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Authority: What Is It?

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In this article an attempt will be made to explore the concept of authority from a formal as well as from a practical perspective. The formal investigation seeks to explore important aspects to authority such as its philology, language use, and types of authority that exist as well as different forms of legitimacy on which it rests. Such a formal investigation is a necessary starting point for any attempt to understand a concept and to explore its manifestations. The practical investigation on the other hand seeks to describe authority as it functions in different contexts. We will look at the authority-bearer and the collectivity, authority and authoritarianism as well as authority and power.

Introduction

Authority is a concept that is both protean and poly-dynamic. Among humans, authority has fundamentally to do with procedures and standards that foster conformity. Standards help to classify as acceptable or unacceptable things that humans do.

In originating these standards, it becomes necessary to establish procedures which help in deciding which of these standards themselves are acceptable or not. The procedures assist in applying the standards to specific situations as well as guide processes of altering the standards when the need to do so arises.

Some people are granted by these procedures the prerogative to exercise authority by playing an initiating or determining role in the sphere of standards. People such as army commanders, referees and judges are granted by these procedures the right to make proclamations, give instructions or impose decisions. When such initiators and umpires in the sphere of standards are effectual within the provisions of relevant procedures, authority is operational.

Authority can be understood as the right to give instructions or impose decisions which are based on recognized procedures. Both the person exercising the authority and the people who are subject to it are bound by the established procedures to act in accordance with the recognized standards. It is a form of conformity. According to R.S. Peters,

... the person in authority has the legitimate position to make decisions which are binding on oneself and the collectivity as a whole ... they are bound to act in accordance...¹

Importance of Speech in Authority Evolution, Exercise and Transmission

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The same author has also helpfully observed that even though non-human creatures that do not have speech (as humans do) experience conformity, that of humans is qualitatively different. It is through speech that humans are able not only to construct standards, which become the basis of conformity and authority, but to pass them on from generation to generation. It is also through speech that those who conform to such authority comply with the constructed standards. R.S. Peters has written extensively on the type of authority which humans experience and express as distinct from other non-human animals. He says, again:

The kind of conformity that humans experience is qualitatively distinct from the conformity of iron filings moving towards a magnet, the pecking order in a chicken fowl run or the conformity of bees in a bee-hive.²

In this article, we are interested in the kind of authority that humans experience; therein lays the importance of R. S. Peters' work on authority for this project.

A Philological Investigation

Philology has to do with the linguistic evolution of terms and a philological study of the English term "authority" sheds light on the multifaceted concept it refers to. The English term *authority* is derived from the Latin *auctor*, which referred to the activity of originating opinion, advice or instructions. The fact that the "auctor" said so, made a standard correct, and imposed that instructions given were to be obeyed and proclamations made were affirmed. The "auctor" had to be complied with whether these instructions, proclamations or standards were indicated by speech or by symbolic gesture. This is authority affected by the "auctor".

Definition of Authority

This background to the meaning of the word authority leads one to accept a definition of it that focuses on the right to command or to decide, which right is based on recognized rules of procedures. This basic meaning of authority is reflected in other scholars who have done extensive research on this concept.

One such scholar is Erich Fromm, whose interest in the concept of authority is in the context of a psychological investigation into the process of deciding what is good or bad ethically. He has made an attempt to clarify the meaning of authority and observes that it is not

a quality one has as with property or physical qualities' and that it '... refers to an interpersonal relationship in which one person looks upon another as superior to him.³

Steven Lukes is yet another scholar who, in the process of his work on power, has contrasted it from authority, in order to distinguish authority from power. In this way, he clearly defines power. He has described authority as:

... a set of rights in status in a collectivity, precisely in a collectivity as auctor, including especially the right to acquire and use power in that status.⁴

Despite their different research interests and the referent place of authority in their studies, both these scholars reflect a basic meaning of it which tallies with that derived from the term's philological background in the Latin word "auctor".

Types of Authority

Most scholars who have investigated the question of authority (such as R.S. Peters, E. Fromm and S. Lukes) highlight the importance of the categories of authority types associated with Max Weber.

S. Lukes highlights Weber's categories as he explores contrasts between power and authority. Peters, though un-attracted to Weber's elevation of the charismatic authority-bearer's unique qualities (as we shall see in what follows), nevertheless adopts a three-fold classification of authority which reflects Weber's rational-legal, charismatic and traditional types.

The three different authority set-ups derived from Weber's work have dominated recent discourse on authority and we have found it appropriate for this project. We will, in this section, affirm the strength and defensibility of the three broad categories of authority that Weber advanced and make use of them as a framework within which to analyze authority in terms of how it functions in general.

The three categories of authority - each with different rules - which give authority-bearers the right to give instructions, and make proclamations or decisions, are the legal-rational, the traditional and the charismatic.

Legal-rational authority

Within the legal-rational category, the authority bearer's claim to exercise legitimate authority depends on a two-sided rationale. It rests, on one hand, on joint-recognition of certain normative procedures and standards by both the authority-bearer as well as the authority subjects. On the other hand, it rests on the prerogative to give instructions or make decisions to be followed, which is assumed by those recognized as wielding legitimate authority on the basis of such normative procedures and standards. This two-sided rationale serves as the ground of legitimacy for the exercise of authority within the legal-rational category.

Traditional authority

Within the traditional authority category, the claim to exercise legitimate authority by the authority-bearer rests on a two-sided rationale. On the one hand, it rests on the established belief by authority-subjects in the sacredness of long-time standing traditions.

Sacred long-time traditions usually stipulate primogeniture or religious appointment as the routes to authority. Because authority-subjects believe these traditions are sacred, they will accept the legitimacy of such authority. On the other hand, traditional authority rests on the high respect with which the office occupied by the authority -bearer is regarded.

This is often the case where, because of the high regard authority-subjects have for the office; they will ascribe legitimacy to authority-bearers who might not competently fulfill the functions expected of them. Here authority rests on:

... established belief in the sanctity of immemorial traditions and the legitimacy of the status of those exercising authority over them...⁵

Charismatic authority

The charismatic-authority category is the one most closely linked to the personality and abilities of the authority-bearer. This type of authority rides on the one hand on personal qualities exemplified by the authority-bearer such as admirable accomplishments, bravery, holiness and exemplary behavior. On the other hand, such charismatic figures claim to reveal or actually stipulate procedures and standards that become the basis on which the authority -subjects recognize and obey the authority. The charismatic figure is viewed by the authority-subjects as an exceptionally gifted individual who is credited with exceptional achievements. Jesus Christ and Prophet Muhammad would be good examples of this type of authority-bearer.

R. S. Peters suggests that Weber's presentation of the charismatic-type of authority exaggerates the importance of the authority-bearer's peculiarities such as vision, vocation and revelation to their claim to authority. He emphasizes the similarity between all leaders in that they exercise authority on the basis of personal claims and characteristics, whether this authority is termed legal-rational, traditional or charismatic. He says:

... (Weber's) account of charismatic authority is rather high and exaggerated ... we talk of people being an authority in the sphere of pronouncements with the authority deriving from the person's personal achievements and history in a specific sphere.⁶

It is my view that R. S. Peters, though correct in drawing attention to the need not to underplay the place of personal claims and achievements in this regard, nevertheless falls short by not giving due emphasis to those peculiar characteristics and exceptional achievements which make charismatic authority-bearers such as Jesus Christ and Prophet Muhammad attract levels of loyalty and allegiance from authority-subjects which supersede those achieved by others.

Though Erich Fromm recognizes the light that has been shed on the discussion about authority by Weber's three-fold classification of authority-categories and bases for their legitimacy, he has introduced a two-fold classification. He talks only of rational and irrational authority. This classification fits in most appropriately with his purpose to

attempt a theoretical clarification of the problem of ethics and psychology where he asks the question

... when we speak of authority, do we mean rational or irrational authority?⁷

His context is that of the place of authority in the process of deciding what is good or bad ethically. So, he speaks of rational and irrational authority.

It is important that we look at Eric Fromm's classification of types of authority under this sub-heading where it fits and recognize that his contribution will shed a lot of light on authoritarianism in a subsequent sub-heading.

Rational Authority

For him the source of rational authority is located in the competence of persons on whom others have conferred authority. Those who confer authority on authority-bearers recognize and accept it voluntarily on the basis that the authority-bearer performs the tasks entrusted to them competently. The basis of rational authority makes it a temporary factor which is given to scrutiny and criticism from voluntary authority-subjects. This is why Fromm argues that the:

...person whose authority is respected functions competently in the task with which he is entrusted by those who conferred it upon him. He need not intimidate them or arouse their admiration by magical qualities as long as and to the extent to which he is completely helping, instead of exploiting; his authority is based on rational grounds and does not call for irrational awe.⁸

Irrational authority

Irrational authority, on the other hand, has its source in domination over others. This domination is effected through physical, military, monetary, technological or mental power. Irrational authority can be active or passive. It is active where authority-bearers make the effort and use mechanisms to apply it actively: it is passive where authority-subjects comply out of a condition of anxiety and helplessness. Whereas rational authority rides on voluntary acceptance and recognition, irrational authority thrives on a form of subjugation that shuts out any form of criticism.

Erich Fromm's classification, though useful for his interest, which is ethical and psychological, fails to account for that which inspires the voluntary recognition and acceptance of an authority-bearer prior to the need for them to justify the conferred status through competence. In comparison, the three-fold classification of Weber and R. S. Peters achieves this by basing the three authority-types in the legal-rational procedures and standards, the sacred traditional beliefs and customs, and the exceptional-personal qualities. We will return to some of these aspects of Erich Fromm's description when we look at the relationship between authority and authoritarianism in seeking to further clarify the meaning of authority.

Evaluation

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A number of similarities and dissimilarities emerge as one analyzes the various types of authority suggested in the foregoing discussion.

First, it is quite clear that all classifications or types of authority mentioned above agree in that they place the phenomenon in the context of human interaction. In the words of Erich Fromm, authority

... refers to an interpersonal relationship in which one person looks upon another as somebody superior to him.⁹

In the same vein, Peters says:

...those conforming to such authority follow rules, they know what they are doing and can speak¹⁰

Human beings and not non-human creatures have this capacity to use speech in the context of procedures and standards. Secondly, it is notable that the irrational authority of Fromm and the traditional-type of Weber share a common indifference towards criticism or evaluation by authority-subjects. In both Fromm and Weber, this factor derives from an assumed difference in value between the authority-bearer and the authority-subject, pre-supposed by the two rationales on which these types of authority ride.

Unlike in rational authority, where both the bearer and subject of authority are considered as equals who are only differentiated by their competencies, Fromm's irrational authority is characterized by dominating power on the part of the bearer and by inhibiting fear on the part of the subject. It is essentially based on a presumed inequality between the two which extends to them inequality in their value. It is interesting to note that a similar difference in value between the authority-bearer and authority-subject also exists in Weber's traditional-type of authority.

The inequality in value between the two in Weber's traditional type derives from the sacredness of the authority-bearer's status imputed by the sacredness of long-time standing tradition. It is also interesting to note that Weber's and Peters' "charismatic-type" accounts for the authority-bearer's exceptional qualities (a critical dimension to the phenomenon of authority). This critical dimension lacks in Fromm's two category accounts. All in all, however, the three categories of authority in Weber and Peters, as well as the two types in Fromm, make clear the protean and poly-dynamic nature of authority.

A Functional Investigation

In the following paragraphs, I hope to further explore the dynamic nature of authority from a functional perspective. Impulses such as power and authoritarianism are closely linked to, though distinct from, authority. Investigating their varied linkages with authority in its functional context will highlight the dissimilarities that exist between

them and yet provide a contrasting backdrop against which to highlight authority's distinctiveness. This is invaluable for any attempt to understand authority both conceptually and functionally.

The Authority-bearer and the Collectivity

The relationship between the authority-bearer and authority-subjects is the most critical one of all the factors that influences conditions within which authority functions. Where authority is functioning, there always is, first, a group of persons who voluntarily acknowledge and accept authority and, second, an authority-bearer who shoulders some responsibility within that group. Every group of authority-subjects shares some common understanding of authority that is based on procedures and standards.

This shared understanding is the basis on which the collectivity judges whether or not an authority-bearer is right or wrong in the exercise of their function. The degree to which an authority-bearer is judged to be functioning in tandem with the collectivity's aspirations and expectations determines the readiness of the group to be loyal to that authority.

We observe here that authority can only be effective in relation to a specific collectivity's expectations. In addition, it is important to note that an authority-bearer who projects conviction that they are meant to be in authority is more likely to attract loyal followership than one who may hold an office of authority yet lacking in this inner confidence.

These two observations about the authority-bearer/authority-subjects and about the authority-bearer's conviction explain some situational experiences that authority-bearers and authority-subjects often go through in their interaction.

There are situations when authority-bearers who function by virtue of holding office project the right kind of image, as expected by authority-subjects, who in turn acquiesce to that authority. In such situations it has sometimes turned out that proclamations and pronouncements made by the authority-bearer have been proven incorrect by subsequent events or realities.

In such cases the collectivity would have recognized such authority not on the basis that the person claiming it is fulfilling the expected function competently but simply because through oration, suggestion or some other outward attraction, such an authority/office-bearer has expressed inner certitude convincingly.

In other cases, authority-bearers have so much needed to maintain an image consistent with the group's expectations to the extent of covering up their failure using institutional and other sophisticated strategies. R.S. Peters has helpfully noted the symbiotic relational contours that characterize the interaction between the authority-bearer and the collectivity when he says:

...for it is not sufficient for a man or woman to be in fact wise or a felicitous prophet if he/she is to exercise authority. He (she) must be known to be so. A man (woman) cannot exercise authority if he (she) hides his (her) light under a bushel... and his persona must correspond roughly to the image of authority shared by the group¹¹

Authority and Power

Power and authority are often confused, and understandably so. This is because the distinction between them is not watertight but that of overlapping impulses. A look at their relationship, guided by the philosophical approach used by Stephen Lukes, Hannah Arendt and Talcott Parsons (whose works will be referred to later), will no doubt add conceptual clarity. Steven Lukes has extensively written on the question of power and highlighted the confusion within political-scientific approaches that fail to distinguish between power, strength, force, authority and violence because of "... a reduction of politics to 'who rules whom' ...which leads to these words referring to means of this process".

Even though the distinction between power and authority should be insisted on, there should always be the recognition that theory and reality project differentiated presentations of each of these phenomena. A number of scholars, including Lukes, who have done research on power, highlight its inextricable link to authority. Talcott Parsons, who is quoted by S. Lukes in "Power, A Radical View" ties power to authority, consensus and the pursuit of collective goals. He proposes that power depends on the institutionalization of authority, which he also refers to as binding obligations. He argues that:

Power is generalized capacity to secure the performance of binding obligations by units in a system of collective organization when the obligations are legitimized with reference to their bearing on collective goals and where in case of recalcitrance there is presumption of enforcement by negative situational sanctions-whatever the actual agency of that enforcement¹²

The link between power, on the one hand, and collective goals and consensus, on the other, is reflected from a different perspective by Hannah Arendt. She insists that power is effective only in the context of a group and hinges on the continued existence of that group. She suggests that as soon as a group of people that coordinates its activities comes into existence, power is inherent within that community and is not generated by any actions on the part of the group. Therefore, individuals who are said to be in power do not possess this power as individual property. Rather, such a person can only be empowered by the group to act on its behalf:

When we say of somebody he is in power we actually refer to his being empowered by a certain number of people to act in their name. The moment the group, from which the power originated with begins to disappear, "his power" vanishes.¹³

Key elements that all these scholars link with the concept of power such as collective goals, consensus and authority (where certain individuals are empowered by the group to

act in their name) show up power as primarily a group's ability to act in coordinated ways. It, therefore, can exist only where there is such a group of people.

Authority, on the other hand, is the right to make proclamations or give instructions that are effectual in a given context of procedures and standards that are consensual. Distinguishable from power, which inherently resides in communities acting in concert, authority is imputed by the collectivity onto certain persons within the group who are associated with rights linked to status (office).

Authority-bearers are accepted and recognized by the collectivity to make proclamations and decisions that are binding not only to themselves but to the group as a collectivity. The procedures and standards on which authority is based provide the binding obligations within which power as a medium is organized and legitimized. This power resides in collectivities and is exercised on their behalf by authority-bearers to whom has been granted the right to use status (official) rights. Thus,

Authority is a set of rights in status in a collectivity, precisely in the collectivity as auctor, including especially the right to acquire and use power in that status.¹⁴

Another way in which power and authority are linked is when power operates as the necessary basis on which authority is exercised. An example of this linkage would be the way in which legitimate expressions of power such as the police or the military provide backing for parliament, which they see and believe as exercising authority. The military and the police are conditions that are necessary for parliament to exercise authority but these conditions must not be confused with the authority that is effected.

The closeness and the overlap with which these two phenomena are linked, explains why they are often confused and the two terms used synonymously. One scholar, who has highlighted the closeness of these two phenomena, yet clearly highlighting their distinctiveness, is Peters. He is more interested in the application of these phenomena more than in questions of where they originate or derive. His context wrestles with the enlightenment of morality and science which lead to a minimization of the importance of the auctor. Whether an instruction is to be obeyed or not does not depend only on the fact that it has been laid down by someone in authority anymore than on the reasonableness of those instructions. Commenting on the impact of enlightenment on the importance of authority-bearers, he says:

Reasons must be given as in science not originators or umpires produced. Of course in both enterprises provisional authorities can be consulted. But there are usually good reasons for their choice and their pronouncements are never to be regarded as final just because they have made them. In science and morality there are no appointed lawgivers, judges or policemen.¹⁵

Using this as his context of investigation, he helpfully observes a number of characteristics that demonstrate that authority and power belong to two different spheres even though there is a close connection between them. Authority is at play when instructions and proclamations that regulate behavior are given via the medium of speech.

When behavior is regulated through propaganda or coercive means of one sort or another, then power is at play. When others are influenced to do what another wants by force, you have power at play. In such cases, there are no procedures or standards, the basis on which the right to command or make decisions may derive and be exercised. Where such commands or decisions are conformed to on the basis of rules that are voluntarily obeyed, authority is at play.

The foregoing has highlighted the distinctiveness and closeness of authority and power which is critical in laying a backdrop understanding of authority. We will now move on to look at its relationship to authoritarianism.

Authority and authoritarianism

Fromm, in addressing the question of the relationship between humanistic and authoritarian ethics, has insightfully drawn attention to the interaction between authority and authoritarianism. He observes that authoritarianism is a word that is used as a synonym for totalitarianism and undemocratic systems.

When it is at play, the authority-subject is denied by the authority-bearer the ability to judge between what is good or bad as the interaction between them is based not on reason but on the subject's surrender of decision-making to the authority-bearer. The subject complies with the authority's decisions, which decisions must not be questioned since the subject has already surrendered decision-making to the authority.

The authority, on the other hand, does not concern itself with the subject's interests but its own. It, therefore, basically exploits the subject even though the subject may derive some material or psychological benefits from it. It does not tolerate rational judgment or criticism which may open it up to being assessed as incompetent. Accordingly, therefore, it ordains

... obedience to be the main virtue and disobedience to be the main sin.¹⁶

We have already noted Fromm's categorization of authority into two categories, viz. "rational and irrational", in earlier sections of this article. Irrational authority thrives on domination over others through power. Unlike rational authority, which rides on voluntary acceptance and recognition, irrational authority thrives on subjugation and precludes criticism. It has many similarities with authoritarianism to the point of being identical with it.

When authoritarianism is at play, the authority-bearer assumes the right to define rules and standards as well as the right to decide that those rules and standards are what the subjects really need. In such a context, therefore, any form of questioning of the authority's supreme definitive role equals rebellion. This rebellion is regarded as a sin that cannot be pardoned. The only course of action open to such a one is that he or she accepts to be punished for their sin and to be remorseful as an expression of their

acquiescence to the authority's supremacy. Authoritarianism makes use of coercion and manipulation as it makes the collectivity slavishly dependent on the authority. Intimidation and the threat of excessive discipline on those who would dare question the authority are instruments used to enforce it.

Benevolent Authoritarianism

It is important to note that authoritarianism can take the form of a benevolent type. This appears to be the case in contexts where both the authority-subjects and the authority-bearer share in common the perception that the authority-bearer regards the wellbeing of the authority-subjects as the primary purpose for which to exercise authority. This perception about the authority-bearer is often sponsored by the view that he has been appointed by 'the gods' to exercise authority and maintain order among humans on behalf of 'the gods' who are more benevolent than malevolent in their dealings with humans.

In such situations, it is often the case that the collectivity does not subscribe to the modern view of 'human rights' that ascribes 'inalienable individual rights, liberties and dignity' to the individual. As such it is not deemed necessary that the authority-bearer seeks the consent of authority-subjects that have inalienable rights, individual liberties and dignity.

Authority is viewed in divinely sanctioned hierarchical terms with 'the gods' at the top of the hierarchy and rulers to whom the gods' has appointed and delegated authority to be exercised in the affairs of the human collectivity under 'them'. Because 'the gods' are believed to be more benevolent than malevolent, it is assumed that 'the rulers' (authority-bearers) are also more benevolent than malevolent.

Thus the dominant attitude towards authority within the collectivity is compliance and acquiescence towards 'benefactors'. It is sponsored by the pervasive perception that the authority-bearer's intentions and exercise of power are benevolent. The question of authority becoming 'malevolent-authoritarianism' because it is associated with power as force, coercion or manipulation does not arise. The demand for compliance by the authority-bearer and the threat of discipline against those who would question the authority-bearers are not viewed as coercion, intimidation or the threat of excessive discipline.

The divinely sanctioned authority exercised by the pope and priests within Roman Catholicism and that by most African traditional leaders would be cases in point. Such authority-bearers are expected by the collectivity to remain in 'power' 'for life'.

The dominant perception here is that the authority-bearer's authority has been conferred by 'the gods' through established social processes they sanction and that authority-bearers are self-regulating in the interest of the wellbeing of authority-subjects'. Thus

both their right to cause belief and action as well as the self-perpetuating nature of their authority is viewed to have been sanctioned by ‘the gods’ and conferred by the people.

The foregoing discussion on authority in general and its relation to power and authoritarianism in particular is critical to any attempt to evaluate patterns of authority characteristic of authority-bearers within given social contexts.

Endnotes

¹ R.S. Peters, ‘*Authority, Responsibility and Education*’; 1973; p.17

² *ibid.*, p.19

³ Erich Fromm; ‘*Man for Himself*’; 1975; p.36

⁴ Stephen Lukes; ‘*Power*’; 1986; p.19

⁵ *ibid.*; p.21

⁶ *Ibid.*; p.20

⁷ Erich Fromm; *op.cit.*, p.22

⁸ Erich Fromm; ‘*Escape from Freedom*’; 1972; p.42

⁹ *ibid.*; p.42

¹⁰ R.S. Peters; *op.cit.*, p.24

¹¹ *ibid.*; p.26

¹² Stephen Lukes; ‘*Power: A Radical View*’; p.41

¹³ Hannah Arendt; ‘*What is authority*’; 1977; p.83

¹⁴ *ibid.*; p.90

¹⁵ R.S. Peters; *op.cit.*, p.40

¹⁶ Erich Fromm; ‘*Escape From Freedom*’, 1972, p.26

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