

Chapter 12: Authority

“Who Says?”

Dictionaries are like watches; the worst is better than none, and the best cannot be expected to go quite true.

- Samuel Johnson

Differences in recognition of authority are two crucial elements underlying controversy. This chapter provides methods for dealing with these issues.

What anyone believes to be true, false, ugly, beautiful, right, wrong, depends on what authority governs their judgments. Consider one of the most famous and enduring educational controversies in American history, the famed “Scopes Monkey Trial.” Here, in brief, is the story. During the “Roaring Twenties” traditional Americans were confronted with things that frightened and angered them such as jazz, Freudianism, modern art, Darwinism, young women with bobbed hair and very short skirts, modern dances such as the Charleston, and Darwinism.

It wasn’t long before traditionalists began flexing their political muscle; and they zeroed in on evolution. Urged on by the fiery oratory of three-time Presidential candidate and persuasive evangelist William Jennings Bryan they demanded that the theory of evolution be banned from the nation’s schools. In 1925 Tennessee passed a law making it illegal to teach "any theory that denies the story of the Divine Creation of man as taught in the Bible, and to teach instead that man has descended from a lower order of animals."²

Soon there was a showdown. Encouraged by a group of Dayton, Tennessee businessmen who wanted to put their town on the map, John Scopes, a local teacher, challenged the Tennessee law by teaching at unit on evolution. Soon he was brought to trial. He was defended by the most famed criminal attorney of the time, Clarence Darrow. And William Jennings Bryan led the prosecution. Eventually Scopes lost — though he was only fined a symbolic \$ 100. But by then the trial had polarized the nation. Even today, the nation is divided over the teaching of evolution and whether or not creationistic science should be taught in parallel.

What, at bottom, is this controversy about? It’s about authority. Or more precisely, which authority one should accept regarding how life came to be.

What or Who says so? Source and Interpretive Authority

Actually, the evolution versus creation issue really involves two types of authority: source and interpretive. Let's make this distinction.

² Famous Trials in American History, *Tennessee v John Scopes, The Monkey Trial*, <http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/trials/scopes/scopes.htm>

Source Authority

A source authority is typically a document, not a person. Examples include books some regard as holy such as the Bible , the Koran, and the Torah. It also includes political documents such as the Magna Carta, the Charter of the United Nations or the Constitution of the United States. Legal documents are also included, such as the School Code of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania or contracts drawn up between corporations or individuals.

Occasionally, particularly if we are dealing with cults or dictatorships, individuals become source authorities. For example, Marshall Applewhite and Bonnie Lu Nettles, or Bo and Peep as they called themselves, were source authorities within the Heaven's Gate cult they founded. So when Applewhite told thirty-eight followers to commit suicide so that their souls could take a ride on a spaceship that they believed was hiding behind the Hale-Bopp comet and carrying Jesus, they all did so. Similarly, when Adolph Hitler issued a command, it was considered the highest authority in the land.

You probably can see how the evolution controversy involves competing source authorities. The Fundamentalists regard the Bible, (which they believe to be the literal word of God in its original languages) as the source authority that explains creation. Evolutionists, on the other hand, maintain that scientific research, which began with the work of Charles Darwin, should be the source authority. This puts the two groups totally at odds. So long as they both maintain their respective allegiances to these different source authorities, the conflict will continue.

There are a surprising variety of source authorities. Here is a representative sample.

| | | |
|-------------------------|---|--|
| The Bible (Christian) | Tarot Cards | The Beatles song <i>Helter Skelter</i> (thought prophetic by murderous cult leader Charlie Manson) |
| The Koran (Islam) | The Pope (speaking <i>Ex Cathedra</i>) | Official Rules of Major League Baseball, 2007 |
| The Torah (Jewish) | Papal Encyclicals | Robert's Rules of Order (Meetings) |
| The Vedas (Hindu) | The Westminster Confession (for conservative Presbyterians) | The Official Texas Hold Em Rule Book (Poker) |
| The Tipitaka (Buddhism) | The Constitution of the US | The Geneva Conventions (Rules of War) |

Interpretive Authority

Even when people agree on a common source authority they can still vehemently disagree on how to interpret that authority. That's where interpretive authority comes in. Unlike source authorities, interpretive authorities are typically people rather than documents. But they are people IN A ROLE following a specified procedure. Smith, MD.. does not pronounce on your physical condition merely because he is *John Smith*. It is his judgment *as a medical doctor* having

performed a diagnosis that leads most people to acknowledge his authority on the matter.. The Pope provides another example. He and his College of Cardinals, interpret the Bible and other Roman Catholic source authorities for the faithful. Liberal Popes, such as John XXIII, gave his interpretation; conservative Popes, such as John Paul II, gave his. Of course, various Protestant interpretive authorities disagree with the Pope's interpretations of the Bible. They also disagree with one another. That's why there are so many different Protestant denominations. Each examine the Bible and come up with different criteria for being a good Christian.

A similar thing happens when it comes to interpreting the Constitution of the United States. Ultimately, that's the job of the Supreme Court. And conservative justices such as Clarence Thomas or Samuel Alito, typically come up with different interpretations than more liberal justices such as David Souter or Stephen Breyer. They all look at the same document, but come up with differing criteria as to how it should be applied in specific cases.

Interpretive authorities can wield great power. Most people concede the authority to individual persons to decide what those persons see, hear and feel. (Notice that individuals function as their own source authority in many situations. After all, those are their very own perceptions.) But under certain circumstances judges, priests and psychiatrists may deny them even that personal authority, even though it concerns their own perceptions. The table below lists some interpretive authorities.

| | | |
|-------------------|-------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Priests | Fact Finders | Newspaper reporters and editors |
| Imams (Muslim) | Engineers of various kinds | TV news producers |
| Rabbis | Polygraph operators | Ballistics experts |
| Judges | Forensic experts (crime data) | Psychiatrists |
| Medical Examiners | Accident investigators | Internal medicine specialists. |

Laying Out Possibilities

If we compare consensus and dissensus on authority, the possibilities of productive interaction for a group of people can be laid out. Practical knowledge requires only consensus on criteria: we need only agree on what is what, and how we control them. We needn't agree on why it works that way.

Criteria are often neutral with respect to authority. That is, competing authorities may recognize the same ones. This is why being an engineer is possible for people of very different religions. But where the very conception of knowledge rests on the recognition of certain authorities, it is not possible to accept those authorities neutrally. One cannot be a Roman Catholic atheist, or a behaviorist mystic.

Criteria are the what's and how's of human action: **this** is what an IQ score is and **this** is how we compute it, we might be taught. And this is why, says your boss, it is important to know an employee's IQ.

Authorities provide the why's. Consensus on both criteria and authority provides what communities call deep understanding, or (well-founded) knowledge. Knowledge is a term of respect reserved for those beliefs which rest upon shared criteria and authority. Where the what's and how's, the criteria, are not in dispute, but the why's are, that community will still recognize such items as practical knowledge. A teacher may know how to get students to learn algebra and may agree with psychologists on the criteria for knowing algebra. But the psychologists may disagree with each other and with the teacher as to why the teacher's method is effective. The practical knowledge is not denied; the deep understanding is.

Now, here are the steps in our analysis:

Step 1) Identify the authorities acceptable to each of the disputing sides.

Step 2) Determine if they are the same authorities.

Step 4) If they are, decide if they prioritize them in the same way.

Step 5) Determine if recourse to authority is unavoidable or if disputants can make do with practical knowledge. Practical knowledge does not require recognition of authority beyond the authority of established practice or personal experience. Do the disputants insist on requiring what they individually see as deep understanding? If both sides insist so, they forego any hope of reconciliation.

Chapter Highlights

Disputes often involve disagreements over authority. There are two types of authority: source and interpretive.

Source authorities are typically documents, though it can be a person, particularly in the case of cults or dictatorships.

Interpretive authorities are people in special roles following certain procedures. Interpretive authorities can disagree about the meaning of the same source authority.

Even if the disputants do not agree on ultimate authority, we can look to see if they would reconcile their differences for the sake of maintaining a practical relationship.

Other Related Chapters in This Text

- | | |
|---------------------------|----------------------------|
| 4, Definitions | 9, The Nature of Consensus |
| 7, What's the Connection? | 15, Fact and Value |
| 8, Presuppositions | |

Keywords for Further Data Base Search

Source authority

Interpretive authority

criteria

Test Yourself

Consider the following situations with their associated questions. What disputes might arise? Which authorities might be called on to settle the dispute? Would the choice of authority be controversial?

Example:

Harry kills Sam. To what extent is Harry responsible for his act?

Sketch of Answer

What the criteria for being “responsible” are, is likely to be at issue here.

The District Attorney’s investigators, lawyers, psychiatrists, and Harry himself will be brought in.

There could be controversy if Harry’s defense is that it was an accident and “experts” disagree. The same with an insanity defense.

1. The Argus company is accused of an illegal level of waste runoff into the Hudson river.
2. A doctor is accused of murder because he helped a terminally ill patient die.
3. An 87 year old driver disputes the state’s claim that he is too old to drive.
4. A work that some object want thrown out as “pornography” is being displayed in a publicly funded museum.
5. A house owner is claiming exemption from property taxes on the grounds his house is a church, but local officials disagree..