

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.

When considering the issue of how a good society should best establish the virtue of morality amongst its people, the debate often produces a particular position from which it is argued that there is a single code of human morality, or at least parts of such a code, that should be enforced from authority. This position is occupied largely, though not exclusively, by those for whom morality is guaranteed in some way, often through adherence to a sacred text or doctrine of religious revelation, and as such it is seen as imperative that the view of morality be upheld as law and enforced institutionally in order to prevent people from acting immorally. Examples of societies which have practised this brand of authoritarian morality are abundant and we need look no further than our own country's recent history to see a state in which people saw what was 'right' and 'wrong' as synonymous with what was legal and illegal. However, in assessing this system of moral authority we can identify serious flaws and indeed dangers that arise from it; and we can propose that a more active involvement in our own moral choices as well as a reduced role for the government in enforcing a common morality is of far greater value to a society wishing to identify itself as truly moral than any moral system which rests solely on authority.

In framing this discussion of morality, it is important to make the distinction between the kind of morality which is seen as immutable and is enforced from authority, and the kind which is seen at every level of society, a living morality which cuts its teeth on the experience and rationality of the individual members of society. This first kind of morality, practised in an authoritarian manner we might refer to as 'top-down morality'; whereas the second kind which does not rest solely on authority can be thought of as more of a 'grassroots' morality. While this distinction may at first appear to be rather arbitrary, in exploring the difference we see that the results for society of each kind of morality are quite different in practice, these differences highlighting the shortcomings of top-down morality.

Firstly, in his essay *On Liberty*, John Stuart Mill offers significant grounds to criticise the idea of top-down morality. Mill suggested that morality which is dictated from authority is often ill-founded to begin with, observing that "wherever there is an ascendant class, a large portion of the morality of the country emanates from its class interests, and its feelings of class superiority."^[1] When it is accepted that one person can command moral authority over another, that person can effectively use their authority to tailor the common morality to their own interests; this is the first significant issue with top-down morality.

Mill also argues that even if we accept that a belief is true, the manner in which the belief is held remains crucial to its value, stating that "however true [a belief] may be, if it is not fully, frequently, and fearlessly discussed, it will be held as a dead dogma, not a living truth."^[2] It is this criticism which demonstrates the key flaw in the argument for top-down morality – when moral beliefs are enforced from authority they are not questioned, interrogated and experimented with, and as such they become dead dogma. This argument also provides grounds for a positive case for grassroots morality, as it is only through living with moral issues, discussing them, challenging them, and thinking about them rationally that we can know *why* we believe something to be right or wrong, and even then we must not draw a line under our morals but maintain the process of interrogation continually.

As well as these arguments, it is often argued that it is always better to do something positive voluntarily rather than being forced to. When we make our own choices, moral or otherwise, it is almost universally accepted that they are of more value than when they are made for us by others. When the choices we make are correct, we cherish them because we understand fully why we hold them to be correct, and when we fail we benefit too because we have had the opportunity to learn from mistakes and this also helps us to understand the beliefs we hold. As well as this, we tend to uphold our actions with more commitment and enthusiasm when we choose to do them voluntarily than when we are made to do them. Indeed, this is a position often taken by those religious persons who also hold that there is a common morality we should all adhere to. Christian philosopher John Hick articulated this point by stating that “a moral goodness that exists as the agent’s initial given nature, without ever having been chosen by him in the face of temptations to the contrary, is intrinsically less valuable than a moral goodness which has been built up through the agent’s own responsible choices through time in the face of alternative possibilities.”^[3] This demonstrates that even if we were to subscribe to the notion that there is a common objective morality, there is no reason to deduce from this that the morality should be enforced through authority.

In the light of these criticisms, we may begin to question and assess what positive reasons there are to support the view that moral issues should rest on authority. The most prominent of such claims is that of Lord Patrick Devlin, who argued that “an established morality is as necessary as good government to the welfare of society...There is disintegration when no common morality is observed and history shows that the loosening of moral bonds is often the first stage of disintegration, so that society is justified in taking the same steps to preserve its moral code as it does to preserve its government and other essential institutions.”^[4] Devlin’s view is that society would in fact break down without morality resting on authority, even calling common morality an ‘essential institution’, and he uses homosexuality as an example of an immoral act which poses a threat to society. Devlin’s views are shared by many social conservatives even in modern societies, particularly religious conservatives.

However, we can critically assess Devlin’s argument simply by observing societies which have tested his claim. Let us consider abortion rights, often denied on the grounds of morality, and Devlin’s own example of homosexuality. One might suppose that if Devlin were correct in his claims, the legalisation of abortion and homosexual acts alone would lead to the disintegration of society, and same-sex marriage even more so. However, in the Netherlands, same-sex marriages have been legal since 2001 and abortions legal since 1984. We might expect, according to Devlin’s views, the effects of this to be socially devastating; however, the Netherlands ranks 3rd worldwide on the 2011 Human Development Index (HDI)^[5], measuring standard of living, health and knowledge, and 4th in human happiness (2010)^[6]. Similar patterns can be found in Norway, Canada and Sweden, all of which rank in the top 10 in both HDI and happiness and all of which share the same liberal, secular values of the Netherlands in allowing their citizens to decide for themselves what is morally right on a wide range of issues the state could conceivably have claimed authority on.

Similarly, we may consider Yemen, a country whose moral code is fiercely upheld and in which abortion, alcohol and homosexuality, among other things considered immoral, are illegal. Devlin may expect that such a society, in which everyone is singing from the same moral hymn sheet, would be socially prosperous. However, Yemen ranks 154th in HDI and 96th in happiness. Iran and Saudi Arabia, with the same moral enforcements, rank 88th and 56th respectively in HDI and 81st and 58th in

happiness^{[5][6]}. This data demonstrates that there are no significant grounds to hold the belief that morality should be tied to authority, and it is certainly difficult to see how these societies can be said to have broken down and disintegrated. The high HDI and happiness rankings would suggest that opening up moral choices leads to the kind of society we should all aspire to live in.

In conclusion, it seems that Ayer was correct in his claim that no moral system can rest solely on authority. As a matter of principle, top-down morality runs counter to Hick's defence of freedom to choose our actions, as well as running counter to the important values of diversity and tolerance; and as a practical matter, it would appear that morality which is imposed upon us is in fact a barrier to our human development and happiness. As removing such barriers is surely our primary goal as human beings, this is as good an argument as any against a morality resting on authority.