

## Preface



It is natural for us to think that humans as animals belong to a certain biological species and are, as such, subject to a number of natural necessities such as the vital need to maintain a certain minimal body temperature and to eat and drink if they are to survive. We are, however, not merely biological entities but also inherently social animals, and societies, too, will “need” to satisfy certain conditions if they are to survive. In societies that do survive there will be a variety of mechanisms for imposing “necessities” on individuals and smaller groups; often these mechanisms will function under the guise of simply transmitting or “passing on” natural necessities. Thus, I *must* eat if I am to survive, so we *must* all work cooperatively for several hours a days in the fields or rice paddies if we are to survive. This transmission, however, is never a mere process of neutral “passing on” necessity. Actual human “needs” of any kind are never presented to us, as it were, “raw” but always in one social configuration or other, so any discussion of basic biological needs is perforce a kind of retrospective abstraction, which might be warranted, but, if it is, is always warranted for some specific purpose. In fact, what is called “transmission” is always a process of the transformation or social constitution of needs. “Transformation *or* constitution” is not a mistaken or incautious formulation, as if I couldn’t make up my mind whether there was something, some “need,” there to start with that was “transformed” into a slightly different need or whether “needs” did not “really” exist until social processed. Rather it is an expression of my view—which, of course, could be incorrect but is not inconsidered—that this alternative is not to be taken as an absolute but is context-dependent.

“We all need to work together cooperatively in order to survive” is deeply ambiguous, and this ambiguity is a breeding ground for ideological distortion. It can mean:

- a. “if we don’t all work together cooperatively, each of us will die very soon (because the small boat we’re in is leaking badly)”
- b. “if we don’t all work together cooperatively, not all of us will survive (although some may)”
- c. “if we don’t all work together cooperatively, we won’t survive *as a recognizable group* (although each individual may disperse and survive alone or as a member of a different group)”

In addition to these strict “needs,” that is, conditions that must be fulfilled if survival is to be ensured, humans also have an individually and socially idiosyncratic set of desires, preferences, wishes, and aspirations. We all need to eat and drink, but I prefer tea to coffee, although many people have the reverse preference. I also recognise that there are, or at any rate have been, individuals and even whole societies, such as that of ancient Rome, in which neither tea nor coffee is drunk at all. We also all grow up and remain throughout our entire lives enmeshed in a thick web of what are now called “normative” demands that have their origin ultimately in institutions that claim “authority” over us. In many Western European societies fathers of families were for a long time construed as “heads of the household” and had significant real and moral powers over their wives, children, and servants; political authorities of various kinds demanded allegiance; churches (or The Church) claimed to preach the word of god and had institutions like courts to enforce their views; relations of economic dependence among the members of small groups gave the words of those in key positions special weight; local forms of social pressure (and of solidarity) could take sharply articulated forms. Finally, as social beings we humans are to some extent capable of perceiving and acquiring knowledge about the real world in which we live, and we have some extremely feeble, only intermittently effective, and highly variable ratiocinative capacities.<sup>1</sup> Human life is to a large

extent constituted by an attempt to reconcile “needs,” desires, and “normative claims” on an individual and social level in view of our best knowledge about our world.

Questions about how individuals and groups should behave can arise in any social form, but it can seem to us from the vantage point of the apparently infinite distance that separates twenty-first-century Europeans from “traditional” societies<sup>2</sup> that in those societies individuals may be perplexed and different groups (and duties to different groups) may conflict, but the question of the *general* structure of an individual human life and of social life as a whole will not seem to be particularly problematic. Since, however, the sources of such normative claims will be diverse, it can easily happen that they seem to make *different* demands on agents even in traditional societies. Equally individuals’ perceptions, beliefs, and preferences will be different.

It is natural for thinking people in the West to start by assuming that the world is (finally) “in order” and trying to formulate explicitly and then “reconcile” the various claims made by the different authorities: The Gospel accounts of Mark and John *can* be made to tally. The emperor, the pope, and the local lord “*really*” are demanding us to lead the *same* kind of life. St. Paul *can* be rendered consistent with Aristotle. In a world *with* relatively intact and generally recognised authorities, the question of discipline, both of how and to what extent one should or may coerce others, and of self-discipline seems in principle answerable: One disciplines people by training them, as much as possible, to want to do what they in any case “must” (of natural necessity) do and also what they should do. To what extent it will be possible to make people want to do what they must and should do will depend on a number of unpredictable factors, among them the nature of the demands society makes and the kind of forces of coercion, manipulation, and educations it has available to it.

What happens, however, if the questions go beyond queries about reconciling occasional discrepancies between individual authoritative statements? What if the emperor is a sinner and schismatic? What if the *pope* is a heretic? What if the very idea of “being a heretic” comes

to look archaic and irrelevant? What could proper discipline (including self-discipline) look like in a world like that?

So is the world, including our authorities, fundamentally in order, or is it not? What would we mean by either of these two statements? How could we argue for one or the other of them? What, if anything, would follow for our lives if one or the other of these statements were true and could be shown to be true? There seems little doubt but that traditionally philosophy was supposed to ask this question, and also little doubt that philosophers had a predilection to answer it affirmatively and to draw from their particular version of the affirmative answer very far-reaching consequences for how humans should act. Dewey, that is, was clearly right to think that traditional philosophy was inherently conservative, having as its goal the project of inventing arguments to support as much of the existing forms of social authority as possible.<sup>3</sup> Aristophanes may or may not have got Socrates right in taking him to be a dangerous subversive, but Plato was certainly on Aristophanes' side in thinking that a happy ending was possible only in a polity from which "sophists" were excluded. The difference is that Plato added to Aristophanes' arsenal of satire, innuendo, drama, slapstick, and verbal pyrotechnics a highly developed variant of one of the sophists' own weapons, ratiocination.

The task of philosophy became significantly more difficult starting in the late eighteenth century when the whole concept of "authority" but especially that of "moral authority" became problematic. The reason for this is the modern hypertrophy of ethical thinking centred on the idea of "autonomy."<sup>4</sup> After all, "freedom" was not the *philosophical* obsession in the ancient and medieval worlds that it has become in the past 250 years. That is perhaps because earlier periods actually had visible classes of slaves and serfs, and the distinction of "free" men from them was not as theoretically problematic; freedom was primarily a political problem—could someone torture you with impunity or not; did you have to pay a lord to get married and work without compensation in his fields for a few days a week or not?—not a moral or philosophical one.<sup>5</sup> To be sure, from Herodotus to Nero

one finds pathetic appeals to the “freedom of the Hellenes,”<sup>6</sup> and “libertas” plays an important role in Roman politics, but this originally meant absence of barbarian, especially Persian, military domination over the Greek city-states, then “independence from foreign rule” (more generally),<sup>7</sup> and this had little to do with the *internal* constitution—oligarchy, monarchy, despotism, democracy—of any given city-state. Later “freedom” could be associated with reduction or absence of forms of taxation, and with certain limited powers of self-management within the omnipotent Roman *imperium*. Or “freedom” might come to be associated with “civitas,” the acquisition of Roman citizenship. None of these were concepts that seemed to pose any special *philosophical* difficulties, certainly not any of the kind that arise for post-Augustineans. To be sure, one philosophical school, the Stoics, had developed views of freedom,<sup>8</sup> but apart from them “*eleutheria*” was not a key concept in older Greek philosophy.

The situation changes completely with the advent of the new conceptions of radical individual autonomy in the eighteenth century.<sup>9</sup> With Kant we get a canonical distinction between the morally valuable “autonomy” of an individual subject and a reprehensible “heteronomy” established as fundamental for ethics. Fascination with this distinction, though, can have bad effects for the concept of “authority” because it can easily be thought to belong more naturally with “heteronomy” than with “autonomy.” After all, if the doctor is the authority I will often follow his (or her) directives, not because I know them to be good but because the doctor has recommended them. Since it is clearly nonsense to say that I am being morally deficient in following good advice, the Kantian has a *prima facie* problem here, which he (or she) might try to address by saying that although I may not “autonomously” have decided to do *this* rather than *that*, I can still count as having behaved responsibly if I have autonomously decided to trust the doctor. This, however, does not solve the difficulty but simply pushes it back a step. Am I in a position to know that passing this particular examination really gives the doctor knowledge? How do I know that in accepting the “authority” of the Medical

Board and its examination procedure I am doing more than accepting the local prejudice of my time and society? After all, there were formal and highly technical theology examinations in the Middle Ages, but no one now thinks those who passed those exams could tell us anything that would deserve to be believed or acted on. At each point in the regress the same kind of difficulty re-arises. The Kantian, then, will probably resort to saying that at *some* point the regress *must* stop and I must be able, or must have been able, to evaluate the authority-claim at *that* step “autonomously” (and I either did do that, showing myself to be a morally worthy subject, or failed to do that, thereby leaving myself open to legitimate moral criticism). Again, the use of the philosophical “*must*” should arouse suspicion. Why “*must*” there be such a point? The reason is that otherwise the theory with its sharp dichotomy between autonomy and heteronomy wouldn’t be plausible. But perhaps the theory is not plausible. In the ancient world “freedom” was not construed as incompatible with the recognition of “authority.” Free men and free self-governing communities would obviously orient themselves on the model of famous men of the past and on the opinions and practice of wise contemporaries. Similarly they would recognise the importance of traditions, established practices, and “unwritten laws”;<sup>10</sup> in Rome they would have special regard for the *auctoritas* of the Senate. Finally, if they had any sense, they would attempt to interpret and obey advice, commands, and warnings given by the gods through oracles or via other “signs.” We don’t believe in divine signs—am I *sure* that my disbelief is something I acquired completely “autonomously” and is not in any way a reflection of the tacit assumptions of my cultural context?<sup>11</sup>—but if modern conceptions of “autonomy” are incompatible with any other of these phenomena, then so much the worse for those conceptions. What sort of human life would it be which failed to assign an important place to respect for, and even a deference to, the judgement and exemplary practice of others?<sup>12</sup> Reverence, respect, and trust are different from blind or coerced submission—in fact real respect is arguably never “blind,”<sup>13</sup> but that also does not mean it is always the

result of the “autonomous decision” of an individual (in the Kantian sense). When Kant claims “Selbst der Heilige des Evangelii muß zuvor mit unserem Ideal der sittlichen Vollkommenheit verglichen werden, ehe man ihn dafür erkennt”<sup>14</sup> [“Even the holy man of the Gospels must antecedently be compared with our ideal of moral perfection, before one recognises him <as such a holy man>”], this is, as Hegel might have put it, one of those half truths which, if presented as the whole truth, is worse than a simple mistake. Of course, in *some* sense we have to be able to connect the life of a human being who is a candidate for being an ethical paradigm with our moral conceptions, but it does not follow either that we antecedently have absolutely fixed and determinate conceptions, as Kant seems to assume, or that we accept someone as exemplary *only if* that person corresponds in *every respect* to what preexisting conceptions we might have. Otherwise it would not be clear how moral development or change was possible, but refusal to learn or to be surprised is no sign of an especially strong or good character; it is more usually of some combination of ignorance, arrogance, and fear. The other “half” of “the truth” is: our “ideal of ethical perfection” is never *simply* our own, in the sense of being a completely autonomous creation from nothing, or in the sense that we have *in every way adequately* “rationally assessed and tested” every component of it. Not only *have* we in fact never done this, but this is not the description of a possible state of human affairs. Kant’s claim about the “holy man of the Gospels” is for him the *end* of the discussion and the story. Seeing that claim in contraposition to its other half, however, should rather be seen as the *beginning* of serious discussion.

The “Enlightenment” ideal of an autonomous individual who restricts himself in his acting and judging strictly to that which he understands thoroughly, has rationally well-grounded views about, and has in his control does not describe a possible form of human life. The proper response to this is not simply to accept the station in life we have been assigned and the beliefs our local “authorities” deem to appropriate for us to hold. The thinkers of the Enlightenment may

have connected the practice of “criticism” with a particular quasi-metaphysics of “freedom,” but there is no particular reason for us to make this mistake. As Foucault once put it, we need to extract and retain “the ethos of enlightenment”—reasoned investigation of claims—from the “dogma of Enlightenment.”<sup>15</sup>

The essays in this collection, all of which were written during the past five years, discuss a number of different issues that arise from this basic situation: What is “authority”? What is “discipline”? What is “criticism”? What is the relation of authority to the question of the “meaning” of human life?

Some of the essays in this collection have appeared in print before: essays 1, 10, and 11 in *Arion* (fall 2009, spring 2012, and spring 2013, respectively); essay 2 in *Cambridge Literary Review* (issue 1/2009); essay 13 in *The Point* (issue 2/2010); essay 9 in *Studies in Christian Ethics* (25, no. 2 [2012]). Essay 6 I originally wrote in German, and a severely truncated version of that text appeared in *Zeitschrift für Ideengeschichte* (Heft IV/4, winter 2010); this is a translation of a revised text based on that longer original.

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