Essay 3.2 — COVER LETTER
Dr. Elisabeth Sharp McKetta
EXPO-25 (Section 14637), Fall 2014
Harvard Extension School
December 16, 2014

Dear Dr. McKetta:

Attached is Essay 3.2. I used multiple sources from Exercise 3, and added one more (Sigmund Freud). I focused more narrowly in this essay on political legitimacy in "The Emperor's New Clothes."

Challenges: probably the biggest challenge is finding critiques of "The Emperor's New Clothes." Because the story centers on seeing what is obvious, there are few critiques of the story itself. I chose to focus on the "as if" semantic construction used in the story, and focused on how the philosophy of "as if" creates fictions, especially those to justify political legitimacy.

Successes: finally securing a copy of the 1919 Russian film "King's New Dress" (a.k.a., "The Emperor's New Clothes").

As always, I look forward to your comments about my essay and welcome any suggestion for improvements.

Best regards,

Student Name

Student Name

Essay 3.2

Dr. Elisabeth Sharp McKetta

EXPO-25 (Section 14637), Fall 2014

Harvard Extension School

December 16, 2014

Seeing What Isn't There: "The Emperor's New Clothes" and the Fiction of Political Legitimacy

A simple though preposterous story, Hans Christian Andersen's "The Emperor's New Clothes" illustrates dual problems of knowledge and political illegitimacy. The tale can be summarized easily enough. Two swindlers arrive in a town and trick the Emperor into believing they can weave a magic cloth. The fabric, they argue, would become invisible to those who were either incompetent or unfit for their governmental offices. Fearing that they will be therefore considered incompetent, ministers (and then the Emperor himself, then later all the townspeople) engage in a consecutive stream of self-delusion and group psychology, each claiming that he can, indeed, see the magnificent fabric. Only at the end, during the Emperor's parade, does a small child blurt the obvious truth that the Emperor has no clothes at all, after which all the townspeople admit the truth among themselves.

From one perspective, "The Emperor's New Clothes" can be seen as a metaphor for political legitimacy. Through trickery playing on the Emperor's

personal vanity, the swindlers' actions eventually reveal the Emperor's reign as a laughable farce. The Emperor's royal garments, announced with fanfare as having magical properties, are shown to be invisible fictions. By the end of the story, Andersen subtly compels readers to ask themselves: is all political legitimacy itself mostly a fiction?

One of the most important scenes in the story is when the swindlers pantomime the assembly of the garments with their outstretched arms, pretending to hand the Emperor each of the garments, with the garments being "light as spiderwebs" (Andersen 10). Andersen repeatedly uses the phrase "as if" (in translation) to bring the fictional into reality ("each stretched out an arm *as if* holding something up") (emphasis added, Andersen 10) within the narrative. Using "as if," Andersen compares an unseen fiction to a seen reality and gives life to the entirely imaginative weaving and final product of the weaver-swindlers. The preening of the Emperor in front of the mirror cements in readers' minds the reality that the Emperor finally believes his own self-delusion.

The semantic use of the "as-if" construction cannot go unnoticed. One philosopher, Hans Vaihinger, argues that the "as if" construct can be used to create an intentional fiction that helps us better understand reality and provides social usefulness. These fictions, according to Vaihinger, could be seen as "a closely woven net, a fine tissue of subjective and fictional concepts in which we envelop reality" (73). For Vaihinger, a key fiction in modern society is the notion of a social contract (111). Citizens in most societies do not actually consent to their government, he notes, but they act *as if* they do by doing certain things: not moving out of the government's jurisdictions, deciding to vote in elections, holding

certain attitudes toward government, and so forth. It is *as if* these acts of tacit consent gave actual consent where none is apparent.

The value of such a "useful fiction," according to Vaihinger, lies in its *utility*, and here the similarity to the Andersen story is pronounced. For Vaihinger, there is a clear direction to fictional value: *utility* leads to *validity*, whereas for a hypothesis, the value goes the other direction: *validity* leads to *utility* (22). A valid hypothesis leads to its usefulness, whereas for a consciously held fiction, the usefulness of it leads to its validity. In the Andersen story, the value of the magic garments was in their supposed *utility*, their ability to demonstrate which people were fit to hold office, and which were not. For Andersen's Emperor, the fictional garments served a practical function that legitimized their use. Their utility led to their validity, similar to how the utility (or usefulness) of a fictional "social contract" could lead to political legitimacy and validity.

Political philosopher A. John Simmons takes issue with this notion of fictions leading to valid political legitimacy. In his *Moral Principles and Political Obligations*, Simmons surveys all the major arguments for how individuals come under political obligations, including actual consent, tacit consent, duty, and gratitude, and finds all of these justifications lacking. Only actual consent provides clear grounds for political obligations, and most individuals in modern societies, he notes, simply do not take any significant steps to consent to anything that would ground their political obligations. Restating John Locke's description of the process by which tacit consent creates actual political obligation, Simmons says:

> If we give our tacit consent to membership—which in both cases we do by acting *as if* there is a political authority over us — then we

> undertake the default obligations of membership and transfer to our political society the rights it requires for a stable, long-term existence (Justification and Legitimacy, 168).

In such a way of tacit consent, paraphrasing Locke, we come under political obligations. Simmons disagrees. Most examples of tacit consent, such as residence, he notes, provide no "clear choice situation" (95), and therefore no clear example of providing anything resembling consent. Choosing to stay in one's country, versus dissenting by leaving one's established life, livelihood, possessions, and possibly all of one's culture and language, cannot be considered a reasonable either-or choice criterion that acts *as if* one is giving consent. While for Vaihinger fictions provide a useful means of justifying the state, for Simmons tacit consent ends up like the Emperor's clothes: fictional, invisible, and without substance in terms of grounding political obligations.

One question that arises from the critique by Simmons could be this question: why are people unable to accept the notion of political illegitimacy? In other words, why is there a need for *any* fiction to justify political legitimacy when such a justification may not already exist? The answer may come from Sigmund Freud, who in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, refers to "The Emperor's New Clothes" as a type of "wish fulfillment." For Freud, the dream is the fulfillment of the wish, with the example of "The Emperor's New Clothes" illustrating an Oedipal wish to appear naked in public without constraint or criticism (Freud 205). Another interpretation, however, is to view the wish-fulfillment as a desire of citizens to believe in the legitimacy of their governments, irrespective of what consent-giving

steps they may (or may not) have given to legitimize these governments. People *wish* to believe in the legitimacy of "reasonable" governments acting "reasonably." Archer Taylor, pondering the question of "why this tale failed so completely to establish itself in the stock of popular tradition," concludes that "possibly the tale points a moral too obviously, and the moral, that it is possible to fool all of the people some of the time, is too bitter a pill" (27). Although Taylor makes a sound point, another possibility is that answering the question "is my government legitimate?" is much too overwhelming for most people to contemplate.

The issue of legitimization appears in one of the few film adaptations of "The Emperor's New Clothes," a film made in Russia in 1919 (Russian: "Novoye platye korolya") by the director Yuri Zhelyabuzhsky. The timing of the film is curious, coming as it did a year after the abdication of the Romanov royal family and the same year as the establishment of the early Soviet state. One of the noteworthy differences between the original Andersen story and the Russian film occurs at the end. In the original story, the Emperor continues in the parade at the end of the story, marching as though nothing had been revealed, even though his illegitimate royal garments were clearly shown to be fictional. In the Russian film by Zhelyabuzhsky, however, the Emperor realizes his nakedness (his political illegitimacy) and runs away from the parade as the onlookers point, mock, and laugh uncontrollably. The change is notable and understandable given the funding of film by Soviet state organizations (Leyda 37): the Soviet committees were anxious to remove any remaining legitimacy from the rule of the Romanovs. Left unspoken (and unanswered, of course) at the end of the film is the question: if the

Romanov royal family's rule was illegitimate, what would make the new Soviet rule legitimate?

In the end, readers of "The Emperor's New Clothes," find themselves in much the same position as the parade observers at the end of Andersen's tale: aware of the illegitimacy of what they have seen with the evidence of their own senses, but unaware of what comes next. The "as if" fictional constructions of political legitimacy offered by some seem as ethereal as the invisible magical garments pantomimed into production by the weaver-swindlers. With no easy shortcut to political legitimacy found, readers of the tale find themselves at the end of the story with the same necessity as in the beginning: "obedience remains as much in need of justification as disobedience" (*Moral Principles* 200).

Works Cited

Andersen, Hans Christian. *The Annotated Hans Christian Andersen*. Ed. Maria Tatar. Trans. Maria Tatar and Julie K. Allen. New York: W.W. Norton. 2008. Print.

The Emperor's New Clothes. [Russian: *Novoye platye korolya*]. Wr. and Dir. Yuri Zhelyabuzhsky. Perf. Dimitri Gundurov, Vitali Lazarenko, Anatoli Nelidov. Torgovy dom Rus'. 1919. Copy provided by The Russian State Documentary Film & Photo Archive at Krasnogorsk (RGAKFD), Russia. Film.

Freud, Sigmund. *The Interpretation of Dreams*. New York: Macmillan. 1913. Print.

Leyda, Jay. "Between Explosions (An Attempt to Repair a Mistaken Judgement)," *Film Quarterly*. 23/4 (1970): 33-38. Print.

Simmons, A. John. *Justification and Legitimacy: Essays on Rights and Obligations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University P. 2001. Print.

--- . *Moral Principles and Political Obligations*. Princeton: Princeton University P. 1981. Print.

Taylor, Archer. "The Emperor's New Clothes," *Modern Philology*. 25/1 (1927): 17-27. Print.

Vaihinger, Hans. *The Philosophy of 'As If': A System of the Theoretical, Practical and Religious Fictions of Mankind*. 2nd ed. Trans. C. K. Ogden. London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner. 1935. Print.