



INTERNATIONAL PHILOSOPHY OLYMPIAD

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Chosen Quote: 2

On authority

Hannah Arendt has made first hand experiences with the nature of authoritarian regimes and the sufferings that come along with it. When she decided to examine the events of the second world war and the genocide of minorities committed by the Nazi regime, authority and the desire to obey to it were one of the first aspects that she explored philosophically. The fact that the genocide was committed by such a large collective is proof to her that authority played a vital part in such regimes, since it relied on it's individuals to participate in the system without thinking critically for themselves (she uses her concept of the "banality of evil" to describe this further). In the given quote she concerns herself with the objective to define authority and since she insists on isolating authority from obedience through violence or persuasion, the task proves difficult.

The question arises, whether there even exists a pure form of authority and what influential factors it relies on. The aim of this essay will therefore be to examine the nature of authority through individual and collective examples.

Personal authority

Each and every relationship is influenced by the hierarchal structures surrounding it. Societal structures such as educational facilities, companies and even families rely on some form of personal authority to function. This authority comes, in most cases, naturally and therefore remains unquestioned. From an anthropological perspective, most collectives, no matter what size, benefit from establishing a leader to centralize their organization, which in turn helps them progress at a faster rate. A professor holds authority over their students just as much as parents hold authority over their children. The essence of personal authority lies in its presumed self-evidence. It is formed through a voluntary pact between both parties and it should ideally not rely on external reinforcements (such as punishments).

On the other hand, as Arendt already mentioned, authority is in its essence hierarchical. It relies on previously established structures to legitimize its validity. And while most structures seem to be well-reasoned, such as a professor having knowledge or competence in a certain subject, they can and have also been used in a manipulative or oppressive manner. The authority of men over women had its foundations on their supposed natural or God-given superiority. In this and many other cases, authority came along with other forms of making individuals obey, such as violence or financial oppression. Through the combination of these methods the structure itself is harder to breach and forces the individuals into obedience, stripping authority of its voluntary character.

The last influential factor of personal authority are psychological aspects. Since individuals tend to comply when they feel comfortable and at safety, certain character traits can be beneficial for individuals to gain authority over others. People who have a self-assured or assertive manner tend to be perceived as more competent and trustworthy. This implies that there is a subjective component to the concept of authority

Concluding from that, personal authority relies on hierarchical structures to validate its existence. It may be the most subjective form of authority, since it largely depends on its voluntariness and numerous psychological factors but the structural reinforcement should not be overlooked. Even on an individual level, authority is mostly observed in combination with power- or argument-based methods.

Conformity

Conformity might be the most abstract form of authority since it is neither held by a single individual, nor an organized collective. Rather, we experience conformity when we are confronted with collective systems or large crowds of people who do not necessarily need to be in any particular relationship to one another.

As proven in numerous sociological experiments, it seems to be an inherently human trait, motivated by our desire to raise our chances of survival. Just as personal authority, it is essentially voluntary but the choice is made subconsciously. Driven by the instinct to blend in, it would be a far-fetched to call this decision entirely free and rational.

Still, conformity is widely seen as a useful tool to hold communities together, without necessarily having to establish a person or a group to dictate the actions. This absence of a leader might indicate that conformity does not fall under the umbrella-term of authority, however, I would argue in favour of a more differentiated perspective on the phenomenon. Since it fulfils the requirement of creating obedience without using verbal persuasion or violence, it definitely meets the primary definition established by Arendt.

Furthermore, conformity bears the potential for abuse just as much as personal authority. Arendt would argue that conformity frees us of the need to think for ourselves, which is the first step towards blindly following collective movements without questioning their moral standards.

State authority

The last and structurally speaking largest form of authority is held by the state. In order to keep the argument concise and short, I will only be talking about democratic forms of government in this case. Interestingly enough, the very nature of authority held by the state is a synthesis of its subcategories. As the head of state is representative of the whole structure he holds personal authority, both towards his subordinates and towards the citizens. On the other hand, a certain collective identification is obligatory for a state to function, since it largely relies on the active participation of its individuals. The conformative character of nations can also be observed in the phenomenon of nationalism and is very often used to reinforce obedience (sometimes beyond morally justifiable limits).

In comparison to the other two forms, it has both the largest range of influence and holds the most potential for misuse. I would like to point out that it is almost impossible for a government to rely on authority alone. Theoretically speaking, freedom and security provided by the state can be viewed as two ends of an axis. Depending on the culture and form of government, a synthesis between the two is established, but both can never fully be given. Since freedom (if total, uninterfered freedom even exists) depends on the absence of external or internal limitations and security is reinforced through external limitations, a coexistence in their absolute forms would not be able to exist in a large collective of people. Whatever compromise is found, it is the state's responsibility to reinforce it. And to do so, it relies on authority, but not authority alone:

While laws are discussed in parliamentary institutions, focusing on finding a reasonable solution to a given problem (persuasion), they are enforced through legal prosecution (structural power). Both alternative forms mentioned by Arendt are used to ensure the functionality of a state, which leads me to the social contract theorists Thomas Hobbes and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. While their individual ideas of this contract differ in numerous aspects, they agree that a certain contract is needed to progress from the state of nature to an organized society. While Hobbes relies heavily on reinforcement through power (and violence if needed), Rousseau seems to lean more towards persuasive argumentation. His citizens are free to confer regularly and decide about their laws and representatives. The concept of state authority exemplifies the difficulty of isolating authority from other forms of achieving obedience.

Pure authority?

While authority certainly exists as a concept in itself, it never seems to appear isolated from power or persuasion. This state of affairs introduces great difficulty when trying to find a suitable definition, which is why a phenomenological approach might be the most favourable: Voluntariness and Subjectiveness are

both aspects that define the essence of authority (as seen in personal authority). As observed in the example of conformity, a specific person or group to hold the authority is not needed, it can exist as a collective but not specific concept. As mentioned by Arendt, authority does not exist without corresponding obedience. On the other hand though, obedience exists without preceding authority. Furthermore, authority relies on hierarchical structures to legitimize its validity. Therefore, the two vital requirements for authority are an obedient reaction to the authoritarian action and supporting structures. However, it is these hierarchal structures that were previously established through persuasion and/or power. Since authority is inherently hierarchical, it must be at least to some extent dependent on these other forms.

Moral concerns

Authority is not immoral per se but the problematic aspect reveals itself when thinking about those structures. If they are morally questionable or even oppressive, that trait transfers onto the character of the authority that defines itself through these structures. If the goal is to assert morally justifiable circumstances for authority, there needs to be a shift in perspective of how we perceive it. As we discovered, authority has a dichotomic character, consisting of an authoritarian and an obedient part. Up until now, we declared the latter as object to the former. Authority is viewed as something that is inflicted onto someone. But as seen in conformity and personal authority, there is a voluntary aspect in complying to it, as long as the decision is not externally influenced by threats, violence, et cetera. If we think about the obeying part as a subject itself rather than an object, the perspective of the discussion shifts.

This relationship to authority might be what Arendt was writing about regarding the banality of evil. Authoritarian regimes rely on taking away their citizens' individualism and therefore their subjectivity. By discouraging them to think critically, they are reduced to objects or (in Kantian terms) to the means to an end.

In conclusion, Arendt raises the question by what authority is defined and limited. She recognizes the connection of authority and power or persuasion and tries to find a definition by subtraction. While this may work in formal logic, it is difficult to apply in real life. Phenomenologically speaking, authority is almost always reinforced through power or persuasion since the necessary hierarchy is established using one or both of the two concepts. Moreover, the moral character of authority is determined by the underlying hierarchy and the voluntariness of the obeying group or individual. While I do not fully agree with Arendt's attempt at isolating the concept of authority, I understand her concerns with the negative potential that it holds. The experiences she and many others made during the second world war are symbolical for the effects that authority in combination with ideological manipulation can have on society and the individual.