

“No moral system can rest solely on authority. It can never be sufficient justification for performing any action that someone commands it.” (A J Ayer, 1910-1989) Discuss.

Authority is defined as the power to give orders and the right to exact obedience. In *Humanist Outlook*, A.J Ayer challenged the notion that submission to authority is a sufficient form of moral system. He demonstrated such contempt for authority in his first book, *The Foundations of Ethics, Language, Truth and Logic.*, which changed the face of philosophy in a courageous, iconoclastic attack on accepted academic philosophy. Therein, he rejected all ethical statements as meaningless because they are neither analytically nor synthetically verifiable. His belief in emotivism therefore explains both his rejection of putative views and conventional authority, and his assertion that "no moral system can rest solely on authority". This ethical outlook poses thought-provoking questions about successful forms of government, the motivation behind moral decision-making, the subjectivity of morality and the inexorable nature of moral progression. However, Ayer's view ultimately questions whether any power has sufficient authority to justify obedience and the extent to which an individual is accountable for their moral actions.

An effective moral system can theoretically rest solely on authority, so long as that authority is perfect: arguably, a benign and incorruptible dictatorship which supports the interest of the people and maintains justice is preferable to a flawed but egalitarian democracy. Plato's *The Republic* describes a utopian city in which the political system is controlled by philosophers who are trained to distinguish between real and apparent truths and are impelled by the 'common good'. They are inspired by justice and are thus motivated to seek justice for others. This ideal political system would have the ability to construct and support successfully a moral system based on truth and justice. However, even Plato questioned whether this would be practically possible. Such a system requires the individual to relinquish autonomy, a fundamental necessity for human fulfilment, to the hands of another. Moreover, in reality, giving a small group or individual ultimate power is likely to be corrupting and therefore cannot be relied upon to establish a moral system of government.

It follows from the traditional philosophical perception of 'God' as an omnipotent and omnibenevolent creator that God is the ultimate benign dictator: many would say that religion provides an effective moral system, determined by a divine authority. A Christian makes moral decisions using revealed law in scripture, the authority of the church, natural revelation and conscience. Each of these facilities derives from divine authority and thus reduces the value of moral decision to God's gratification. The sole motive behind a Christian's moral action is submission to the divine will. Therefore, without God, mankind would descend into immorality and anarchy. Scientists and philosophers have disputed this premise, and have frequently analysed the question of "why are people good?" In the twenty-first century, militant atheists such as Richard Dawkins are building on the work of Bertrand Russell and Ayer by challenging religious attitudes and the legitimacy of obedience to divine authority.

The danger of abandoning religious authority is that the absence of belief may lead to a moral vacuum. Ayer had no such concern, and shocked his contemporaries with his overt atheism: Bishop Butler responded to this by saying "Then I cannot see why you do not lead a life of unbridled immorality."¹ The belief that "If God doesn't exist, everything is permitted"² (Dostoyevsky, *The Karamazov Brothers*) is widespread in religious communities. In fact, Ayer led a moral life as a parent, human rights activist and teacher. Christopher Hitchens postulates that it is actually the Bishop who could not lead a moral life without submitting to religious authority, and implies that the religious might be inclined to immorality, were it not for their faith. In *God Is Not Great*, Hitchens

¹ Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great*, page 185,

²Quoted by John Mayled Routledge (2007) in *OCR Religious Ethics for AS and A2, 2nd Edition*, p.79.

contends that rather than edifying moral behaviour, religion can be positively malevolent. It is and has been used to justify bloodshed and oppression, and incites the rejection of natural compassion by silencing the voice of conscience. Thus, it could be damaging to allow religious authority to inform a moral system.

If religion cannot serve the role, it seems natural to explore the potential of other ethical sources to provide the basis for a moral system. Cultural relativism argues that the concept of morality stems from the *de facto* values of the culture. The theory states that one will always act in a way that is consistent with local customs and ideals. In order to appreciate an individual's moral decisions, one must first be cognisant of their social and cultural background. Thus, behaviour within a society can only be judged by the standards of that society. Arguably, this is a form of determinism; our culture determines the acceptance of certain values. No successful moral authority can circumvent the pre-existing, traditional ethics ingrained in a culture. Attempts to eliminate the influence of culture on the population have proved futile: during the Chinese Cultural Revolution, Mao Tse Tung outlawed religion and traditional Chinese ritual in order to enforce ultimate socialism. However, suppressed practices continued covertly and re-emerged after his death, demonstrating that cultural ideas are impossible to extinguish by authority alone.

Moreover, evidence is accumulating for the existence of intrinsic universal moral laws. Moral Objectivism recognises moral norms but requires the use of reason to justify them. Clyde Kluckhohn accurately observed that "Every culture has a concept of murder... notions of incest and other regulations upon sexual behaviour... [and] of mutual obligations."³ These common features suggest that there are ethical concepts which are of intrinsic value across cultures. Fundamental, universal values can be identified and are derived from an internal locus. This implies that an objective moral framework is known intuitively and "overarches rulers and ruled alike"⁴ (C.S Lewis). However, there are differing interpretations and perspectives of this set of values dependent on cultural background. Therefore, an individual behaves according to an internal value system, which tends to and is motivated by goodness for its own sake. This internal moral compass cannot be completely overridden by authority. Supporting this idea, Dawkins offers a Darwinist theory for the origin of internal and cultural ethics, using natural selection: certain "altruistic" values evolve because they are in the interest of the propagation of "selfish genes" within the group, given that group members are likely to share genes.

If one accepts that there is an internal moral system, it is evident that the resulting cultural and ethical predilections can be overcome when an individual is under the power of a greater force, such as fear of oppression in a tyranny, or for a greater good, such as the imperative to follow military orders in the pursuit of a just war. However, there are countless instances in which blind deference to authority has resulted in grave injustice and calamity. Indeed, "Unthinking respect for authority is the greatest enemy of truth"⁵ (Einstein). Authority is most successful when it serves to exploit or manipulate popular opinion. For example, Hitler's rise to power in Nazi Germany was possible because of pre-existing public sentiment against minority groups. History shows that regimes that are contrary to universal moral codes and oppress their population ultimately do not flourish. Moreover, the diminution of ignorance and the growth of tolerance have resulted in increasing moral progression that cannot be quashed by any form of superimposed authority. Achever Clausewitz quotes Blaise Pascal: "...violence cannot weaken truth, and its efforts can only make truth stand out more clearly."⁶ Therefore, no moral system can be upheld if it is not congruent with the immediate moral values of the people, regardless of authority's instruction.

³ Clyde Kluckhohn, *Ethical Relativity: Sic et Non*, p.276

⁴ C.S Lewis, *The Poison of Subjectivism*, p.108.

⁵ R. Highfield & P. Carter, *The Private Lives of Albert Einstein*, p.78.

⁶ Blaise Pascal quoted by Achever Clausewitz, *Carnets Nord* preface p.7 unmarked.

From this it follows that, although laws can be used to shape behaviour, for example banning smoking in public places, in general, successful legislation must reflect moral values in order to be accepted. As William Blackstone states, "Law is the embodiment of the moral sentiment of the people." Laws that do not mirror prevalent attitudes undermine authority and result in public defiance. This is exemplified in the American Civil Rights Movement in which increasing numbers of Americans were sympathetic to the plight of the African Americans. The force of public support led to the success of Martin Luther King's campaign. In this way, the populace both fashions and leads society's moral system, while authority must follow behind, as a means of enforcing law and actualising justice.

In conclusion, a moral system could rely solely on authority only if that authority were infallible and had the support of the people. This fantastical situation is the only one in which it would be acceptable to act unquestioningly simply because it is commanded. Like Ayer, I cannot accept that there is a divine or human authority that should have the power to override an individual's rational expression of morality. The aim of any authority should be to achieve a synchrony between the moral framework of the individual and universally accepted values, and its sole purpose to realise justice and promote the contemporary common good. In the words of Mark Twain, "Laws control the lesser man... Right conduct controls the greater one."

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