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A Modern Defense of Religious Authority

1. The Modern Rejection of Authority

IT HAS OFTEN BEEN OBSERVED that one characteristic of the modern world is the utter rejection of authority, or at least, the rejection of authority in so far as that is possible without leading to societal collapse. The need for political authority is grudgingly accepted to avert social disaster, but the fact that there is no moral authority is generally thought to be too obvious to require argument. For example, Patrick Hurley claims in his college textbook on logic that the appeal to authority for a moral judgment is an example of the *Ad Verecundiam* fallacy: “If someone were to argue that abortion is immoral because a certain philosopher or religious leader has said so, the argument would be weak regardless of the authority’s qualifications. Many questions in these areas are so hotly contested that there is no conventional wisdom an authority can depend upon.”¹ Not only does Hurley think it is obvious that there is no moral authority in disputed domains, but his reason for thinking so is just that those domains are disputed. He does not consider the possibility that someone could actually *have* the authority to give moral prescriptions.

The rejection of authority extends to most domains of belief, not only moral beliefs. The ascendancy of modern science is usually credited with convincing people of the untrustworthiness of traditional sources of belief, including, of course, the teachings of the Church. The prestige of science has made scientific experts the closest thing we have to authorities over belief, and if there is any vestige of authority left in the epistemic realm—the realm of belief, then it is science. But although people will often accept the word of experts in an esoteric scientific field, scientific experts are not authorities in any robust sense. It is entirely up to the individual person whether she chooses to believe an expert. There is no question of commanding belief, and no duty to obey.

Are there any *good* reasons for rejecting authority in belief and morals? I think there are two interesting and influential reasons. One comes from John Locke, who argued that nobody may command belief because it is impossible to obey it. “It is absurd that things should be enjoined by laws which are not in men’s power to perform. And to believe this or that to be true does not depend upon our will.”² If authority is the right to command, there is no authority over beliefs.

Locke’s claim that belief is not under the control of the will has a measure of truth that has led to an extensive debate in epistemology, but I do not see that it is any harder to believe on command than to believe what ordinary people tell me. It depends on the circumstances. Suppose my friend Ann says to me, “She will never marry him.” Surely it is possible for me to believe her, and if I have good reason to think she is reliable and sincere, I can also be justified in doing so. We all believe plenty of things we are told, often with good reason. But imagine the same situation except that Ann chooses her words a little differently. Instead of saying to me, “She will never marry him,” she might say, “Believe me, she will never marry him.” She could even make the command mode stronger by saying, “She will never marry him. You *must* believe that.” In each case I know that Ann intends for me to believe what she says, and I know that she believes it herself. Whatever reasons I have to think that Ann is privy

to inside information on our friend's marital intentions can be the same in each case. I may not like the tone of the last case, but I see no reason to think that I am unable to follow the command. If I can accept Ann's testimony about this particular matter, why would I find myself unable to do so once she turns her testimony into an explicit imperative? The real issue is not whether I can believe on command, but whether I ought to.

There is a second reason why authority over beliefs has been widely rejected in the modern period, and this reason has tremendous significance for almost every area of human life. Authority is thought to be incompatible with autonomy. The idea of autonomy as used in contemporary discourse comes from Kant and philosophers leading up to Kant's work, but the idea has permeated our culture in ways that confuse it with such distinct ideas as the Stoic notion of self-sufficiency, the existentialist idea of authenticity, the idea of integrity, and especially the idea of independence. But in its most basic form what we call "autonomy" is the view that the ultimate authority over the self is the self, and it is this sense of autonomy that appears to conflict with authority. It led Robert Paul Wolff to his famous argument that the conflict between authority and autonomy makes anarchism the only acceptable political arrangement,³ and it led to the common view that the final word on whether a person lives or dies is the word of that person herself. What is particularly interesting about autonomy in this sense is that it not only makes the attempted exercise of authority a moral wrong, but it also makes it a moral wrong for the subject to accept it. If a person acts or believes on authority, she is not acting as a self-governing person should act. She is allegedly injuring her own personhood. So one's autonomy can be violated by oneself as well as by other persons. The apparent conflict between authority and autonomy is therefore very serious. According to this argument, an autonomous person not only has the right to reject external authority, but has an obligation to do so.

It is not surprising, then, that autonomy has a bad reputation among traditionalists. Probably everyone who grew up in a country

that values democracy will say that the authority of the political state derives from the consent of the governed, but there are different answers to the question, “Why does it matter if the governed give consent?” If you ask for the source of authority in general, the traditionalist may refer to God’s governance of the world, or the natural law. If you then ask him why he believes in religious authority, such as the teaching authority of the Catholic Church, he will say that Christ founded the Church. If the issue is the authority of Scripture, he will say it was revealed by God. If he is Muslim, he will say that Sharia law was revealed by God. There are many other justifications for authority that could be mentioned, of course, but in almost every case, the defender of authority accepts the position that authority is incompatible with autonomy. The difference between the anarchist like Wolff and the traditionalist is that the former values autonomy and the latter values authority. They agree that you cannot have both.

It is understandable that the traditional adherent of one of the major religions is skeptical about autonomy because the authority structures of the major religions predate the invention of autonomy, and many interpreters think that the idea of autonomy arose as a conscious rejection of those very authorities. That view is probably false, but the motives of historical persons are no longer the issue. The perception that authority and autonomy are strongly at odds, if not downright inconsistent, has had a dramatic effect on the perception of the justification of believing religious teachings. From the perspective of a typical atheist believer in autonomy, members of religious communities are unjustified in accepting authority in their community. From a perspective inside the community, authority is justified by reference to other beliefs that arise from within the community, such as “Christ founded the Church.” This is not necessarily problematic. There is nothing wrong with being part of a tradition from which one takes various beliefs justified by that same tradition. But accepting the alleged incompatibility between authority and autonomy in effect allows many supporters of autonomy to dismiss the authority structures of religious communities without due regard to

the actual implications of autonomy. Historical and cultural divisions make it difficult for a traditional religious community to meet the challenge posed by the modern defenders of autonomy on the latter's own terms, but I think that that can be done and that it should be done.

I propose that what we need to do is to look at how Robert Paul Wolff's challenge was met in the political domain. Given the premise that the ultimate authority over the self is the self, political authority was defended in a very influential argument by Joseph Raz three decades ago, an argument that has become classic in the annals of political liberalism. What I will argue here is that a simple generalization of Raz's argument generates an exactly parallel defense of moral authority and religious authority. My conclusion is that if political authority is compatible with autonomy, so is religious and moral authority.

2. Using Autonomy to Justify Authority

Joseph Raz's book *The Morality of Freedom* became a landmark in the tradition of political liberalism.⁴ In that book and later work, Raz showed how the authority of the political state can be defended from the premise that each person is the ultimate authority over himself. The early influence of Wolff's anarchism disappeared, and Raz is still one of the most influential writers on the philosophy of law in the English language.

Raz proposes some theses about authority in general before moving to the practical domain and, in particular, to the political domain. One is a thesis about what it means to act on authority, or the pre-emption thesis. This thesis says that to act on authority one must take an authoritative directive as one's reason for doing the act, replacing one's other reasons for and against doing the act. For instance, you may have many reasons for and against stopping at a red light. In favor of stopping, let us imagine that it appears safer to do so, you do not want to get a traffic citation, and the law says so. In favor of not

stopping, let's suppose that there is the fact that you are in a hurry and there is a reasonably high probability that you can do it safely and without getting caught. If you put all these reasons together, giving each a certain weight, and then decide that all things considered, you will stop, you are not acting on authority. You are acting on authority only if the fact that the law says to stop is *the* reason you stop. Authority is fundamentally the normative power to give others pre-emptive reasons.

The pre-emption thesis says nothing about whether or not you *should* act on authority. For that we need a second thesis, what Raz calls the Normal Justification thesis. This thesis says that the normal way to show that one person has authority over another is to show that the alleged subject is more likely to act for her own ends if she accepts the directives of the alleged authority and tries to follow them, rather than to try to act for those ends directly (53). In other words, given that each self-directing person has reasons for which she acts, it is rational to act on those reasons the best way she can. Sometimes the best way she can is to adopt an indirect strategy: do what authority A says to do. If she can act on her own reasons better by doing what A says to do rather than by acting independently, acting on authority is what self-direction tells her to do. It is an efficient means to her own ends. By acting on the authority's directive pre-emptively, she is letting the authority stand in for her in reaching her ends. Acting on authority is therefore not only compatible with autonomy under these conditions, but follows from it.

The task of Raz is to justify a system of laws on the basis of the Normal Justification principle. I have no opinion about whether such a project succeeds. But what I want to do is to call attention to the generality of Raz's thesis justifying authority. Rationally self-directing persons have many ends, some of which are more successfully reached by acting at the direction of someone else, whether it is a political authority, or an authority in some other domain. We have lots of ends that are practical, and so the justification of authority thesis can be used to justify taking someone as an authority about

many things that have nothing to do with the law—one's health, one's computer, the best way to plant one's garden. We also have lots of ends that are epistemic. We want to find out the truth in many domains, and we have reason to think that there are persons whose authority in these domains can be justified by a specification of Raz's Normal Justification thesis. I propose a justification thesis applied to beliefs as follows:

JUSTIFICATION THESIS FOR EPISTEMIC AUTHORITY

The epistemic authority of another person is justified for me by my conscientious judgment that I am more likely to form a true belief and avoid a false belief if I believe what the authority tells me than if I try to figure out what to believe myself.

Under the assumption that authority for a self-directing person is justified using the Razian framework, authority over beliefs for a self-directing person would be justified by this principle. If I am an intellectually realistic person, I will admit that there are many other people who are more likely to know the truth about some matter than I am myself. When that happens and I am aware of it, it is a demand of my own self-governance to take their word for it and to believe what they tell me because they tell me. The general principle here is that as long as I judge that their process of figuring out the truth using their experience, skills, background knowledge, and judgment is better than mine, I should let them stand in for me in determining whether a proposition in the relevant domain is true. I am serving my own ends by deferring to them in this way, and they are serving my ends by the process they use in coming to tell me that some proposition is true.

There are a number of issues that arise here that need to be resolved before it is reasonable for me to believe what someone else tells me pre-emptively in a particular case. For instance, maybe I have reason to believe that the putative authority is more likely to get the truth than I am, but the authority is only slightly more likely

to do so. If I have already formed a belief on the matter, I can easily be less sure of the authority's superiority to me in this case than I am of a belief I have adopted. It would probably be unwise to defer to the authority in such a situation. This is not a qualification of the justification thesis, but it is an acknowledgment of the difficulty in being confident that another person really is superior to oneself in the relevant respect.

Another kind of problem arises when there are competing authorities, both of whom are more likely to get the truth than I, but that disagree with each other, and I am not in a position to judge which one is more authoritative. The reasonable thing to do in such a case might be to defer judgment, or to make a judgment based on other reasons for belief that I have not mentioned, such as believing in a way that is more likely to survive my future reflection. I have not said what aspects of myself I should reflect upon in deciding how to evaluate competing authorities, nor have I said that the end of truth trumps all other ends. But one of the purposes of reflection is to govern oneself in such a way that one reaches one's ends, ends that themselves survive further reflection. After I do as much reflection as is necessary, it can happen that someone satisfies the Justification of Epistemic Authority thesis for me, even when there are competing "authorities."

Both Raz's Normal Justification thesis and my Justification of Epistemic Authority thesis may need supplementation with other principles to give us a determinate answer about what to do or believe in a particular case. The path from Raz's Normal Justification thesis to the conclusion that I ought to take a particular law as authoritative is even more complicated than the path from my Epistemic Authority thesis to the conclusion that I ought to take a certain belief on authority. But it is revealing that many theorists find Raz's thesis successful as a defense of political authority. Likewise, it seems to me that adherents of the value of autonomy ought to take seriously the epistemic parallel I have proposed.

3. *Moral Authority*

Are there some domains of belief that are off-limits to authority? As I mentioned at the beginning of this article, it is widely believed that there is no authority in the realm of morality. To think otherwise supposedly fails to acknowledge what a self-governing person should do. But can we consistently justify taking a belief about a scientific matter on the word of an authority, but not a moral belief? Is there any reason why we should defer to an authority about our computer problem, but not defer to an authority about a moral problem?

One reason immediately comes to mind. Many people believe there are no moral truths, or they believe that there are moral truths, but only because they are socially constructed. In either case, wouldn't that mean that there cannot be authority over the truth of such beliefs?

Actually, it would not. As long as I aim to make my moral beliefs true in whatever way they can be true, and I judge that I am more likely to get beliefs true in that sense if I accept the testimony of some other person than if I try to figure it out myself, I am justified in taking a moral belief on her testimony even if moral beliefs are not true in the same sense as scientific and other so-called "factual" beliefs. In fact, I do not even have to think that moral beliefs can be true in any sense. As long as I believe that some moral beliefs are better than others, I can be justified in taking a moral belief on authority when I judge that that person's moral belief is likely to be better than mine in that sense. "Better" can mean better defended, or better at aiding the community in its goal of peaceful co-existence, or better at giving me a belief that I will continue to hold ten years from now, or better in some other way. Provided that I conscientiously judge that some other person's moral belief is likely to be better than mine in whatever sense you want, I am justified in taking that person as an authority with regard to that belief by a simple modification of the justification principle.

Another reason for rejecting moral authority is that it seems to conflict with the right of each person to follow the voice of conscience

within her. In fact, it is part of the Catholic ethical tradition that a person is obliged to follow her conscience. Much has been written about the conscience, and it has sometimes been treated as a distinct source of moral knowledge, like Socrates's *daimonion*, a voice within him that prevented him from acting wrongly. But conscience can be opposed to authority only if conscience is a power by which I judge independently what is right and wrong in some case. Pope St. John Paul II criticizes this view in *Veritatis Splendor*:

The individual conscience is accorded a status of a supreme tribunal of moral judgment, which hands down categorical and infallible decisions about good and evil. To the affirmation that one has a duty to follow one's conscience is unduly added the affirmation that one's moral judgment is true merely by the fact that it has its origin in the conscience. But in this way the inescapable claims of truth disappear, yielding in their place to a criterion of sincerity, authenticity, and "being at peace with oneself," so much so that some have come to adopt a radically subjectivist conception of moral judgment. (§32)

Clearly, that cannot be the sense of conscience that has final authority. But there is another sense of conscience that arguably does have final authority: conscience as your best judgment of the truth in some case, all things considered. In this sense of conscience, your best judgment cannot conflict with authority when it is your own judgment that tells you that the authority is more likely to get the truth than you are yourself. Conscience interpreted as one's best judgment therefore does not conflict with authority where authority is defended by the Justification of Epistemic Authority thesis applied to moral beliefs.

There are some disadvantages to taking a moral belief on authority for the self-directing person that should be acknowledged. Although I think that believing on authority can be justified even when the belief has moral content, we cannot get moral understanding by the testimony of an authority. If a moral authority tells me that

abortion is wrong, and I believe it because I conscientiously judge that the authority is more likely to get the truth about the morality of abortion than I am, I am justified in having the belief, but I am not going to understand why abortion is wrong just because the authority said so. This is undoubtedly the reason papal encyclicals and other documents by religious authorities are typically accompanied by extensive argument. Some people (not many) may read the whole document and come to accept the belief advocated in the document on the basis of the reasons given. In such a case the person is not believing on authority alone, but is letting the authority guide her direct evaluation of the reasons. I would not deny that she is in a better epistemic position than the person who accepts the immorality of abortion on the teaching authority of the Church alone, but my purpose here is not to deny that importance of understanding for a self-governing person, but to make the narrower point that adherents of the modern value of autonomy who think that autonomy conflicts with taking beliefs on authority are making a mistake. Even when the belief is about a moral matter, a person who takes the belief on authority can be justified in the same way political authority is justified in the tradition of political liberalism.

4. Religious Authority

A person with moral authority in the sense I have been discussing is any person who is more likely to get the truth about some moral matter than some other person. One's grandmother can be a moral authority in this sense. Because the guiding premise has been the modern assumption of individual autonomy, authority needs to be justified by reference to an individual person's reasons for acting or believing. Since that person is in a different state from all other persons in the world, the persons who are authoritative for her will often differ from the persons who are authoritative for someone else. But some persons are authoritative for large groups of people who are bonded together, in part, because of common acceptance

of beliefs that are transmitted over generations by an authoritative structure that is recognized in the community as the primary vehicle for that transmission. When authoritative beliefs are transmitted to large numbers of people over many generations, long after any particular person in authority has died, the question is no longer limited to which particular person to accept as an authority, but also what structure of authority is best designed to transmit authoritative teachings long into the future. It is no surprise, then, that moral authorities are often embedded in traditions.

My position is that authority within a religious community can be defended by extension of the same general principle for the justification of authority we have been using. Religious authorities are often both epistemic and practical. A religious community's epistemic authority is justified for me by my conscientious judgment that I am more likely to believe the truth if I believe what we, the community, believe than if I try to figure it out in a way that is independent of the community, or the Church. The community's practical authority is justified for me by my conscientious judgment that I am more likely to live and die well and ultimately reach salvation by following the directives of the Church than if I attempt to reach those ends on my own.

There are some important differences between the Church or religious community and the political state that affects the way authority is justified from the point of view of the individual member or subject. I think it is significant that modern political thought is motivated more by fear of bad authority than by desire for good authority. For historical reasons, it is now considered more important to devise a justification of authority that prevents tyranny than to give the bearer of authority the function of assisting the subjects in pursuing their individual and collective good. That means restricting authority as much as possible, compatible with having a tolerably smooth-functioning society. The contours of authority as proposed by Raz justify the authority of the state by reference to the state's ability to aid the subjects in the pursuit of ends they all have in ad-

vance of being subjects of the state. The ends that the state helps the subjects attain are very limited, so while the state has a high degree of power over the subjects in the relevant domains, the power of the state does not extend to a very large part of the subjects' lives.

In contrast, communities of all sorts are composed of persons who have something in common that persons outside the community do not share. Communities also have communal ends, which are not the same as the ends of the individuals in advance of joining the community. But by becoming part of a community, individuals assume the ends of the community. Certain communities can become an extended self and its members refer to it as "we," signaling that they identify with the community and its ends. Authority in a community is justified at least in part by reference to the communal ends, not only the ends the subjects have in advance of community membership. When the community is a religious body such as a church, authority is justified partly by reference to individual ends, such as personal salvation, and partly by the ends of the Church as a communal body, such as ministering to the spiritual and bodily needs of persons outside the Church. The range of authority of a religious body can therefore be much more extensive than the range of authority of the state.

The authority of a religious community can be more extensive in another way. The religious community teaches me some of my individual ends. The concept of salvation is something we learn through a community, and we adopt it as an end through membership in the community. Actually, it is not necessary to be a member of a religious community in order to adopt salvation as an end, but the usual way to take a religious end as one's personal end is through membership in a religious community. That means that if we are going to use the Razian approach to justifying authority, we would have to say that in many cases, the authority of the religious community is justified by reference to ends one adopts on the authority of that same community. How can authority be defended by the demands of individual autonomy in such a case?

I think the answer requires taking a careful look at what a conscientiously self-governing person does. Defenders of autonomy clearly believe that a self-governing person has ends, but nobody thinks that a self-governing person's ends must be fixed in advance of undertaking the process of self-governance. While governing ourselves with whatever ends we have by nature, we gradually learn to modify those ends. Some ends disappear and new ones are added as we follow the prescriptions dictated by our rational nature. Raz defends political authority on the grounds that acceptance of authority can be defended by the demands of rational self-governance. I am arguing that when authority is defended by rational self-governance, it can also be a demand of rational self-governance to accept a modification or addition to one's ends on the word of the authority. In this way, altering one's ends on authority is entailed by autonomy. There is no reason to think that moral and religious authority are excluded from this line of defense.

Contemporary defenders of autonomy and traditional defenders of authority generally assume that they have so little in common as to make it hopeless to attempt a dialogue on the defensibility of any kind of authority, whether epistemic, moral, religious, or political. But they do have one thing in common. Both sides agree that they are hopelessly divided. I think they are mistaken. Under the assumption of the value of autonomy, traditional forms of authority can be defended. If adherents of autonomy have objections to religious or moral authority, it cannot be on the grounds that such authority conflicts with autonomy. There are many ways in which authority structures and the exercise of authority can be criticized, of course, but the deepest attack is simply wrong.

Notes

1. Patrick Hurley, *A Concise Introduction to Logic* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2008), 133.
2. John Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration* (New York: Classic Book America, 2009), 24.
3. Robert Paul Wolff, *In Defense of Anarchism* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998).
4. Joseph Raz, *The Morality of Freedom* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986).