



**INTERNATIONAL
PHILOSOPHY
OLYMPIAD**

Essay: 97860-e9160.pdf

Since authority always demands obedience; it is commonly mistaken for some form of power or violence. Yet authority precludes the use of external means of coercion; where force is used, authority has failed. Authority, on the other hand, is incompatible with persuasion, which presupposes equality and works through a process of argumentation. Where arguments are used, authority is left in abeyance. Against the egalitarian order of persuasion stands the authoritarian order, which is always hierarchical. If authority is to be defined at all, then, it must be in contradistinction to both coercion by force and persuasion through arguments.

- Hannah Arendt

I. Introduction

Since the beginning of time, empires have risen and fallen, often under the pretext of failed authority – or governance. Rules, mighty and strong, have capitulated to the greatness of *another*. In the modern world, we see the nature of authority evolve from kings and fighters to technocratic elites, who possess the ability to *alter the functioning of human society*.

The aforementioned quote, by political philosopher, Hannah Arendt draws an attention to the dichotomous nature of authority. In a bid to answer, the larger question ‘What is authority?’ Arendt draws the readers attention to three possible facets in which authority has been historically conceptualised: *obedience, coercion, and persuasion*. While she focuses on the latter two, I think obedience is an inherently important component through which authority and by extension, governance can be understood. The nature of her argument, prompts us to think more deeply about what it fundamentally means to overlook a society. Is authority synonymous to dominance? How do we *elect* someone in positions of authority? What is authority? Questions like these, compel us to look at the quote in a three-pronged manner:

1. What is the nature of authority?
2. How must we look at authority in an era of technological revolution?
3. How must societies exist together?

In this essay, I will argue that authority must be reconceptualised to be understood in relation to human relationships. That is to say, it must be derived from morality, and individual authority, situating agency to be fundamental to authority. That is to say, authority is less about coercive control and persuasion through argument, and is more about the ability to take accountability. First, I will argue that true authority arises from the ability to be morally responsible. Second, drawing upon the works of Martin Heidegger, and Luciano Floridi, I will argue that human relationships and authority must be reconceptualised in a technological world – so as to say, we work in tandem with technology, rather than against it. Lastly, I will, through a Rawlsian perspective argue that societies, and by extension law & order must exist with plurality, conviviality, and integrated multiculturalism.

I. The Nature of Authority

The word ‘authority’ though an abstraction at large, can be understood tangible macroscopically and microscopically through two frameworks. The same way in which rulers such as Julius Ceaser, Barack Obama, and Winston Churchill possessed authority over the Roman empire, America, and the United Kingdom, a teacher in a classroom, telling students to remove their notebooks, and their subsequent compliance, also possesses authority. The essence¹ of authority, to an extent, lies in obedience. However, obedience is not the only virtue due to which someone possess authority. Authority can look like a mother planning a summer vacation for her family, or a general commanding an army. A person in authority tends to be someone *in control*, to whom people are obedient.

I think that while obedience and control are two inherent qualities of authority, both definitions presuppose that authority is intrinsically linked to power and dominance. We must seek to redefine authority in relation to the field in which it is fundamentally exercised – human relationships. Before doing so, we must understand the current problem in status-quo: coercion and persuasion.

¹ Although philosophically contested, the ‘essence’ of something has been understood has the virtue of which makes something the thing, i.e., that due to which Xs are Xs.

What do coercion and persuasion look like when exerted by authoritative people? This looks like an elderly man exerting coercive control over a teenager, thereby trafficking her. It looks like a ruler holding his army hostage, because his motives for fighting (even when on the brink of losing) is purely egotistical. That is to say, vulnerable, marginalised communities remain at the margins and are structurally locked out of the opportunity to move towards the centre of the spectrum. Drawing upon the philosophy of Simone De Beauvoir, women continue to exist in the margins to society as “the Other” and continue to be defined in relation to their male counterparts. When people in positions of power – or those who have authority – exert coercive control over more vulnerable groups in society they do two things (1) it perpetuates the narrative of hierarchies and exacerbates conditions already marginalised communities (2) they violate the individual rights of a person. Drawing upon the philosophy of Immanuel Kant, people are treated as a “means to an end” and not an “end in themselves.” Authoritarian rule and coercive control tends to overlook and violate the basic individual principals by which a society functions – the right to live, the right to independence, and the right to bodily autonomy.

It is because of these existing inherent failures in the structure of society – hierarchy, coercion, and persuasion – that I think calls for a reconceptualization of society. So, to speak, a person who possesses authority, must invertedly be morally responsible for the actions of society at large. Authority must be redefined as the ability of an individual to be morally responsible for their actions. Culpability becomes fundamental to authority as a mechanism to hold persons in authority responsible – without which we would enter a continuous cycle of havoc and one synonymous to the Hobbesian ‘State of Nature.’ To illustrate this with an example, imagine you rule Ireland. As the ruler of Ireland, I have to decide how much money must be allocated to the education sector. In the event that I underallocate resources, I must be in a position of accountability. Pawning off one’s mistakes would be inverse to authority and would result in those at the top exerting bureaucratic power.

There are two fundamental ways in which this can be understood: the microscopic and the macroscopic, both of which are contingent on each other. In order to understanding this, we must look at *when* a moral agent is culpable. Microscopically speaking, a moral agent is culpable on fulfilling either one of the three broad epistemic conditions for moral responsibility, which are Awareness of action, consequence, alternatives. To understand each, we will look at an example of Mary and Jack.

- (1) An agent is morally responsible if they are aware of the action. Suppose Mary and Jack are in the gym. Mary is on the treadmill and Jack enters the gym and switches on a button, causing all activity to stop – thereby injuring Mary’s hand. However, Jack is not culpable because he was unaware the button stopped the electricity, he thought it simply turned on the air condition.
- (2) An agent is morally responsible if they are aware of the consequences. Using the example of Mary and Jack, Jack would only be found culpable if he knew pressing the button would cause Mary to fall down and did it anyway.
- (3) An agent is morally responsible if they possess an awareness of alternatives. Jack was unaware that instead of switching on the button, he could have called a trained electrician/used the remote control available to him – which frees him from culpability.

Thus, from this, we can understand the frameworks which grant culpability. While it may be argued that this is inherently individualistic, recognising these three conditions in the broader framework of society becomes essential when granting something authority. Macroscopically speaking, authorities and governance often exists in groups or communities. Insofar as we do so, there exists as a phenomenon known as ‘collective responsibility.’ That is to say, does in the words of Arendt, “political responsibility” belong to the individual or the collective. I think that even if, there exists a collective with the same identity, intention, or action – one which identifies as a unified group different from corporations, phenomenologically speaking, the ‘we’ is reducible to the ‘I.’ Even if, there exists a collective community which acts as one unified group, with a unified identity there exists individual consciousnesses which make up these groups. Even in a unified collective, individual ‘I’s’ partake in decision making.

Holding these collectives culpable would be an abstraction at large. If a collective is held responsible, accountability and justice is never achieved because responsibility *fades* when not concentrated. For instance, in the act of war, it becomes impossible to hold the *complete* nation X accountable. Therefore, we tend to concentrate responsibility and power. In the event of doing so, I think when the individual to opts-in to being held accountable for the actions of a collective, is truly the agent with authority.

In conclusion, I think that a person with authority, and the nature of authority must be defined by an individual's ability to be accountable. They must rise to be accountable for the society and community in which they live. Thus, authority becomes inherently individualised, but also relativised to the human relationships that foster them.

II. Authority in a Technological Era

In the last five years, technology has fundamentally altered the way in which we see society. Drawing on the works of Martin Heidegger, the essence of modern technology no longer a "mode of revealing." On the contrary, its essence lies in what Heidegger terms as "enframing" or *Ge-Stell*. Modern technology, has prompted us to look at the world as a "standing-reserve." We look at the world not as things-in-themselves but as objects ready-to-hand. That is to say, for instance, a river bank is no longer viewed as a structure supporting life, a structure with blue water and tress; rather, we look at a river bank as a resource to extract water, to extract fish, and to sustain *our* livelihood. As technology fundamentally alters the way in which we live, Heidegger goes so far as to say that we adopt a technological worldview. This is one in which we see the world in terms of its utility and resources. A hammer, is no longer the mode of revealing which opens the up the world and reveals to me a wall as something to be penetrated into, rather I look at hammers as objects through which I set-up an art gallery. We are thus, as a society, progressing towards an industrialised worldview. In addition to this, philosopher Luciano Floridi even says that we are headed towards the fourth revolution – that of technology.

The onset of a technological revolution, prompts us to rethink the ways in which we look at society. That is to say, we must aim towards working in tandem with technology rather than working to exist independent of it. We must restore the process of unconcealment in our lives, where truth, or *Alethia* can flourish. I think, this fundamentally is possible if we, as society, grant thought and thinking as a prerequisite to authority.

Moral agents tend to lose sight of their actions, when they, in the words of Hannah Arendt, possess an 'inability to think.' That is, look at the world from the perspective of the other. We must aspire to foster conviviality and plurality in our societies so that our worldview is not linear and works towards incorporating the other. We must, to establish true authority, be able to first cultivate *inner, self-reflective dialogue*. The cultivation of inner dialogue grants humans the tools of self-reflection which they might have lost. In a bid to self-reflect, agents might ask themselves, "Did I do something right or wrong?" When this happens, it becomes apparent that an individual is unable to break away from dialogue with oneself, one cannot escape oneself in the same way I can walk away from a fight with a friend. When this happens, pre-universalised fundamentals which I posses begin to break down as the objective becomes the subjective. An agent is able to move away from the pre-conditioned historical biases and recognise the plurality and otherness which exists in the world outside of my own pre-conceived notions.

The proliferation of technology in the modern world, prompts us to rethink the authority in which we organise societies. We must now look at authority in a two-fold manner. First, we must be able to, through the process of thought, and self-reflective dialogue, establish individual authority. So as to speak, we must be able to *think for ourselves* and be morally aware and thus accountable for our actions--because thought and morality are intrinsically linked. Second, the ability to think, in addition to obedience and culpability, must be a necessary component to derive authority. This prevents us from entering into a world dependant on technology with people in positions of authority existing as cogs in a machine. The capacity for independent thought allows us to preserve the essence of our human nature and flourish in a way which breeds advancement rather than regression. When pairing the technological revolution with the establishment of individual authority, we begin to see the foundations of a society built on the principles of co-existence and cooperation, rather than dominance and erasure.

In conclusion, I think that in relation to technology, we should look at authority as individual authority and develop individual technology in a world of technological development. When we do so, the development of individual authority forges the path to existing with conviviality.

III. Living with Conviviality

In redefining what it means to have 'authority' we must also ask ourselves; how then should we live in society? I aim to answer this in a two-fold manner. First, by laying down how we must look at society, in terms John Rawls' public political culture and second, by then synthesising the way in which we must lay the frameworks of authority (section IV).

First, we must begin to restructure society to foster conviviality and plurality. That is to say, the laws which form the foundation of our society, must be revised to acknowledge and incorporate multiculturalism. Scholars such as Thomas Hobbes and Jean-Jacques Rousseau have posited that we exist in society by means of a social contract – one in which we give up some of our personal liberties for the common liberty to capitulate to the general will. This claim however, encounters resistance from feminist philosophers who argue that the social contract theory presupposes the existence of a free and equal society in which all individuals begin with the same base common liberty. The social contract theory, thereby ostracises women who have been historically side-lined and have historically not had the same level of liberties in comparison to men. The social contract theory thus, is largely utopic because it assumes that all agents in societies have the same ‘amount,’ so as to speak, of liberty. Seeing this, we must look at alternate forms of political theory as mechanisms to organise society. I think we must turn our attention to John Rawls’ conceptualisation of public political culture. While it may be viewed as largely idealistic, I think thinking so conflates description with normative validity. Political thought must be idealistic or else it runs the risk of conforming to the status quo, we must conceptualise future ideals and principles to strive by when thinking of mechanisms to run society.

Thus, I think that if we wish to live with conviviality and to foster pluralism, we must do so by adopting the ‘Original Position.’ That is to say, we must cast a ‘Veil of Ignorance’ over our pre-conceived biases such as our gender, socio-economic background, and social status. We must make decisions knowing very little contextually. This therefore, equips us with the ability to make decisions independent of bias. We would make decisions which are fair and favour the most vulnerable members of society. More importantly, we adopt something known as a public political culture. Which is, recognising the same esoteric principles by which we run our lives. For instance, a Christian, under the veil of ignorance would favour a law in favour of prayer because of a belief in a God whereas an atheist might because of autonomy. Under the veil of ignorance, we begin to recognise and cognize society and its laws in a way which respects human autonomy and diversity. We begin to adopt policies which we might have done otherwise due to the presence of a subjective opinion. Insofar as we exist as agents with individual thought, we must work towards creating a framework for society which is objective in its enforcement of entrenched notions.

Therefore, as we begin to adopt frameworks which exist to foster interreligious dialogue, conviviality, multiculturalism, we begin to break away from notions of authority as relative to the majoritarian. We begin to move closer to a notion of authority relative to human relationships and justice.

IV. Conclusion

For millennia, the world has existed conflating authority as the ‘mighty’ or as the ‘all-powerful.’ I think that while this is, in some regards true, we must recognise that authority exists independent of power and violence. Authority is not synonymous to coercion or persuasion, rather, exists as an abstraction which fundamentally decides the way in which society functions. A person with authority possesses the culpability to make decisions and has independent thought. When an individual is said to have authority, we must reconceptualise our belief to incorporate that an individual with authority must be truly in control. They must be control of themselves and their thought, not of society as a means of coercive control. Historically, authority has always been understood as X ruling Y, I think, using this notion, we must look at authority in relation to human relationships. Human relationships which are limited not only to one another, but human relationships in relation to technology, political structures, and thought. We must use the authority of individuality and social authority to breed and foster conviviality and plurality.