
Gottfried–Ryn Dialogue Deficient

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The tone of scholarly discourse affects its quality. Although this observation may not prove invariably true, its general validity gives me confidence to cite it in order to introduce my disappointment with the recent dialogue on power, political and otherwise, between Paul Gottfried¹ and Claes G. Ryn.² The authors' contrasting styles of presentation initially struck me as more salient than their substantive differences. Rereading and reconsideration allowed me to appreciate the latter, but also to recognize that some were superficial and that the differences that were truly profound received an insufficiently sharp explication from the authors themselves.

I can best understand the essential opposition between the two pursuant to an unequivocal affirmation of Professor Ryn's stronger arguments. He rightly insists, for example, on the significance of beautiful women in many real-life discussions of power, specifically including political power. Professor Gottfried's objections in this respect are feeble and unbelievable. He cannot be serious. As a historically aware scholar, he surely has read the old saw that most wars, at least until recent times, have had their origins in disputes over women and cattle (with there being room for debate on their relative importance). Admittedly, Professor Ryn falls short of forensic perfection when he adduces the hoary examples of

¹ Paul Gottfried, "Power is Coercion: a Response to Claes Ryn," *Humanitas*, XIV, no. 1 (2001), 96-99; references to this article hereinafter cited in the text and notes as "PIC."

² Claes G. Ryn, "A Broader, Subtler View of Power," *Humanitas*, XIV, No. 1 (2001), 100-07; references to this article hereinafter cited in the text as "BSV."

Caesar and Mark Antony to bolster his position on female beauty and power. These examples are plausibly geared to HUMANITAS's erudite readers, but wouldn't JFK And Bill Clinton have been more germane? Still better would have been a discussion of contemporary promiscuous sex and concomitant high incidences of illegitimacy, venereal disease, and "fatherless" children. Who can deny the impact of these developments on governmental power in modern America? Professor Ryn, who justifiably denounces "reductionist theory" and "overly abstract . . . key terms" (BSV, 100-01), should know that weak examples can also achieve irrelevance.

A less abstract approach on the part of both dialogists might have enabled Professor Gottfried to accept Professor Ryn's correct assertion about power occurring in a broad societal context, "within an already existing intellectual and imaginative mind-set with its corresponding desires."³ Professor Gottfried seems displeased by this statement only because, well, it's too abstract. Be that as it may, I cannot detect much difference between the dialogists regarding their ostensibly contentious positions on the powerful welfare state. Referring to its beginnings, Professor Gottfried writes of its having been "endorsed" by "people of little learning, who believed the state would provide for their needs by redistributing income and by 'helping out' with their families" (PIC, 98). Professor Ryn pounces on this claim with his retort: "Persons of little learning may in fact, sometimes because of their limited learning, have minds and imaginations especially prone to extravagant speculations and dreams loaded with political import" (BSV, 102). The opposition between the professors in the present instance puzzles me. As best as I can tell, Professor Ryn objects to his colleague using the word "imagination" and its cognates too infrequently and with insufficient depth of imputed meaning. Professor Gottfried, however, deflates this charge with his mention of people's self-perceived needs and concern for their families. Are or are not these themes, which are inextricable from culture both high and low, prominent in the imaginative lives of most people? Even though both professors would answer this question affirmatively, they nonetheless offer us an unedifying spectacle as Professor Ryn's penchant for having imaginative activity labeled as such

Their views of welfare state much the same.

³ Claes G. Ryn, "Dimensions of Power: The Transformation of Liberalism and the Limits of 'Politics,'" *Humanitas*, XIII, no. 2 (2000), 18. Critically quoted by Gottfried, PIC, 98.

collides with Professor Gottfried's hypersensitivity to allegedly overly abstract prose.

We gain renewed respect for our dialogists in light of Professor Gottfried's remark, apparently acceptable to Professor Ryn, that "The managerial state came to power because the people wanted it, though in the best of all worlds they would not have been given that decision to make" (PIC, 98). Professor Gottfried here acknowledges, albeit not with optimum clarity, the momentous cultural change that has elevated the quality of being common to a position of preeminence in the modern age. Before our era, no sane man would have conceived of such nonsense as the universal franchise, "person-in-the-street interviews," public opinion surveys, "focus groups," and, of the greatest consequence, the amorphous, pervasive deference to all that is base and/or contemptuous of tradition. Professor Gottfried is right, though I think that prudent readers would do well to eschew his terminology of "people of little learning," particularly when the discussion shifts from history to the present day.

*A culture
of fatuity.*

The issue is not unlettered people nor naively stupid people nor those with putatively defective "moral sensibilities, minds and imaginations," to borrow Professor Ryn's language (BSV, 102). We use superior terminology when we speak of fatuous people and their culture of fatuity. The latter is certainly *a*, if not the only, defining mark of modernity. To be clear, I take fatuity to mean stupidity engorged by complacency, arrogance, high self-esteem, the cult of self-gratification, and simplistic utilitarianism masquerading as intellectual sophistication and/or practical compassion. A culture of fatuity now reigns supreme, especially in the so-called developed world. This culture makes totalitarianism possible. And that observation, in turn, opens the door to the real differences between Professors Gottfried and Ryn.

To his credit, Professor Ryn is clear as to what he means by totalitarianism. Although "[s]trictly speaking, *totalitarian* power, in the sense of comprehensive and complete control, is a contradiction in terms" (BSV, 106, italics in original), "totalitarianism" adequately describes some recent regimes, e.g., Nazi Germany, marked by considerable reliance on blatant coercion. Totalitarianism as a historical reality, Professor Ryn avers, waxes and wanes. The concept doesn't apply, he suggests, to the contemporary United States where "the element of mutuality between 'rulers'

and 'ruled' should be more easily seen" and where there exists "an ever-present give-and-take between . . . elites and those whom they govern" (BSV, 107). These pronouncements are unassailable, Professor Ryn believes, and they appear to settle decisively the Gottfried-Ryn debate. But they do nothing of the sort, for Professor Gottfried has an utterly different understanding of totalitarianism.

Employing the noun exactly once, Professor Gottfried places it in a phrase pregnant with meaning. He writes of "the *march* of totalitarianism" (PIC, 99, italics added), a phrase which implies what its context makes unmistakably clear, viz., that totalitarianism is a this-moment phenomenon, something that is current and evolving, and at least as definitive of today's United States as it was of Nazi Germany. Professor Gottfried may be right or he may be wrong; he is, in any event, expressing a different idea, despite some evidence of backpedaling in the final sentence of his essay.

Let us go some distance toward grasping his position. He does not contest Professor Ryn's recognition that political power in the United States involves "give-and-take" between government and the governed. That fact does not cut to the heart of the matter, Professor Gottfried would contend. What *is* important is the way the giving and the taking increasingly run up against no meaningful limits. American totalitarianism is not yet "perfected," not least because it is still evolving, but it trends toward the realization of government's unlimited ability to dispose of the totality of society's resources, not merely the material resources, but also the moral, intellectual, and, yes, the imaginative ones. Government moves into the position from which it can take all in order to give all; conversely, the American people eagerly comply, i.e., they give so that their takings can be unimpeded. This is totalitarianism. It is fatuity empowered, whereof the motto might be: "Happiness and good experiences for everyone, through beneficent public authority, by whatever means."

American totalitarianism evolving.

Professor Gottfried's thinking seems to bear a close resemblance to that of Bertrand de Jouvenel. The French philosopher, writing in the 1940s when the fate of fascism was still in doubt, set forth a sort of proleptic vision of the fruition of trends he observed in liberal Western culture and government. "Power," as de Jouvenel sometimes called government, "takes over, as it were, the whole business of public and private happiness, and it is an indis-

Gottfried resembles de Jouvenel.

pensable clause of the contract that all possessions, all productive energies, and all liberties should be handed over to it, as being the labor and the raw materials without which it cannot accomplish so gigantic a task.”⁴ Professor Gottfried, I believe, shares this vision, although for him it is a description of current conditions rather than an apprehension. He would agree, as Professor Ryn would insist, that contemporary totalitarianism doesn’t always behave “totally.” Yes, he would say, there are fluctuations in what government claims to be able to do and limits to its avowed responsibilities, but these are recognized to be so open-ended that there are no limits in principle and, hence, no actual limits to what government *may* do in pursuit of, e.g., “tolerance” and “caring.” All aspects of private life, i.e., those from which culture excludes government, subsist in that way only conditionally and precariously.⁵ Concerning another point, Professor Gottfried would maintain, to his dialogist’s certain chagrin, that speaking of government’s control of a ruled population is entirely accurate. Yes, of course, there is the easily misunderstood “give-and-take” of politics, but nowadays government holds all the trump cards. The U.S. system of a “voluntary” income tax is symptomatic. On still another point, Professor Gottfried would argue, possibly with Professor Ryn’s concurrence, that meaningful resistance to the modern Leviathan has become virtually inconceivable. Resistance to, e.g., Nazi Germany is conceivable because it was possible and it occurred. But who can imagine a similar stance against a regime “devoted to the whole business of public and private happiness” and armed with the twin weapons of a flexible notion of criminality and the *power* to declare opponents “misguided”? The Branch Davidians and the resisters at Ruby Ridge turned into buffoons, not heroes.

Fully convincing or merely vaguely disquieting, Professor Gottfried’s position casts doubt on Professor Ryn’s prognostication

⁴ Bertrand de Jouvenel, *On Power: its Nature and the History of its Growth*, trans. J. F. Huntington (New York: The Viking Press, 1949), 357.

⁵ The pathetic way in which Americans congratulate themselves on their “limited” government should not obscure this government’s vast scope. In contrast, the real limitations on the seventeenth century’s so-called absolute French monarchy, even under Richelieu’s and Mazarin’s tutelage, were so severe as to render it a preposterous parody of government to the modern sensibility. See Orest Ranum, *The Fronde: A French Revolution 1648-1652* (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1993).

for political change. “Real and lasting political change,” writes Professor Ryn, “would require a change in the moral, intellectual, aesthetical life of the West, causing new elites to form, first of all outside of politics” (BSV, 101). Those who use such space offensively, even for narrowly cultural transgressions, can be silenced or co-opted, with the latter expedient reducing the room outside of politics still further. Either suppression or subjection to the “politics of inclusion” awaits those upon whom Professor Ryn pins hopes for change.

Resumption of the Gottfried–Ryn dialogue along its earlier lines would probably not progress to a point at which one side or the other would concede. Even so, if the participants were to resume their discussion with a strong empirical orientation, readers would enjoy a better opportunity to make their own judgments. Philosophically and historically informed scholars make the best empiricists. Therefore, if our dialogists are willing, they ought to continue their debate using the contemporary United States as their referent. Professor Gottfried would bear the burden of proof or, more accurately, the burden of persuasion. He would have to make credible both of two propositions, namely, that life in the United States is thoroughly politicized, or nearly so, and that there exists some sort of governing elite able to impose its will on the general populace. For his part, Professor Ryn would have to refute one or the other of these propositions, though he might indulge his readers by contesting both.

*A strong
empirical
orientation
needed.*

Why should the dialogue be resumed along the foregoing lines? I can answer authoritatively only for myself. While I feel in my bones, so to speak, that Professor Gottfried is right, I also worry that his many fine journal articles and books, together with other similar influences, move me to deceive myself, although I arguably do not require such stimulation. At any rate, there are doubtlessly other readers beside myself who have questioning if not altogether open minds on the matters Professors Gottfried and Ryn address. We shall welcome persuasive, empirically grounded observations and arguments.