

Authority: Who needs it?

The academic question first. What do we mean by authority? The dictionary suggests a socially organising power derived from law and statute, or from office, prestige or character. It is, in other words and for the purposes of this essay, the organising power of an idea (or an ideology), embodied in a personality, an organisation or an institution. It is the ability of an idea to influence, and in the limit control, our behaviour. For, without the common idea shared between source and subjects, the authority of the person, office or institution is empty. For those who dispute this assertion, consider those who habitually deny and contest authority. The greatest reward is to make the authorities look stupid, almost regardless of the penalty. Contest is inevitable so long as authorities can be made to look stupid. A common idea is the essential ingredient of a sustainable authority, regardless of its actual manifestation in people or in institutions.

We do not need to further dissect all possible meanings and nuances of the word to explore the question of who needs it. In logic, we cannot possibly tell the sensible meanings without knowing who thinks they need authority and why. But we do need to come to some consensus on these questions before we can sensibly discuss the nature and weight of any crisis we may be suffering. There can be no crisis, no turning point or critical condition, without a change in the flux of needs and motives for authority, and thus of its sources and exhibitions. Perhaps we have simply outgrown the need for authority, in which case the sources will atrophy and its exercises will be history.

Furthermore, the questions of who needs authority and why are fundamental to any serious intellectual debate on the state and character of our present social systems - our recipes for life and living - and thus also to the sciences which purport to explain these systems. The answers are critical to questions of what sort of science our social studies might think they can do, as well as to the sorts of rules, faiths and reasons we might each pursue as means to living better lives, whatever we choose to mean by better. In short, the nature and construction of our accepted authorities is fundamental.

A tall claim, this. But consider the history of ideas - the *Passion of the Western Mind* - as ably explored by Richard Tarnas. Here we are told that the western mind has been in its present 'post-modern' condition before - during the times of the ancient Greek Sophists. This was such a time as our own: a chaos of conflicting ideas, with no apparent basis on which to certify one above all the rest. Religious beliefs, political structures, and rules of moral conduct were then seen, as now, to be humanly created conventions, and were all open to fundamental questioning and change. Tarnas tells us that "this decisive shift in the character of Greek thought, encouraged by the contemporary social and political situation, owed as much to the problematic condition of natural philosophy at that time as to the decline in traditional religious beliefs".

The echoes in our present condition are nearly deafening. I refrain from comment on the present states of our religions, which you can add for yourselves. But, aside from these, we are faced with the essentially philosophical enigmas presented by our quantum mechanics and particle physicists - our present-day natural philosophers. Their current ideas are clearly and very substantially problematic as to the fundamental nature and essential causes of our worlds.

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Whether things are fundamentally particles or waves may seem singularly unimportant to most of us. But it is certainly extremely curious that, whatever these seemingly fundamental things are, they apparently 'know' who wants to know, and behave accordingly. If we set up experiments to see particles and not waves, then particles we see. Otherwise, we see waves. And these wavicles or partives seem to know *after* the fact of the looking (in the double slit and Aspect experiments), but *before* the seeing, and adjust their appearance accordingly. And this, apparently, is the essential stuff of our concrete existence. We are all fundamentally plagued by (or blessed with) elemental uncertainty yet universal knowledge. We cannot escape by pretending that the physicists have got this wrong. Simply too much follows and fits from their knowledge for it to be substantially erroneous - incomplete: yes; but wrong: no.

Tarnas goes on: "despite the positive effects of the Sophists' intellectual training and establishment of a liberal education as the basis for character formation, a radical scepticism towards all values led some to advocate an explicitly amoral opportunism. Students were instructed how to devise ostensibly plausible arguments supporting virtually any claim. The philosophical denial of absolute values and sophisticated commendation of stark opportunism seemed both to reflect and to exacerbate the problematic spirit of the times." Tarnas suggests that the whole development of reason then seemed to have undercut its own basis, with the human mind denying itself the capacity for genuine knowledge of the world. The Sophists' relativistic humanism, for all its progressive and liberal character, did not then prove wholly benign. Is it doing so now?

To answer this question, we need to re-consider the ways in which we suppose people and their communities organise themselves, and the ways in which we grant power to ideas to generate the authorities according to which we agree to live and behave. In other words, we are forced to consider the very basis of our so-called social science. How do we come by the working truths by which we govern and regulate our own (and, if possible, other peoples') lives? How and why do we generate (never mind venerate) our authorities as practical, workable and acceptable social truths?

The nature of truth and science

We had better be clear what we mean by truth. Truth seems to come in three basic and different forms: experiential, confirmed by independent and reliably replicable evidence; game or rule truth, as in mathematical truths or laws of social life and play; and belief. We distinguish between: *veracity*, as agreement or correspondence with external observations; *validity* as valid in law or from well-founded logical and mathematical deductions; *value*, in the ethical sense of deserving of esteem and having intrinsic worth.

Science, as commonly pursued, typically only worries about veracity and validity, leaving value to be determined by the users of science. Science relies on correspondence theory, concerning the nature of facts and the correspondence between facts and explanation (scientific theory or belief) and hence the veracity of our truths. And it relies on coherence theory as the rules and operation of logic and hence the validity of our truths. Scientific truth is obliged to be always provisional, on two major grounds. First, explanations of facts are continually bedevilled by the re-definition of existing supposed facts and by new observations - so explanations need to be continually revised and reformed. Second, and even

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more fundamentally, Gödel has shown, through his incompleteness theorem, that there is no such thing as a self-contained and complete logic system. Every logic we use necessarily relies on some “given outside determinant” (a g.o.d.), a prior belief in something. The consequences are apparent in our current debates over, for example, food safety and genetic modification.

It is this prior belief which underpins our value truth. Value, however, is something we grow within ourselves, from sources either within or deeply outside ourselves. It is the product of our biological nature and our social nurture (or *vice versa*, it hardly matters). It is the product of our needs, desires, ambitions and aspirations, wherever they come from.

Social Truth and social science

Social science is bedevilled by the obvious fact that objectivity is fundamentally denied. Our truths are clearly of our own making. So, too, are the social institutions and systems founded on these truths. Value truth for people, and for social sciences, can only be proxied through persuasion and conviction of fellows, peers, neighbours and societies. It is no accident that the triple foundation (lower division) of the seven liberal arts comprise: Grammar; Logic; Rhetoric - grammar providing the rules of intercourse; logic providing the reason of argument; rhetoric providing the persuasion and conviction. That has been both a recipe for social science, and, by the same token, a recipe for defining social authority.

But there is an important fourth form of ‘truth’ - the *vernacular* or expedient or surrogate truth; the urban, street, village myth - which may or may not correspond to any of the three “authoritative” truths above, but which is treated as if it were true for many people for much of the time. We use vernaculars and myths to govern most of our socio-economic and political relations and transactions. And the more we are snowed with information, the more we need to distil this information into working truths - our approximate, incomplete and misinformed vernaculars.

Since objectivity is fundamentally denied to social scientists, we need a better definition of its surrogate - social acceptability through persuasion and conviction. Only idiots and geniuses can typically survive for long holding fundamental subjective beliefs seriously at odds with at least some peer or reference group. Survival requires that the rest of us earn (or otherwise obtain) food, shelter, income, recognition and (hopefully) respect from others. At a higher level than mere survival, our self-respect requires that our subjective views appear to us to have some wider social value, even if as yet unappreciated by our peers and reference groups. In other words, our own survival requires consent from others for our continued prosperity and freedom, if not continued existence. Our self-respect requires permission from society for us to try and practice persuasion, emotional conversion and intellectual conviction. So, how do our social systems grant us this permission and provide us with social acceptance?

We gain this social acceptance through one of three basic social transactions: gifts from those who love us; tributes from those who fear us; or exchange with those willing to trade with us; the triple social ‘organisers’ identified by Ken Boulding - Love; Fear; Exchange - or: Consent; Coercion; Contract. Our individualistic and subjective views have, ultimately, to be consistent with, and coherent and acceptable to (or at least tolerated by), our lovers, governors, slaves and servants, or trading and negotiating partners. So, ultimately, our

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individualistic subjectivity is heavily conditioned, if not primarily determined, by what our societies will accept and tolerate.

It is this social acceptance or toleration which we are obliged to take as the surrogate for objectivity. We use our political conventions to persuade others of our beliefs and convictions, and to enforce those of the resulting rulers. We use our economic systems to trade ideas as well as things with each other, convincing them of the sense of tolerating our rights to existence and income, if not belief. We use our reason to persuade through rhetoric and logic. We commit to these systems, either as friends or enemies, on the basis of self-belief and faith.

The apparently fundamental distinction between objective and subjective is not a sensible question. Sensible questions are those for which the answers will prove to have genuine value. The value of the answers depend on someone else finding them useful, either as foundations for further thought about and exploration of our world, or in helping it work, behave, perform and cooperate better. If we are determined to be subjective, then we will ultimately need to persuade a substantial number of others to agree with us, otherwise they will deny or ignore our right to exercise our individuality. In so doing, we either need to be a dictator or a prophet, or to make a profit. Unless, that is, we can otherwise convince others through reason and rational argument to accept (and thus compromise) our subjectivity, thereby transforming it into some modest consensus. These are our only routes to sustainable authority - the continued defensible power of an idea to command respect.

Ultimately, then, our determination and acceptance of social truths and associated authorities must rest on the *rules* of our political and economic systems, or the *reasons* of our intellects and senses, or the *faiths* of our individual and collective humanities, or g.o.ds, as given outside determinants. If we challenge these foundations as we find them in our societies, then either we fail and are coerced into unwilling submission. Or we change our society. Societies thus evolve according to collective and often implicit negotiations about the foundations of our social truths, whether we realise this or not.

The evolution of social authority

How can these threads be drawn together into a concept of reality or accepted (more or less consensual) social truth - our picture of the determination of authority? The focus, here, is on the processes used to determine social acceptance or consensus - the 'social organisers' identified by Boulding and echoed by other esteemed social science researchers since then.

Boulding, in *The Economics of Love and Fear*, has suggested that human history can be characterised as moving between domination by one or other of these three basic organisers - consent, coercion and contract. If so, however, particular epochs or societies will be characterised also by the habits developed from previous eras or cultures. These become embodied in the institutions and conventions of the present society, as the conventional vernacular. Thus, some social transactions are governed by routines, customs and traditions. They become automatic and autonomic (conventionalised) rather than being derived directly from fear, love or exchange. We thus use four principle social organisers or transaction systems in all our social relationships: consent; contract; coercion; convention. These are the basic rule systems and habits, or institutions as Douglass North calls them (winning a

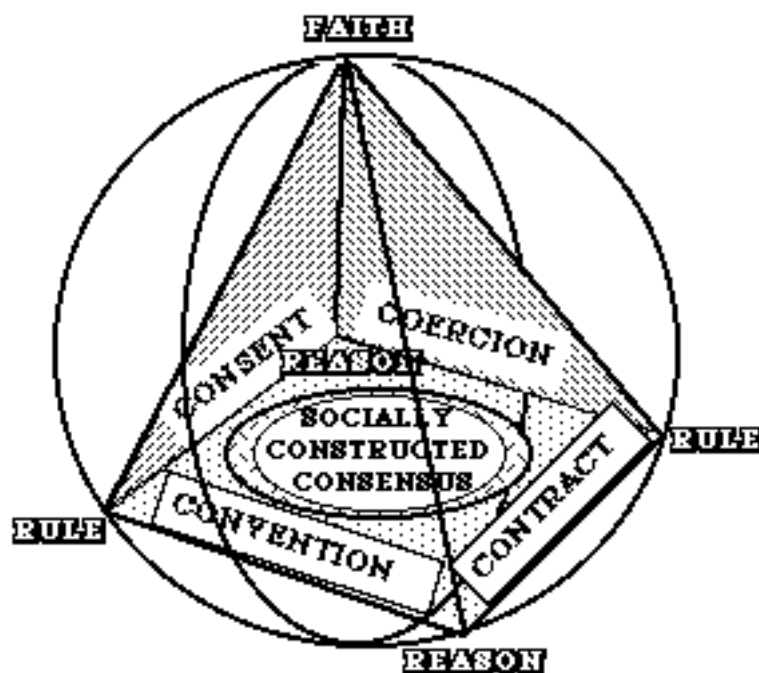
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Nobel Prize for his insights), which we all use, in different mixes and balances, to govern, regulate and organise our lives.

In turn, these social organisers rely for their legitimacy and coherence on the triple foundations of our various truths or authorities: rules and laws; reason (including replicable experiential evidence); faith, as acceptance of self-evident, morally imperative or personally cardinal truths. Unless agreeably based on these foundation pillars, any society or community will question and undermine the social organisers and institutional patterns through which people generate consensus, as the common acceptance of how the world works.

The following picture may help to illustrate the argument. Here, the four social organisers - consent, coercion, contract and convention - are each represented as one face of a quadrilateral pyramid. Each face, in turn, is founded on and thus defined according to its reliance on Faith, Rule and Reason - the triple roots of social authority. Greater reliance on one cornerstone rather than the others will alter the shape of the organising plane or negotiating agenda, and thus alter the reflection of social truth produced through this transaction system. The resulting amalgam of the social vernacular - the socially constructed consensus - is pictured as the reflection of these four planes or agenda. The social consensus will thus depend on the interaction of the four organising planes, with each of their definitions in turn depending on their foundations of faith, rule and reason.

The essential concepts of Social truths & their relationships.



Of course, the characters and cultures of our communities and societies will affect the ways in which we construct our social realities. So, too, will the contexts and circumstances in which we then find ourselves. These four Cs (character, culture, context and circumstance) will cloud and obscure the essential systematics, so the picture implies a continual spin and revolution to our socially constructed truths - our vernacular authorities. Furthermore, the orientation of this construct depends on where one stands. The particular construction (with

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faith characterised as the apex of the pyramid) depends on who we are. Make up your own minds, and then seek to convert your friends and enemies. But the whole construct that we choose to live in spins and evolves. Or, if we are careless or unlucky, simply revolves. We might need professional, expert and authoritative “spin doctors” to ensure care and foster luck.

Is it an accident that St. Paul’s advice that faith, hope and charity were all we need has persisted for so long? Or that it makes some sort of sense, regardless of our particular religion? And that the greatest of these is charity? Faith in our self-evident truths; hope that our reason is sensible; charity in our rules, lest we fall foul of them and find ourselves judged, exactly as Rawls has argued in his theory of justice.

So what?

Take the case of the World Trade Organisation. [Readers can add their own examples as they see fit, as tests of the framework.] Economic arguments are here defined to lie on the south-east baseline. Economic faith consists in belief in the rules and reason of economic logic, which leads to competitive markets, free trade and voluntary contract. This view of the world remains somewhat removed from the vernacular consensus, as well demonstrated in Seattle. There, the demonstrators exhibited a variety of perspectives more or less identifiable as being north-west of the establishment consensus, complaining that at least their consent to the WTO’s largely economic perspective is not to be taken for granted. Meanwhile the international lawyers have us all caught in the vice between the north-east and south-west baselines - the interplay between convention and coercion, with consent and contract squeezed out of the consensus. Authority is contested. Which is socially catastrophic or entirely legitimate, depending on your perspective and position. The point is, it is natural. Which strongly suggests that it was ever thus. Our present condition and circumstance is no more pivotal than the earth is to the solar system or universe. We have been here before. Indeed, we are very possibly condemned to reside here indefinitely, if we should all be so lucky as to live for so long.

It is a corollary of the outline story being told here that the more authoritative any authority seeks to become, the more likely it is that the authority will be undermined and contested. Authorities seek to organise. Any organisation or society must ultimately retain the consent of the organised, for mere coercion is bound to generate increasing resistance and hence increasing costs and resources for enforcement - leaving less for attainment of (however questionable) ambition. Conventions, though, establish vested interests which will be defended; or will support cravings for past and supposed better habits. Meanwhile, contracts continue to be made in the teeth of, or as the tail of, the dogs of convention and coercion.

The social logic

But, of course, this more or less reasoned account of our condition, with our authorities continually questioned and contested, is no better and very possibly worse than a near infinity of other possible stories. The merit, if that it be, of this story is simply that it seeks to provide a framework of explanation.

As Ralph Dahrendorf has already told us, in his 1995 ESRC lecture: “There remains a common theme for a science of human society, and that while much progress has been made

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in developing its various facets and aspects, it is still important to try and tie the parts together - not in search of a 'world formula' but to make sense of the social habitat in which we live, have lived and are likely to live". Quite so. I respectfully submit this story as an entry.

In the Socratic tradition, it appears possible to dissect and define the object of scientific enquiry - truth - and thus of the foundations of our social authorities, in terms of their essential component parts, the definitions of which has appealed to at least some previous thinkers. The reconstruction identifies the notions of inherent subjectivity of social authority, and suggests how societies contrive to construct or project some heavily plural and 4C specific consensus or vernacular through their institutions and transaction systems. These systems, in turn, are organic rather than mechanistic, evolving and adapting to changes in contexts and circumstances according to the characters and cultures of their inhabitants. Reason (as the foundation of the scientific method) is only one of three grounds on which such discourse or transactions are based. Rules (embodying myths and conventions as well as the perceptions of the results of science and logic) and underlying faiths are at least as important.

There is, perhaps, a natural appeal of philosophies which deny authority to any established discipline or apparently privileged institution. The wish to escape domination and control (and slavery) appears to provide considerable impetus to the post-modern thought. The notion of exploration and practice of open discourse is very attractive, especially to those suspicious or sceptical of the motives and behaviours of those in conventional authority.

However, to wish the world a better or more sympathetic place is not to make it so. Even if it is accepted that the world was once a better place, it is not possible to revert to or rebuild that condition without (implicitly at least) understanding why such past systems proved unsustainable and what it is about present systems which make them both unacceptable and apparently robust. To do so requires more than description, deconstruction and critical discourse. It requires the development of richer and more inclusive story. We need a better narrative (if not a metanarrative) capable of meeting emerging issues and including alienated or presently disadvantaged communities.

Our present systems, with all their imperfections and unsustainable structures, are the result of the evolution of social institutions. Hurrying up the evolutionary process by deconstructing present structures may well not produce better or more coherent lives. Given that our social worlds are social constructs, it is sensible to try and understand how and why such constructs develop and evolve. Without such improved understandings, deconstruction results in destruction. The history of sophist movements provides ample evidence.

Lest we fall into a post-modern dark age, we need to reconstruct our perceptions of the model systems of the social science disciplines. We need to develop, if not a metanarrative, at least a tool box or lexicon from which contrasting metanarratives can be constructed, and hence debated. Specialisation, and associated fragmentation, only make sense if there is a corresponding trade between groups and disciplines for mutual benefit. The present lack of communication between social science disciplines and, even more, between those who espouse the post-modern views and those incurably modernist, prevents trade of ideas and insights. Encouraging trade requires that importers and exporters can exchange both goods

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(ideas) and currencies, as the grammar of our logical interchange. Exchange implies common understandings of these ideas and common acceptance of the grammar. Dismissal of the ideas of present specialists from other communities denies the prospect of trade. We need to encourage interchange of ideas, and to do so requires a groping towards a common understanding of concepts and social constructs. This essay is an initial attempt in that direction. If you do not like it, then the challenge is to develop a better one.

There is no unified, eternal truth as such. Our authorities and social truths, by which we lead our lives, are being continually re-constructed, as the post-modern terminology has it. But, and this is my critical point, there is a generalised systematic process which determines, or at least understandably conditions, the ever-evolving transient consensus - the flow of social truth. Our authorities are nothing more than the ephemeral embodiment of this stream of socially constructed truth. If we are careful, we might possibly be able to discern some fundamental principles within or beneath this stream of logic, which might then count as eternal truths.

Without a faith in the existence of such a process, there can be no such thing as a social science. There can be no rational means of pursuing more harmonious and fruitful lives. Without such a faith, we can only aspire to be second-rate artists. Artists with no fundamental or enduring insights into the meaning and beauty, or catastrophe, of it all. Without such a faith, we are all charlatans and deserve to be dismissed as such. My picture of the process may well not be yours. It is certainly incomplete. But it is an attempt. What does your's look like?

The answer, then, to the question of who needs authority is that we all do. If it is not available in acceptable form from elsewhere, we invent it and construct it for ourselves. And we are then left with the problems of how to deploy and exercise it.

There is, of course, a large number of important but unanswered questions left from this story. Among the most obviously important are as follows.

- How do we construct knowledge and understanding from the masses and clouds of information which rain on us from every point of the compass? In short, how does our reason work to generate personal and thus social truths and their associated rules and faiths?
- How do we resolve the inevitable contests, and how do these conflicts arise? Where are the human motivations and ambitions, and thus the exercise of self-will, in these constructs?
- How do we use our transaction systems so as to produce consent without unnecessary coercion? How do we establish conventions to enhance rather than frustrate our human ambitions and contracts?
- How do we reconcile the power of the limited rich with the mass of the disadvantaged? What rules can we devise or culture, and what rulers do we elect, to minimise conflicts, promote harmonies and judge outcomes? Where, in the end, is our morality?

You might notice, if you have been following the briefs for these essays, a curiosity here. These questions are, in other words, the remaining four questions set to challenge social

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scientists by Prospect and the ESRC. What a coincidence. We need to write and read the other essays. Our ability to do so coherently and consistently will provide an important test of the story outlined here.

For, in the end, the huge and possibly ridiculous ambition of this argument - to redesign and reconstruct our social science and our understandings of living - cannot be reached without embracing all these questions. Quite impossible, you say? Very possibly, but what alternative do you have? To answer only one at a time? Then your answers will be partial and incomplete, and therefore misleading and wrong. And there will be no way of telling whether they are even roughly right, or exactly and thus disastrously wrong. In short, you will have no authority. We had better get to the other stories.

The Nature of the Social World

In the beginning was the word,
and the word was a voice of our virtual realities,
formed from our perceptions of what we hear, read and see,
and our attributions of what these sensations
mean and signify about our worlds.
These words we then make flesh - and concrete, steel and stone
and make our virtual realities actual, factual, and factional

These words are our self-evident truths,
our validated and verified realities:
the specifications and constraints of our virtual worlds;
our 'given outside determinants' - our own individual g.o.ds.
Tailored and coloured by our communities, clubs, and peer groups;
nurtured from our nature by the four Cs:
context, circumstance, culture and character:
a living balance 'tween personal self-expression
and safety-in-numbers: conformity with the crowd or herd.

Education and life questions these gods,
growing new and different interpretations
which we absorb or discard according to need and preference:
needs arising from the demands for survival and prosperity
- the ability to pass on our genes;
preferences from what makes us comfortable,
and provides coherence -
the desire to grow and pass on our cultures and characters,
to be judged and valued by our place in history
- to make our virtuals virtues and realities
to make devices and give advices
to eliminate or tame our (but mostly others') vices.

[4,680 words]