They may be at best unskilled in the skills of respectful public debate, all too easily offended or intimidated. How are we to behave? Yes, it is our duty to ourselves and to them to provide a environment in which various points of view can be respectfully aired; yes, it is our duty neither to censor our scholarly sense of truth nor to impose it in an imperious manner.

These principles are obvious. But the practice can be oh so complicated. When a student approaches one of and says (as one once said to me), "I think that Arabs are like dogs. You have to hit them and then they understand," what are we to say? When a Muslim student expresses discomfort at how her core beliefs are treated in a classroom, what are we to tell her? When another student instead privately asks, "Can we talk about Islam? I'm afraid of being branded a racist if I just ask a question," how are we to encourage critical inquiry while still providing a safe environment for all students to explore a given subject matter?

Is safety even the best term to use—or is it better to see our task as leading students into areas where they are a bit uncomfortable, to push them beyond the boundaries of their past thinking? And how are we to foster the skills for them not merely to think critically but to speak with those who share very different backgrounds or values?

How we answer these questions shapes the lives of others, often at a particularly malleable stage of their lives. I do not offer answers tonight; I only insist that we keep asking ourselves these questions so that we wield power consciously in the classroom.

The second of four difficulties with our exercise of power has to do with how we act with regard to the region we study. I spoke of the autonomy given by peer review—but what does such peer review mean in what is, despite all our egalitarian pretenses, an extremely hierarchical academic world?

The academy is hierarchical because the world is. We write as privileged scholars, often in North American universities, about societies in the Middle East that are very much affected by decisions made and institutions based in this continent. We provide critical information, relay some voices, privilege some analysis—and leave others at greater risk of falling into a global void. When we argue and publish in English, as most of us were raised to do, we use not merely our native language but the *lingua franca* of international communications in many fields. To write in a different language, even the language of a Middle Eastern society, may enlargen one's immediate audience but at the considerable cost of restricting one's global reach. Those of us who speak the Frankish tongue as our mama loshen exercise a form of power. We

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may not sense it but our actions have consequences: Whose voices do we privilege? Whom or what do we interpret and convey?

Like the bureaucrats and officials I have met, most of us do not feel powerful. But we hardly appear powerless—to our students, to our junior colleagues, and to many of those in the societies where we study. To them we can appear powerful, distant, and perhaps a bit unpredictable or even capricious, utterly beyond mechanisms of accountability.

I therefore want to remind us all that our power often exceeds our cognition—as individuals and even as a scholarly community. It often operates a bit invisibly, at least to those of us who operate it. We should strive to make it visible, first of all to ourselves. We should never forget that the most immediate source of accountability for each of us is our own conscience, our own sense of our individual integrity, scholarly discipline, and common humanity. If we fail ourselves, we will fail others.

Seen this way, it would seem difficult to argue with my hectoring reminder, even if it has taken some uncomfortable forms.

But let me now turn to the third of the four ways in which I think we need to behave more consciously and carefully. I have hidden within my remarks so far an assumption that should now be exposed and questioned—not because it undermines my admonitions but because it accentuates them. How do we exercise power over each other?

I have slipped in quietly an assumption that each of us is now or will become a tenured professor in a North American institution. But most of us are not now tenured professors. Most of you in this room are not. Nor are we all tenured faculty in the making. There are many changes at work in the academic work force generally and some specific to our field: the growth of a contingent academic work force; the ways in which scholarly interest in the Middle East sometimes is pursued in different forms outside of the traditional academy; our growing geographical diversity; and the diversity in career paths and institutions that somehow connect with Middle Eastern studies and attracts people to the ranks of our scholarly association. If we ignore these trends or pretend that they are the exception rather than the rule, we will not undermine the power and hierarchy that operate in a scholarly field. We will only render it still less visible and surrender ourselves more fully to some of its less salutary effects.

Let me mention briefly but with special emphasis the way in which universities are restructuring the academic profession—but doing so by protecting and insulating those who currently have tenured positions from its effects. Adjunctification rarely comes by downgrading the status of current faculty members. Those of us who have tenure are safe and

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sometimes profit from its effects as it enables our sabbaticals and freedom to select what we teach. The result that the most powerful voices in the professoriate are those who are insulated from the trend and can often ignore it. I am not sure that the trend can be resisted. But it must be acknowledged if its effects are to be addressed.

In the Middle East Studies Association we need to give this matter considerable thought. How we structure our annual meetings; how we advocate our professional interests to the non-academic world, how we defend academic freedom, how we arrange our curriculum; how we define our scholarly communities, how we decide what "peer" means—all these things must come to acknowledge the changes we can no longer view as an aberration. Even if we decide to resist these changes, we must help each other cope with them.

And those whose privileged position has freed them from fearing these changes should be very much part of that coping effort.

But not the only part. And that brings me to the fourth and final way in which I think we need to be more deliberate in how we use our freedom, and that is how the need for recognizing power extends even to those of us whose feelings of powerlessness are particularly well grounded: the adjuncts, graduate students, untenured faculty, graders, secondary school teachers, undergraduates, freelance journalists, interns, and, yes, even mid- and lower-level bureaucrats and analysts: even you have a degree of power within a specific realm. Those of you who are young, junior, or subordinate may grow to come to have power very slowly—so slowly that you will not realize it is happening. You may never feel powerful; few people do. And that is a problem. Even those of us who feel weak must still strive to keep in mind the nature of our own power—otherwise, without noticing it, we will translate whatever unaccountable power we might have over ourselves to irresponsible power over others.

Help us, the Middle East Studies Association, foster the freedom from fear that is the basis of all of our power. And help us think of ways not merely to protect our individual autonomy but to avoid abusing it. We need to use our power to enable those with weaker voices to speak with less fear. We all need to work against intimidation from those who are hostile to what we do. But we also need to be conscious of how we might intimidate each other in quashing dissident voices. The result, of course, of such a refusal to silence will be noise, lots of noise. We will speak to the world in many discordant voices. If we, as a community, never confuse the broader public with the resulting din, if we seem to speak only unequivocally and univocally, we may not be doing our jobs. It is quality and nuance, not harmony and not even clarity

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that the community of scholars should seek to contribute; none of us has a monopoly on truth and virtue individually, nor do all of us collectively have such a monopoly.

It may seem as if I am calling for civil disagreement among ourselves. Instead, when drafting these remarks, I have carefully avoided use of the term "civility." In drafting my remarks, I felt compelled to search for (with intent to destroy) mention of the dreaded word. It had not slipped in. "Civility" as a word, we all know, has been seized by those who would use it to shout down others, as if civility is something to be imposed on adversaries but never practiced by oneself; as if those deemed rude for the political opinions as much as for their language should be rudely shouted down and sanctioned. Since civility has been polluted and deployed in such an uncivil manner, let me refer instead to our speaking as scholars. It is probably a better phrase anyway, since scholars can sometimes be a bit rough and blunt with each other.

Scholarly debate is a virtue to be cultivated by ourselves in order to converse and search for better questions and answers; it is never something that can be imposed by others, not even by academic administrators or political authorities. We are right to insist on academic freedom, but we should ask ourselves whether we are exercising that right in a way that helps others do the same—especially students, untenured and adjunct faculty, and junior colleagues. We should speak to edify and inform and elevate and never merely to express ourselves; it is our scholarly consciences and not our egos and certainly not self-appointed watchdogs that we should seek to satisfy.

So my conclusion is clear: we need to be more conscious and careful in our roles as teachers, scholars, and colleagues. Our relative autonomy and freedom from fear is not very evenly distributed and when we ignore that, we will operate in a manner that is unjust.

Let me briefly elaborate that conclusion by unmasking another hidden assumption —one I am not ashamed to embrace fully though it is one that may also be controversial. I have spoken implicitly as if power can be acknowledged and managed but not combatted or denied. I have spoken more like a senior policy maker than an academic.

I think that cuts against the grain of many of our individual discussions. Many of us here are likely more comfortable with seeing our task as working against the gradients of power, as questioning and subverting hierarchy and authority. Many will say, "Nathan, you've been in Washington too long. What you call responsibility is just resignation or even co-optation. You have sold out to power. You have forgotten that our job is to fight the power, not join it."

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I have portrayed us as leaders within our own realms who see power pass through us, and I conclude that the best we can do is to hope to steer it ever so slightly in a more just direction. I am implicitly suggesting that when we claim to work completely against prevailing power relations, we are often unaware of, or even worse deny, how much we are enmeshed in those hierarchies, profit from them, and irresponsibly obscure them by our claims of powerlessness. Immediately after lecturing Congress on the relationship between being and consciousness, Havel went on to string together a series of phrases that I find very odd in their juxtaposition but instructive nevertheless. He spoke of "the human ***power*** to reflect," which seems to me at the center of the scholarly enterprise. Then he referred to "human meekness" and "human responsibility." The first phrase stresses limitations; the second implies efficacy. What did Havel mean? I have no idea. But his words still capture my meaning today. It is based on the power of our reflections, and the need to forge them in an alloy of meekness and responsibility, that lead me to the perspective that some might see as insufficiently subversive.

I cannot prove my insistence that meek responsibility is better than more defiant attitudes. I can offer only a story—of a rabbi, a cantor, and the caretaker of a synagogue on Yom Kippur, the day of atonement. The rabbi, overcome by the solemnity of the occasion, overawed by the imminent presence of the divine, overwhelmed by the sense of his own sinfulness and failure, begins the service by falling to his knees, beating the ground, and shouting, "I am nothing! Lord, I am nothing!" The cantor, seeing this feels similarly moved and also falls and pounds the floor, shouting, "I am nothing! Lord, I am nothing!" The humble caretaker, confused by the commotion, feels compelled to join in, and is forced also to shout, "I am nothing! Lord, I am nothing!" Hearing the cries of the caretaker, the rabbi whispers to the cantor, "Look who thinks he's nothing!"

Our scholarly being imposes on us a deeply personal obligation to use our power consciously. To those in this room who claim to be powerless nothings, my response is, "Do not flatter yourselves. Be conscious of the need to use the power you have been given, however meager it sometimes seems, in ways that are true to your scholarly being."

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