

The Conservative Vision of Authority

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I. The moralization of society

For classical liberals, the problem of politics was to find a way of restraining power; for modern liberals, it is how to maximize autonomy; for socialists, how to distribute the benefits of society fairly. For conservatives, the basic problem is the moralization of society, that is, the attribution of moral significance to the relations of people in community. For the citizens of a “moralized” society, all the major aspects of existence are colored by ideas of duty, loyalty, and status. For example, being a man or a woman isn’t just a piece of biological data; it is a calling to the station of mother or father. Thus people read in their very bodies a summons to socially useful self-giving. The fact that someone is my parent or mate or child confers automatic rights and duties. Neighbors become countrymen; power becomes authority; work becomes cooperation in the divine act of creation. Moralized society secures each man’s dignity in the most profound sense of assuring him that his actions really matter. As Hegel explained, only a moral (ethical, in his terminology) society can reconcile the limited scope of man’s individual concerns with the universal scope of his reason. According to the former, the scope of the average man’s actions is necessarily small, and these primarily affect a small number of people close to him. According to the latter, man is able to formulate general moral principles. These, however, will be either global or abstract. The former, such as “pursue the overall happiness or progress of mankind”, give only a small significance to a man’s daily actions, and that in an always indirect and often unclear way. The latter, such as “love your neighbor” do grant a man’s actions direct significance, but they are too abstract to tell him what he owes to his wife as opposed to his coworkers as opposed to visiting foreigners, etc. What we need to bridge this gap is a social context which makes it clear what love of a person implies for each recognized relationship. Ethical society is the conservative, Hegelian solution to the problem of reconciling the universal and the particular sides of man, so that he achieves his full dignity.

Liberalism has sought to free man from these preset roles and duties. Everywhere we hear the cry that people should not be “restricted” by gender roles, kinship ties, or national loyalties. People must be free to choose their own meanings. But to say that a thing can have any meaning we choose to give it is to say that that thing is meaningless in itself. All of Nature, including our own bodies, has been recast as intrinsically meaningless raw material, to be exploited as we (either individually or collectively) see fit. This has undoubtedly expanded the realm of human freedom, but at the cost of alienating us from the natural and social world. We are given more choices, but at the price that our choices lose all real significance. For conservatives, this is too great a price to pay for freedom.

II. The network of dependencies

The most fundamental fact of life, from which all serious social relations proceed, is man's dependence. He relies for his needs on others, and they rely on him. People have never been independent, nor can they be, nor is independence a healthy ideal. Nor are most relationships of dependency arbitrary.

Many are natural in the sense that they "suggest themselves" to the minds of most people, and they could only be replaced through some sort of totalitarian government organization. The dependences between generations (young children on parents, elderly parents on children) for basic needs are of this kind. So too are territorial relations: the mutual dependence of those living close together to maintain those common goods—such as public order or shared language, customs, and currency—that make the good life in common possible. Through constant intrusion, the government could break the dependence between generations and between neighbors; it could insist all dependence be on the state itself, but most of us realize that this would constitute a continual act of violence against the natural development of personal relationships.

A key difference between the liberal and the conservative is their attitude to natural dependency networks. A liberal judges these relations according to an independent, abstract standard ideal of freedom or equality; then he demands government act to rectify the "injustices" he finds. The conservative, on the contrary, has no abstract, "outside" standard with which to judge his society; rather, he builds his ideas of equality and justice around existing dependency networks. To the liberal, this is acquiescence to injustice. To the conservative, the liberal is a menace to the social order.

From dependencies, we derive duties. To those who rely on me, I have duties. From those upon whom I rely, I have rights coupled with the duty of gratitude. With duty, we have entered the moral universe. Duty is the mark of citizenship in a moral community. Without it, one is not yet a true partaker in the spiritual good offered by this sort of community. So, for example, as long as the products of a culture are simply available for my optional enrichment, I am not a member of that culture, but only a consumer. Only when that culture's traditions become a trust which I am charged with handing down have I truly entered into the stream of that culture's life and made it my own.

III. Loyalty and Love: the horizontal completion of moral community

There's a tendency today to see duty and love as opposing motives. Duty is what we do against our wills out of obligation. Love moves us willingly and spontaneously. An act may be done out of duty or out of love, but not

both. Hence the romantic objection to marital commitment—that it adds to a love relationship the alien and antagonistic element of duty.

In fact, this alleged conflict between duty and love is contradicted by all of our experience, in which we find the two to be organically connected. Self-donation belongs to the nature of love. I can't give myself totally to someone today while planning that I might abandon that person later. Thus, love's own inner dynamism drives the lover to promise lifelong fidelity to his beloved. In romance, parenthood, and friendship, commitment is the fulfillment of love. Conversely, commitment and mutual dependence naturally foster love and loyalty. A platoon of soldiers will generally be more devoted to each other than the members of a bowling club. Commitment is organically linked, not only to devotion to individuals, but also to devotion to groups: loyalty to the family itself, the tribe, the guild, the army, the country, whatever group that relies on me and on which I rely.

IV. Authority: the vertical completion of moral community

The interconnection of dependence, duty, and loyalty raises a community to the moral sphere. Of themselves, however, these are not sufficient to satisfy the universal aspect of man's reason. Each group to which a man belongs is necessarily particular and limited. He can look beyond the group; he can recognize objective goods outside the group and feel the potential call of duty to them. Each man will naturally be a member of several such groups. He will be aware of individuals and groups to whom he is not connected, but whose rights he knows he should respect. He will recognize duties toward things—like truth or nature—that transcend human interest altogether. Therefore, men will not be satisfied with a community that stands for nothing beyond its own collective self-interest. Such a community has not yet recognized and addressed them at their highest level.

A man forms his self-identity largely around his loyalties. To be fully integrated, he needs an ultimate loyalty that defines who he ultimately is. However, none of his particular communities has the right to make such a claim on him. To attempt to do so would be tyrannical; it would mean telling him to disregard some valid loyalties while giving to one an ultimacy it doesn't legitimately possess. Man is ordered to the entirety of the moral order. Therefore, the way for a community to legitimate itself is to present itself as a collective commitment to the moral order as a whole. A family or a state then sees itself as a group built on a common dedication to Goodness itself and Justice itself.

This idea completely reshapes the individual's understanding of the community's claims on him. The community is no longer completely self-interested, but points to a good outside itself. Nevertheless, the community is not thereby reduced to a means to an external end. The end is an affirmation of the moral order, and the community precisely is this affirmation. What has been introduced is the element of *authority*. So the difference between a community with authority and one without it is not that the former is more restrictive or "bossier". The Soviet Union

was totalitarian but anti-authoritarian. The difference is that a ruler with authority speaks not only in the name of the people's good or the people's desires; rather, he speaks primarily for Justice. In doing so, the ruler addresses his subjects at their highest level of morality.

It would, however, be a misunderstanding to think that, because a ruler with authority (a king or paterfamilias, say) represents universal justice, that his jurisdiction is therefore universal and unlimited. On the contrary, authority is naturally plural—in that each person is subjected to more than one of them—and limited—in that the ruler is only entitled to speak for Justice to a limited group of people under his authority. Recall that authority is the solution to the problem of multiple loyalties. By seeing his obedience to multiple authorities as all rooted in an allegiance to a single moral order, the subject secures a unitary identity. He has an ultimate allegiance, not by picking one authority and placing it over all the others, but by identifying a transcendent source that directly legitimates them all. Authority does mean that the ruler's commitment to justice is not a merely partial thing. Fathers and kings encourage all of the virtues and discourage all of the vices in their charges, not just those that directly affect the group. Authority figures must even constrain their own subjects if needed to protect the legitimate rights of outsiders. Here is a striking difference between an authoritative ruler and a mere agent of the people's will. Authority is the answer to the cosmopolitan's claim that loyalty to particular groups bespeaks a limited moral vision, that it is merely a form of collective selfishness.

A fully developed moral community will have institutional symbols of both aspects: the horizontal completion of loyalty and the vertical completion of authority. The former institution expresses the unity-in-mutual-dependence of the group, its bonds of loyalty and compassion. The latter institution expresses the unity-under-judgment of the group and rebukes the group, if necessary, for its moral failings. The two symbols are made clear by keeping the two institutions distinct. In the family, the mother is associated more with the horizontal symbol, the father more with the vertical. In the State, the deliberative body (e.g. Parliament) expresses horizontal unity—the community united in discussion of the common good. Parliament claims to speak for the people. The vertical symbol is borne by the king or (in the United States) by the Supreme Court. These speak to the people in the name of higher authorities: God, past and future generations, and the fundamental laws or Constitution.

V. The transcendent ground of authority

Authority claims to speak for the moral order as if this were a unitary thing, like Plato's conception of the Good. In evaluating the reasonableness of authority, one must ask if it really is meaningful to invoke a coherently unitary and ultimate Good. It would seem that authority is basing itself on some very strong, and very questionable, metaphysical premises. Does one really need to accept these premises to appreciate the claims of authority?

Yes, for authority in the full sense that I'm describing it, I believe one does. Therefore, although this is an essay in politics rather than metaphysics, it is necessary to briefly describe the worldview in which authority ultimately makes sense. One who considers the nature of goodness or value confronts a problem of the One and the Many that is precisely analogous to the problem of multiple authorities described above. Goodness in this world is irreducibly plural: there is no univocal quality that accounts for the goodness of an ecosystem, a person, friendship, courage, knowledge, music, etc. Furthermore, some goods are not only distinct but seem unable to coexist with other goods: a human can't have both masculine and feminine virtues; a community can't have the intimacy of a family, the freedom of the market, and the impartiality of the state. To choose only one quality in this world and assign it absolute value would be a sort of mental tyranny. Nevertheless, goods must have something in common if the word "good" is to have any meaning at all, above the subjective meaning of "whatever I happen to like". Although not every virtue and perfection can coexist in every subject, to claim that purely good qualities themselves contradict each other would make goodness incoherent; morality would then be the futile attempt to reconcile contradictory values.

Against this monstrous possibility, most men have asserted that goods and perfections do not contradict each other. The purely positive elements of masculinity and femininity, of being a dog and being an angel—that which makes these things good—do not contradict each other. They could in principle coexist. It's only the limited natures of humans, dogs, and angels that make this coexistence impossible for these subjects. All good could coexist in perfect unity and harmony in a being with no limiting nature, that is, in God. God is the answer to the unity-in-plurality of the world's goodness, as He is of the world's being. To Him is the ultimate allegiance that gives one's life unity and integration. God is, in a sense, the mirror of the soul—the ultimate unitary object to complement the unity of each subject. However, positing devotion to God as the ultimate ground of morality doesn't reduce finite goods to mere means any more than grounding communities on a devotion to Justice reduces them to means. The analogy between the two cases is particularly strong. To the authoritarian mind, moral communities simply are collective affirmations of Justice—serving this end is their inmost essence. To the religious mind, finite beings simply are glorifications of God—serving this end by their inmost actualities and perfections through which they participate in Him. The actual existence of God is a topic beyond the scope of this essay. It is important, though, to appreciate how closely the idea of authority is connected to the idea of God. We can connect the two yet more closely and summarize all that was said above in the following formula: to be in authority is to be God's representative. I believe that the modern insistence on carrying out political science in entirely secular terms is the reason that authority's true nature is usually misunderstood or ignored. Also, I think it fairly certain that authority in its full sense can only exist among a religious people.

VI. Collective response to God in its contemplative and practical aspects

One might object that the above description confuses the state with the Church, authority with religion, the ruler with the priest. Surely it is the latter that has always been charged with the intercourse between God and society. In fact, both ruler and priest mediate God's presence socially, but in very different ways. Authority in the state and the family address in God's name the practical reason. Authority always speaks in the imperative. "Do this. Don't do that." Authority *qua* authority never speaks in the declarative. It would be meaningless, for example, for the ruler to command that gambling is wrong. He may, however, command that the wrongness of gambling be taught in schools, or that gambling shall be punished in some particular way. Because it speaks in the imperative, the statements of authority are particular rather than universal. A meaningful command is always limited to its intended recipient. A ruler can order one subject to stand up and another to sit down without contradicting himself. The social experience of God has a theoretical or contemplative aspect, as well as a practical one, and this contemplative encounter with God is the realm of the Church. It consists, first of all, in dogmas—declarative statements about God, His relationship to man, and morality. Unlike orders, dogmas are by their nature universal; if one is true at all, it is true for everyone, everywhere. While diversity of authorities, customs, and cultures is natural and good, diversity in dogmatic belief is bad because it means that at least some people are ignorant of the truth. Ideally, there should be one Church.

Most of the contemplative religious life involves communication with God: statements *to* or *from* Him rather than statements *about* Him, *I-Thou* discourse rather than *I-It*. In recent centuries, this part of religion, at least, has seemed to be a necessarily private affair. In the confines of my own heart, I can offer love and praise to God, but how can a group do this? Groups may take collective actions, but surely they don't have collective beliefs or feelings? No prior age would have agreed with this religious individualism. A group can indeed collectively express a belief or feeling; this is what is accomplished through ritual. Consider a group of Americans standing for a recording of the national anthem before the start of a baseball game. Every one of them might have his mind elsewhere—on the coming game, for example—yet an expression of patriotism has certainly taken place. Who precisely made this expression? Not the individual: he might not be thinking of his country at all, and the fact that he's standing with his hand on his heart only has a certain meaning because the group gives it a meaning. No, in rituals, it is the group itself that speaks. Of course, the above example is a sort of worst-case scenario where only the group speaks. To be fully meaningful, each individual should consciously affirm what the ritual expresses. Even so, it is the collective making the statement, not each individual separately. Performance of the ritual unites all who have participated in it into a single voice, even those separated by distance

or death. This is a key part of its meaning. In our public relationship to God, the Church is the “we” who speak to God and the “us” to whom He speaks. Finally, the Church is charged with symbolizing both God’s presence in the world and His transcendence of the world, so that these intuitions are woven into the common life of the community. This is accomplished by the setting aside of a sacred realm in which the presence of God is especially attributed. Sacred places like temples, sacred objects like icons and relics, and sacred times like holy days assure the community of God’s nearness while simultaneously focusing this presence to distinguish God from the profane world.

The roles of the Church are, then, dogma, ritual, and consecration. The roles of authority are to establish justice and defend the common good. In the family, the two roles are combined: parents both teach and govern; the family is both a domestic church and a domestic kingdom. In the wider society, the roles are divided, with the Church taking on one, and the State the other. The two are always distinct, but not separate. The State relies on the Church to consecrate its authority, since authority is itself a primary example of a sacred thing. The Church consecrates the rituals that bind the community together, fostering a unity on which the State relies. The State’s commands base themselves on dogmas. (“Don’t gamble,” is based on “Gambling is wrong.”) Both Church and State are sovereign in their own sphere, and they stand or fall together.

Today, the Church has been effectively marginalized, and authority has lost its religious aura. The State has lost none of its will to power, though. With the eclipse of the idea of authority, the State is no longer restrained either by respect for a Higher Power or by respect for the equally legitimate authority of the family. The fall of authority is the rise of administration. Rather than the agent of Justice, the State makes itself the enabler of personal indulgences, the champion of our vices. As the realm of meaningless consumption expands, the sacred realm contracts, and our imaginations with it. Are we even capable of realizing, I wonder, how much we have already lost?