

The Place of Authority in our Judgments of Truth, Goodness and Beauty

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Kant thinks that our judgments in all three parts of Critical Philosophy: metaphysics, practical judgment, and aesthetics, entail antinomies, antinomies that were to be resolved in analogous ways. For example, in aesthetics, the dictum *de gustibus non disputandum* is antithetical to the claim that if we could not *dispute* questions of taste, we could *contend* for them and expect others to agree (*Kritik der Urteilkraft* paras. 56, 57, B232-240; A229-237). He putatively resolves the antinomy by claiming that the judgment of taste in the thesis does not presuppose 'distinct' concepts, but the judgment of taste in the antithesis presupposes an 'indistinct' concept, a super-sensed substratum of appearances.

I agree that our judgments in questions of metaphysics, ethics and aesthetics face philosophical problems. There seem to be two ways in which we engage with others in discussing these judgments, the mode by which we say, "Don't argue! Hutton's Hams are the best", and the mode by which we submit to the invitation, "Come now, and let us reason together" (Isaiah 1.18). I argue that our judgments in questions of fact and of morals and of beauty are made with authority. I argue, further, that our expressed judgments in all three spheres are required to be submitted to the authority of others. This is not an antinomy, since each proposition is consistent with, and even entails, the other.

But, you may say, I rarely, if ever, have any authority, since I am compelled by the facts to think what is the case, what is true. "If we think at all, we must think of ourselves, individually and collectively, as submitting to the order of reasons rather than creating it" (Thomas Nagel, *The Last Word* [New York/Oxford: OUP, 1997], p. 143, the last sentence of the book). I agree in part, but the position is not as simple as that.

All our thinking arises from attempts to cope with the way things are in order to bring about what we want to happen. There are roughly two ways in which things are.

First, natural physical objects are captured by generalizations and ideal formulas, such as "water expands with freezing" or $E=MC^2$ (James F. Ross, *Hidden Necessities*, chapter 1 section 1). Natural physical

objects may also become the object of moral or aesthetic judgment. Under these aspects they are also captured by generalizations such as, "Aristophanes' plays are obscene but not pornographic" (Peter Jones, "Ancient and Modern", *The Spectator*, 4 November 2000, p. 18), or "abortion is morally equivalent to murder" or "abortion is not always equivalent to murder."

Second, formal truths are true of ideal objects. The form of thinking compels us to agree that the sum of the square of the sides of a right-angled triangle equals the square on the hypotenuse, or that $2+2=4$, or that a pawn can only move one square unless it captures another piece or becomes a queen. Formal truths are immaterial.

Unless we are compelled by our thinking to agree with the formal truths, we are not qualified to be heard in any argument or to play any game. This is one price of entry. No one can exercise authority in discourse unless they have paid this entry price.

There is also an entry price to paid before we can capture natural truths. We have to take on trust a number of things. For example, we have to accept the principle of indifference: the odds of an event that is pure chance occurring is exactly one in two. No amount of experimenting can confirm or refute this principle. We also have to assume that laws that held in the past will hold in the future, unless frustrated by someone's action. There is no knock-down evidence to establish this, but it is true. Given these assumptions, we then have to submit to natural truths. The proviso is that there is always more that is real about any physical object or set of objects than we are capable of capturing by our formulas.

So we are all in a sense under authority as soon as we begin to make judgments of fact, moral value, or beauty. We have to accept the rules of the game we play; we have to make certain assumptions; and we have to work with the "hidden necessities", to use James F. Ross's term.

But that said, we then act with authority. We begin to make moves on our own account.

In directing your attention to the authority exercised by anyone who thinks, I am not at all suggesting that thinking is arbitrary. I am simply drawing attention to the obvious fact that, whenever there arises a question about the behaviour of objects in the natural world, or about what we should do as moral beings, or about what we should agree is beautiful, anyone involved in the discussion inevitably exercises authority and is bound to submit to superior authority, if there should be superior authority.

There are always ways of showing that our judgments in physics, ethics, and aesthetics are wrong, although the tests might take quite a

long time to disclose our error. Tests to show that a line of action, such as liquidating kulaks, is not a high moral requirement for producing a perfect society, might take, for some, seventy years to work and make the point. The jury is still out on the paintings of Andy Warhol. But reflect that the oversimplifications of Newtonian physics took nearly two hundred years to uncover.

However, there are no infallible tests for knowing when we have attained the truth; “although we may attain [truth], we cannot infallibly know when”, to cite William James (“The Will to Believe”, *The Will to Believe and other essays in popular philosophy* [New York, London, Bombay: Longmans Green, 1897, repr. 1899], p. 12). It follows that those who have attained the truth have to assert it on their own authority and submit it to the authority of those in a better position to judge, should they exist.

Let me take my two points in turn.

First, if we are to form judgments in physics or ethics or aesthetics, having paid our entry price, and recognizing our duty to accept the truth whenever it shows itself, we inevitably pose as authorities. We become responsible for what we say. We assert that others should adopt our position. The inevitability of this exercise of authority may be illuminated by the analogy of gravity. Each of us, by virtue of being a body having mass, exerts a small gravitational pull on every other body. We know we have this power and are responsible for our exercise of it. By analogy, anyone who reads this paper is exercising at least a modicum of authority. If any of you should speak to other readers or to me, you will exercise more authority. You may exercise an authority that depends on your power over others to whom you speak of these matters; you may be their teacher or supervisor. You may exercise an authority that stems from your ability to articulate a truth that neither I nor other readers had seen so clearly before you spoke. And you, the articulator of a truth none of us had previously seen, may be a first-year student at a Liberal Arts College or a retired lawyer with an amateur interest in the problem. We won't know what authority you have, until you have spoken, and we may mistake your authority and accept what we should have rejected, or reject what we should have accepted.

My second point. In all our judgments of fact, of morality, and of beauty we always depend on the authority of others. Not only do we have to learn the price of entry to the game of making judgments - the truths of reason that enable us to add and to multiply and to speak a language; and the things we have to trust such as the principle of indifference and the persistence of laws into the future. We also have to learn the natural necessities that we could not have discovered for

ourselves in the short span of life assigned to us, truths such as that iron rusts and animals die and that light has a certain definite speed. We must learn from teachers whom we are required to obey, even if they are sometimes wrong in detail. We will never find out where they are wrong until we accept their authority to be considered right until shown wrong.

The necessity of submitting to authority never ceases. I am bound to start with the assumption that the speaker at the seminar has authority to promulgate the truth. It is very unlikely that there is not some truth in the case that is being argued, even should I judge on reflection that the case was flawed. Furthermore, just as every concert artist still has a teacher, and every world-class golfer still has a coach, so every university teacher and every thinker is bound to consult frequently with a teacher, living or dead.

Thomas Reid, after pointing out that “it is ... the intention of nature, that our belief should be guided by the authority and reason of others, before it can be guided by our own reason,” then went on to say this: “Reason hath ... her infancy, when she must be carried in arms: then she leans entirely upon authority, by natural instinct, as if she was conscious of her own weakness; and without this support, she becomes vertiginous. When brought to maturity by proper culture, she begins to feel her own strength, and leans less upon the reason of others; she learns to suspect testimony in some cases, and to disbelieve it in others; and sets bounds to that authority to which she was at first entirely subject. But still, to the end of her life, she finds a necessity of borrowing light from testimony, where she has none within herself, and of leaning in some degree upon the reason of others, where she is conscious of her own imbecility.” (*Inquiry into the Human Mind, on the Principles of Common Sense*, 1764 [2nd ed., 1765; 3rd ed., 1769; 4th ed., 1785] Section xxiv; *A Critical Edition*, ed. Derek R. Brookes [Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997], p. 195)

That said, I do not wish to retract my first thesis, that, however much I learn from others and submit to their authority, I still exercise my own authority when I make a judgment. I cannot adopt D. M. Armstrong’s ploy in his preface: “I have indeed received so much valuable help from so many persons that I cannot be certain that I am responsible for every error that the book may contain.” (*A Materialist Theory of Mind* [London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1968], p. xii) But we shall see that there is a grain of truth in this joke.

Here I come to my third point, and the heart of the matter. Whenever I make and publish a judgment, I am exerting authority, but I am also bound to submit my judgment to the authority of others who are in a position to test my claim. I am never exempt from the reach of the

authority of others.

Of course, the situation may require me to cut short the discussion. If I am a general preparing for battle, I may have to rule that all time for discussion has expired when a staff officer questions my authority. The referees for *Mind* might have to decide after reading only the first page that the paper should not be published. The general and the referees for *Mind* combine two sorts of authority, authority deriving from their gifts and training and authority deriving from their executive positions. The two sorts of authority can be distinguished, but I doubt if either ever exists without the other. The academic who never acts as referee or examines still holds classes and expects students to attend. The most incompetent general or politician was still entrusted with authority for some reason. However well qualified and well accredited the general and the referee, they may still make terrible mistakes. The general who cut short the discussion might have done wrong and be proved wrong pretty smartly, and the referees who could spare time only for one page might have rejected a paper from another Frege.

The case of Frege is interesting. The great Jewish scholar in my field, Gershom Scholem, reports on the Winter Semester he spent at Jena in 1917/18, after being discharged from the army, having been held for more than two months as a psychopath, temporarily unfit for service. The prominent philosophers at Jena were Hans Vaihinger, the Kantian, and Bruno Bauch, the neo-Kantian, and Paul F. Linke, the phenomenologist. Scholem went to the lectures of Gottlob Frege and read two of his writings. "Frege was without doubt by far the most important thinker in the philosophical faculty, a man who today [1977] is world famous. In Jena he was barely tolerated, an appendage taken seriously by scarcely anyone. He was already in his late 60s but, I think, not yet an Ordinarius." (*Von Berlin nach Jerusalem: Jugenderinnerungen* [Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1977], pp. 124-6 at p. 125.)

As Timothy Sprigge has reminded me, philosophy, like everything else, is subject to fashion. Nor is there any law of inevitable progress. Nevertheless, classical works do get written, and they emerge at last in their true colours as classics. It is instructive that the young Gershom Scholem spotted what Frege's colleagues missed.

The existence of classics throws into relief the first reason why we are bound, having ourselves claimed a little authority for our own judgments, to submit them to the authority of others. We are aware that people differ in their aptitudes in artistic and musical spheres, in athletic prowess, in intellectual ability and in economic and administrative skills. Some people are immensely better at making money for

themselves and the societies to which they belong than others. I can sing in tune provided there is a strong accompaniment, but any choir member is an infinitely better singer than I am, not to mention a soloist.

The same is the case with my ability to make judgments of fact, of right and wrong, and of beauty. The bare ability to do so is generally more widespread than the ability to sing in tune, but the gap between me and Einstein, or Aristotle, or Rembrandt is greater than the gap between me and a concert pianist. It would be foolish of me not to submit my poor thoughts to the test of greater authorities, living and dead.

There is another reason. We inevitably love our own opinions and are liable to be blind to their defects. Just as no one can be final judge in their own cause, so no one can be final judge in their own theory. We must have a theory, and so claim authority for it as true, in the first place. But then we are bound to submit it to competent loving impartial judges for their verdict. My authority never exempts me from submitting to the authority of better judges than I, if they exist.

But here is the rub. How do I know that the judges are competent and loving and impartial? They may use their authority as witting or unwitting agents of the devil to tempt me to abandon the truth.

In 1904, French medical scientists discovered inoculation against TB. British doctors, despising French science, rejected this procedure as "dirty", and continued to treat TB by surgery and isolation until 1946, causing immense pain and suffering and loss of earnings to tubercular patients in Britain for forty years. The authority of the British Medical Association was evil. (F. B. Smith, *The People's Health 1830-1910* [London, 1979].)

Since at least 1956 it has been an axiom that government aid to the governments of underdeveloped countries was the necessary condition of lifting half of the world's population out of poverty and distress. The recent campaign backed by the Church of Scotland to cancel Third World government debt is the latest example of this authoritative doctrine. P. T. Bauer has argued that foreign aid by governments to governments "does not and cannot affect favourably the principal determinants of development." (*Dissent on Development: Studies and debates in development economics* [London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1971], p. 135.) If he is right, then the effect of the immense authority of people like Gunnar Myrdal has been to hold back the possible emergence of masses of people living in poverty and distress from their misery, and to increase the power and wealth of despotic governments.

I think that, when the present generation of research students come to maturity, they will rub their eyes in disbelief that Kant's theory that free will and determinism are compatible still held sway in the 1990s.

The French doctors and Peter Bauer have to make their case by arguments and evidence. It is not a naked power struggle. And the very authority they claim for their judgments could mask some fatal flaws in their positions that have yet to show themselves.

I have given two reasons why we are required to submit our own authoritative statements in physics, ethics, and aesthetics to the authoritative judgment of others. I have warned of the danger that we may, in doing this, be surrendering ourselves to bondage to an evil and corrupting fashion. I should not leave this topic before making a third point. If I discover a loving and impartial judge who has superior wisdom and insight to my own, I am bound to give my steady loyalty and allegiance to that person, so long as nothing occurs to show that the feet are of clay. That is, I am bound not only to give honour where honour is due, but also to trust that authority even although, for the time being, I do not see why I should. Further, I suggest that this trust should not be given to an authority whose life is deeply flawed, perhaps in another area than the area of authority I am especially interested in. I may revere Bertrand Russell for his mathematics and logic, but should I give my loyalty to a man who was cruel to his wives? He has undoubted authority, and I should submit my jejune views to his scrutiny, but I doubt if I should give him loyalty. Should I not withhold loyalty from Frege because of his anti-semitism? On the other hand, I can give Peter Geach loyalty, even though his views on historical criticism of the New Testament are mostly silly.

To conclude. No one is in a position to say, I rely only on reason and real evidence, and I claim no authority apart from that, and I recognize no authority apart from that. Whenever we make a judgment and promulgate it, we stake our own reputation on it and claim our personal authority for the position. The fact that we make a judgment is only possible because we rely on the testimony and authority of others - our teachers, the classics in our field, our friends and colleagues. Our judgments are inevitably coloured by whether we grew up Christian or Muslim, did philosophy at Melbourne or Edinburgh. Furthermore, whenever we promulgate a judgment in physics, ethics, or aesthetics we are bound to submit it to the authoritative judgment of others. We are even bound to accept their ruling, unless they are wrong. Then we may have to die for our views, if the worst comes to the worst.

Where does my authority come from? Where does the authority of the competent, loving and impartial judges to whom I must submit my authoritative statements come from? Where does the perverted authority I may exercise or which may be turned against me and others come from?

We recognize that executive authority is given to us; MPs are elected, lecturers are appointed, as are conductors of orchestras and directors of galleries. Those who do the electing or appointing are also made eligible or themselves appointed. If there is an infinite regress, we are no nearer a solution to the question about the source of the executive authority. But remember that, although executive authority is given to us, we have also exercised our own authority to seek it or avoid it, to make good use of it or to mar it, to relinquish it or to cling on to it.

Similarly, the authority that derives from the skills and learning we might possess is given to us by our genetic inheritance, the luck of climate and good food, the accident of long illness in youth which seems to enhance later creativity, the good teachers, the well-stocked libraries, the well-organized laboratories and galleries, and so on. If there is an infinite regress, we are no nearer a solution to the question about the source of authority in our subject: physics or ethics or aesthetics. And remember that, although abilities are given to us and instilled into us by gifted teachers, we have also exercised our own authority to develop them or to neglect them, to make good use of them or to waste them or to make evil use of them, to persist in our calling or to lose heart and give up.

We cannot side-step the problem of the origin of authority by appealing to objective tests alone. Although the best authorities are always thinking about the problems, making observations, performing experiments and assessing outcomes, in all these activities they are exerting their own authority and submitting their findings to competent, loving and impartial judges whom they hope to be superior in wisdom to themselves. The authority of their judges shows itself as authority, and all the tests and criteria are no substitute for the judgment that they truly possess authority. Those who make mistakes can still possess unimpaired authority.

Authority is there. Authority is given. Since we are required to avoid an infinite regress, everything given must have a giver. I see no way of avoiding the conclusion that this giver is the one whom all are accustomed to name God, the source of all truth and of all authority.*

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