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# Epistemic Authority, Rationality and the Fallacy of Educational Democracy

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In any rational authority system, authority must be closely connected to point, purpose and function. The situation of authority in colleges and universities (T.E.I.s\*) provides a special case of such point, purpose and function.

The present paper tries to show the quite special features of the epistemic (knowledge) authority of academics that provide rational justification for their being in many positions of social authority in their institutions. To do this, (1) the particular aspects of the point, purpose and function of such epistemic authorities will be demonstrated, (2) the logical necessity of academic disciplines for rational endeavour will be pointed out, and (3) the mistakes involved in the common notion of educational democracy will be exposed.

## *The Point, Purpose and Function of Epistemic Authority*

Firstly, some general societal aspects of epistemic authority should be indicated.

It is clear that no person can hope to master more than a minute part of the knowledge that exists. In order that it is all mastered, there need to be knowledge specialists: this is similar to saying that there need to be epistemic authorities. Concomitantly, it can be argued that the vast body of knowledge has to be mastered by people who become epistemic authorities, if the modern, complex, industrial, liberal Western democracies are to continue to exist.

Furthermore, what makes the existence of knowledge or epistemic authorities a sort of natural necessity, is that mastery of any area of knowledge is itself a slow and laborious business, that must be gone through before any person is in a position to understand, let alone, to criticise, judge, or further develop the area, in an informed rather than a superficial way. (It is also the case that some people just seem to be 'drawn' to particular specialisms and to do well at them, while there are areas of knowledge that the less intelligent part of the population is just incapable of understanding.) Again, as de George says,

Reliance on authority is a way in which knowledge can be transmitted and shared, so that more men may know and use this knowledge than would otherwise be the case. This, in brief, is the basis for the argument that epistemic authority is in general legitimate. The argument is a

\*T.E.I. = tertiary educational institution

pragmatic one, and it claims that in some cases it is reasonable and rational to accept the word of someone else that *p* is the case (de George, 1976, p.83).

And further,

Epistemic authority is thus in principle substitutional in nature. Its purpose is to substitute the knowledge of one person in a certain field for the lack of knowledge of another (de George, 1976, p.82).

So whereas social authority uses other persons to get things done, knowledge authority is used by other persons both to gain knowledge and to get things done.

Two qualifications should now be made. Certainly it would seem that the sensible thing to do for anyone who is not an authority on a given subject, is . . . to defer to the beliefs of those who are, for what better grounds can one who is not knowledgeable in a given field have for a belief in that area than that it is the belief of one who is knowledgeable in such matters, especially of one whose business is to know about such things?\* (Adams, 1976, p.4)

What is more, the person knows, "... that the authority, in assessing the reasons that are available to him, has been led to this position" (Adams, 1976, p.5). But while all this is true, it (a) must be carefully noted that the knowledge or epistemic authority is indeed restricted to the area of knowledge, except for some possible transfer to adjacent disciplines and except for "... the transfer of scholarly habits of care, toughmindedness, etc," (de George, 1976, p.85). And (b) someone is to be considered an authority in various degrees: the history teacher is an authority in relation to his pupils: depending on his special period, he may or may not be an authority in relation to the T.E.I lecturer.

Secondly, some specific attributes of the individual epistemological authority should be noted.

Academics have themselves passed through T.E.I.s specifically established to train and educate. They have acquired specialist knowledge and understanding, and in various degrees some expertise in passing on and developing this knowledge and understanding in others. And the diplomas and degrees they have acquired are society's stamps of approval to show that this is indeed the case. This is far from suggesting that T.E.I academics are all-knowing, or that some very narrow and bigoted people do not become academics. Neither is it to suggest that for those academics who have teaching qualifications such qualifications are fool-proof and mistakes never made in such certification. It is merely to say that most academics have mastered a significant understanding in a specialist area.

As time passes, academics generally increase this knowledge and expertise, developing, modifying and refining it through interaction with others and through a developing sensitivity to the nuances of the discipline.

\*The author is not talking about matters of mere belief, (such as religion?)

Academics also demonstrate their knowledge and competence: they develop understanding and a degree of mastery in their students; they continue to turn out graduates who can take their place in the complex activities of the real world. The knowledge authority of academics is really being justified continually in an inductive manner. It is justified in and depends upon the continuing proper dealing with actual cases. Like all inductive generalisations, it takes only a few cases of being wrong for their authority to begin to be questioned. (Is this a psychological rather than a logical issue? Is it a fact about how people actually behave in relation to authorities, rather than about how they should logically behave?)

That academics can in general demonstrate that they are epistemic authorities is a reminder of the implicit point that there is no ineradicable difference between what an academic knows and what a student knows, with the exception of course of students who just are intellectually incapable of grasping the matter. The academic's claims are authoritative because they have the backing of independently establishable knowledge, a backing acquired in public institutions, a backing that if someone wishes, can be publicly demonstrated, a backing that given time and application most students can if they desire to acquire for themselves. There is thus nothing metaphysical about the fact that academics are knowledge authorities who make authoritative statements. It is merely that they have passed through a period and place of induction, and such induction is in principle equally possible for any other rational being. Indeed, students in T.E.I.s are at various stages in this very induction. For the academic in his justified role is trying to make himself redundant, in the sense of trying to get his students no longer to need him, trying to make his students into his epistemic peers. The academic life involves not just the disinterested pursuit of knowledge, but also the disinterested passing-on of knowledge.

There is of course a crucial corollary. An academic is to be listened to because he is an authority. But his authoritative utterance, like all such knowledge authority is only provisional. For we know very well that the intellectual history of mankind is a succession of the establishment then later refutation of statements by an authority. The chemist, Arrhenius was awarded the Nobel Prize for his electrolytic theory of dissociation; it was later given to Debye for showing the inadequacies in Arrhenius's theory (Barbour, 1971, p.147). In cosmology, Ptolemaic worldviews were succeeded by Copernican, Galilean, Newtonian and then Einsteinian, with questions nowadays even being asked about the last.

Semmelweis showed the physicians of nineteenth century Vienna that it was they who spread puerperal fever in childbed. Ben Jonson has given place to Milton, Dr. Johnson, Bradley, Knights or Knight, and Lewis in authoritative interpretation of Shakespeare. We know that today's authoritative utterance may be falsified tomorrow. But equally, we know very well that we ought provisionally to accept such statements as the best at present available. The fact that one authority replaces another as time goes by is no argument for the vicious relativity of knowledge or truth. Rather, it is evidence for the opposite:

the later authoritative statement is really a better explanation, a nearer approximation to the truth.

Students should have to do what academics tell them to do in connexion with the propagation of knowledge and understanding, because at least relatively speaking academics in T.E.I.s are provisional epistemic authorities. It is perfectly proper for academics to make pronouncements, give opinions, develop insights, demand answers, provide examples, promulgate orders and expect particular sorts of behaviour from their students in academic situations. But at the same time it is essential as I have said elsewhere (1976, p.6) that they do these things in a 'teacherly' way: authoritatively, not 'authoritarianly'. Academics must develop epistemic authority, but equally they must develop a general and appropriate scepticism. This requires a nice balance between authoritative statement and qualification, and is probably the chief difference between being authoritative and being authoritarian. In being authoritative and 'teacherly', academics will try to develop in students a proper propensity to question, by showing that the evolution of human knowledge has been a gradual refinement, differentiation and development, but also the realisation that in epistemic matters one person's opinion is not just as good as another's.

The upshot of the last few pages is that, as Peters argues, ... knowledge can only be handed on and developed if institutions are devised for this purpose. If such institutions are to be organised on rational grounds, this means that those who are authorities on various matters are given the opportunity to instruct others and to take part in the administration of the affairs of their institutions. Those who are authorities must be put in positions of authority at a level which is consistent with the principle of public accountability (1966, p.251).

Peters is arguing that in a rational system, knowledge authorities because they are knowledge authorities should be given the right to social authority. So for Peters, and the present writer agrees, the situation of the knowledge authority in the educational institution is but a special case of the more general situation in a society that is based on rational authority. Here the crucial link in the rational authority situation comes through the interesting idea that because what the epistemic authority says is right (correct, advisable), he is given the right (entitlement) to give orders, tell people what to do, in relation to that knowledge authority he possesses. This seems to me to have the important corollary that academics should work hard at showing that their epistemic authority is actually a resource for the community in general and for students in particular.

#### *The Logically-Necessary Connexion Between Rationality and Academic Disciplines*

It has so far been argued that it is rational to give social authority in T.E.I.s to academics because in so doing, the point, purpose and function of T.E.I.s are met. But other aspects of rationality can also be shown to feature crucially

in the situation. These have to do with the necessary rationality of epistemic authority itself, embodied in epistemic authorities.

Thought and behaviour, in order to be rational in even the most elementary sense must take into account what has happened and what will happen, as well as what is happening. Only the possession of language makes these features possible in anything more than a superficial way.

The more complex the language that takes in these aspects, the more rational does it become possible for the thought and behaviour to be. And it is precisely this more complex language that makes up the entities that we refer to as theoretical knowledge or knowledge of disciplines.

For being rational involves not merely having concern for the point, purpose and function of an organisation or institution. It also involves, in meeting point, purpose and function such features as seeking the truth, trying to get things right, arguing as logically as possible, providing good reasons for any intellectual position held (which of course includes bringing to bear appropriate empirical data) discriminating only when there are relevant differences, and so on. The reason for mentioning this aspect of rationality here, is to show how it strengthens the case of the epistemic authority; for the depth of knowledge of the epistemic authority would seem to put him in an ideal position to comply with these strictures of rationality in his own area of competence. Clearly, rationality has a great deal to do with the quality of thinking. The better the thinking, the more rational the argument, the more rational the person, and derivatively the more rational the organisation.

But there is a further underlying, epistemologically-fundamental aspect of thinking that requires pointing out. Without this aspect, the very existence of better or worse, rational or more or less rational thinking would itself be impossible. Bennett is pointing to this fundamental feature when he writes,

. . . only linguistic behaviour can be appropriate or inappropriate to that which is not both particular and present. .(whereas). . . non-linguistic behaviour. . . is necessarily related to states of affairs only in so far as it consists in an attempt to do something about that state of affairs which constitutes the present and particular environment of the behavior. . one consequence of this is that only in language is it possible to register theoretical knowledge (1964, p.87,88).

So it is not merely that without the tool of language, men could never become rational at all. It is also the case that it is only because of the sophisticated language of disciplines that human beings can master concepts such as point, purpose and function and grasp what these are in complex organisational settings, and it is only because there is the sophisticated language of disciplines that human beings can engage in the more complex aspects of getting something right, or thinking logically. The same point can be put tangentially by saying that for a person to be more rational he requires actual theoretical

and disciplined knowledge; for rational thinking and action cannot be carried on simpliciter. Rational thought and action in order to be rational require that the thought and action concern themselves with concepts and statements about the concrete and conceptual worlds. This means further, that *ceteris paribus*, the more experience and knowledge a person has, the more rational will his thought and action be able to be. It also means that specialist and disciplined knowledge will help towards rationality in dealing with specialist areas such as are covered by the disciplines of academic institutions such as T.E.I.s, disciplines which have been mastered by the epistemic authorities of such institutions.

The logically necessary connexion between rationality in T.E.I.s and disciplined knowledge is thus a further reason for giving epistemic authorities the right to social authority in T.E.I.s

#### *The Fallacy of Educational Democracy\**

Further support for the thesis of this article comes through challenging a widespread misconception of appropriate T.E.I. social authority. For it is sometimes suggested that because T.E.I.s are one part of the larger democracy outside their walls, they should be run 'democratically', i.e. in a manner similar somehow to the running of the larger democracy. Just what this view involves in detail, and whether it is even a realistic option are not generally clear. However, what such critics appear to have in mind is at base something like one man, one vote situations, majority decisions and plebiscites of staff and students. This view seems to me to be a very atrophied notion of that outside democracy. For in fact the outside democracy is a very complex entity, in which voting is merely a tool, and things such as the protection and hearing of minority views are more crucial. A democracy is not a dictatorship of the majority. As Andreski says,

The ultimate value of democracy is as a bulwark against tyranny and as a means of achieving individual freedom (1976, p.58).

What is more and of significance for the present case, much of the actual activity of a democratic society consists in consultation with and in the making of representations to people and bodies in authority, rather than in actually having representatives on such bodies.

To give more detail to the argumentation, it may be suggested that the democratic model usually being offered by advocates of democracy in T.E.I.s is suspect in two interrelated ways.

Firstly, the general democracy outside the T.E.I. is a multi-purpose organism, not one with the limited, two, interrelated T.E.I. purposes of pursuing and passing-on knowledge. The multi purposes of the democratic state outside may succinctly be called "the state's political and social concerns". These concerns involve an endless list of things such as general concern for com-

\*This section owes much to the writing of R.S. Peters.

munity health and welfare, pensions for the old, road safety campaigns, foreign policy, crime prevention, providing money for defence, protecting the political interests of minorities, ensuring there are sufficient T.E.I.s, and so on. With respect to many of these issues, the ideas of one person are as good as those of another, hence the electoral policies of one man one vote that decides on representatives to do the final deciding.

But the purpose of a T.E.I. is not multiple in this way. T.E.I.s pursue knowledge and provide education and training for students in particular specialist areas. And as has just been argued, it is manifest that there are authorities in these areas. So in order for academics to carry out these purposes by properly performing their functions, what is required is not some plebiscitic democracy, but the implementation of the two principles that Peters calls, the autonomy of academics (academic freedom), and provisional authority of academics (1973, pp. 44-45).

If knowledge is to be expanded and truth to be pursued, and if students are to be inducted into this knowledge, then academics must be allowed freedom to carry on such endeavours. They must not be restricted by the predilections and prejudices of politicians, businessmen, trade union leaders, authoritarian administrators, short-sighted student activists, or anyone else who may dislike or find inconvenient to their cause, the things that pursuit of truth and knowledge reveal. To give in to any of these is to provide the thin edge of the wedge for the others. Political interference is probably the most all-encompassing and invidious. Examples are legion in most of the world outside the West. Two representative examples are the disastrous effect on academic life of the University of Ghana by President Nkrumah, and the complete destruction of such academic life by Amin in Uganda. But examples are common of destructive influence by some of the other groups just mentioned, for example the widespread student interference during the 1960s in academic life not only in the West, but in other parts of the world. To take but one instance. At the University of Chile in Santiago, the Research Assistant in the Medical School had his laboratory left uncleaned for six months because he opposed various moves to power by students and ancillary staff. This had the most adverse effects on the breeding programme in genetics, where twenty years of work was lost (personal communication to the present writer).

Deriving from the principle of the provisional authority of academics (argued for earlier) is the claim that it is usually only academics who know fully-enough just what is needed in a course that is to help students to master a field of knowledge, and just what areas at the edges of the field are likely to be fruitful for further research and exploration. This means that academics should have the controlling say in the content of courses, in the appointments of other academics in the field, and in the general control of accreditation of students in that field (i.e. examining). Bell makes a significant observation, in what he calls the paradox of authoritarian (he means 'authoritative') justification. As he says,

The difficulty is that the very inequality for which the exercise of authority is a remedy may preclude those at whose benefit it is aimed from judging whether it is being exercised competently or not. I cannot help but feel

that this difficulty has been nicely illustrated in recent months (Bell was talking of 1970) by some campus debated between academics and under-graduates about the content of courses and curricula. Academics, called upon to justify their dealings with the undergraduate mind, face the difficulty that it is an undergraduate mind which has to comprehend this justification. Hence the very justification itself risks appearing in undergraduate quarters as yet a further exercise of unjustified and arbitrary authority (1971, p.202).

Of course this does not mean that there are not times when academics need to be brought back to earth from their ivory towers by way of financial constraints and community pressures, or that there are not times when coteries of academics who decide to appoint only persons who hold political views similar to their own should be constrained by the outside democracy from using the T.E.I. as a place for indoctrination. It merely emphasises the significance of the principle of the provisional authority of academics and thus their crucial position in the authority hierarchy of T.E.I.s.

Secondly, the above model of T.E.I. democracy is suspect in so far as, even in the wider democracy outside the walls of the T.E.I., one man one vote is used only in specific cases. It is used to elect representatives to do the deciding in a parliament and a cabinet; it is thus used where issues are multiple general ones where the average person's opinion is as good as any other. And although there are referenda on various issues, these are infrequent, and also of general non-specialist concern to all citizens. Again, while there are of course one man one vote situations in all sorts of organisations inside the general democracy such situations occur only when one person's opinion is as good as another, e.g. to decide on cricket club policy, or to elect the chairman of the women's institute. What is more, the general democracy also indeed appoints specialists in a wide range of areas, and leaves them alone to get on with their work. In fact, for the multiple purposes of a democracy to be carried on, such specialists must most of the time be left to get on with the job. And getting on with the job entails authoritative activity and decision, not elections. To take an extreme case that makes the point properly: prisons only fulfil their point, purpose and function in the general democracy by being run autocratically. Hospitals are largely in the control of medical personnel, not patients. And the same sorts of consideration apply from fire brigades to kindergartens. In short, appropriate institutions in the larger democracy, in order to fulfil their function and to run rationally do not have to be run 'democratically' if by 'democratically' is meant one man one vote situations and plebiscites of the consumers or clients. Brubacher argues similarly that,

.. neither college nor university is a political community. Its business is not government but the discovery, publication and teaching of the higher learning. Its governance is based not on numbers or the rule of the majority, but on knowledge. The fact that a society is politically organised as a democracy does not entail that all its other institutions-- its churches, industrial corporations, military and naval forces-- must be so organised (1977, p.36).

Indeed, rational authority in a democracy falls under numerous different types, e.g. in business, in the bureaucracy of the government, in trade unions, in associations, and all of these varieties are functional and legitimate.

But of course, in T.E.I.s there are also areas of decision and control that rationally are not the prerogative of academics. (Perhaps it is the fact that there are such areas, that is at the base of much of the confusion about authority in T.E.I.s.) Whether Indonesian ought to take precedence over French; whether money ought to be spent on nuclear rather than on solar energy projects; whether there should be co-operation between neighbouring T.E.I.s; whether a new library building should be constructed; whether a university ought to be allowed to set up a concurrent B.Ed. course when there is already a concurrent B.Ed. running in the CAE at the bottom of the hill; these and a myriad other issues are as much the concern and right of the interested layman, the student, the alumni, or the community in general, as they are of the academic. So it is painful, functional, purposeful and therefore rational to have these sorts of people together with academics on senates of universities and governing councils of CAEs, on state higher education coordinating bodies, and so on.

But it should be carefully noted that the issues described in the previous paragraph are indeed non-specialist social-moral ones, on which there are no epistemic authorities, and that epistemic authorities must be paramount on epistemic matters or rationality suffers.

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