A Crisis of Authority: The Dilemma of British Universities

Fernando Cervantes

Today is Tuesday 24 February 2004. I am a university lecturer and a member of the AUT (Association of University Teachers). Therefore, I am on strike all day and I am looking forward to being on strike all day tomorrow. Being on strike, of course, means that I should in no way be seen to engage in any work-related activity. In the past it would have been clear to me that writing an article for *New Blackfriars* was emphatically a work-related activity. But these days things are no longer so clear: the "research committee" in charge of my department has informed me that nothing I publish in *New Blackfriars* would "usefully" contribute to my department's performance in the next RAE (Research Assessment Exercise). So fortunately, in my particular case, being on strike and writing for *New Blackfriars* is something I can do with a clear conscience and without any danger of being accused of unprofessional behaviour. Besides, I have chosen to write about how the situation I have just described could have arisen. This is a subject that bears absolutely no relation to my specialty or to the research interests of my department, and so I have no difficulty in thinking of myself as properly and genuinely on strike.

I will argue that the current crisis in British universities is essentially a crisis of authority. To make this clearer I shall briefly recall the way in which, some decades ago, Professor Alessandro Passerin d'Entrèves framed the subject in his now regrettably neglected introduction to political theory, *The Notion of the State*. In this masterly work, d'Entrèves distinguished between three complementary characteristics of the state in western political thought. The first is force, which is easy enough to understand: the argument of Thracymacus in Plato's *Republic* should suffice. The second is power; that is, force buttressed by law, which is not quite so straightforward but still fairly easily comprehensible as a set of rules that a given community or set of communities have good reason to adhere to. And the third is authority; that is, power legitimised by morality, which is really not straightforward at all and throws us headlong into the deep end of our topic.

© The Dominican Council/Blackwell Publishing Ltd 2004, 9600 Garsington Road, Oxford OX4 2DQ, UK and 350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148, USA

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2004.00052.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

The fact that it seems so much more difficult to come up with an explanation of what we mean by morality than of what we mean by law suggests to me that the crisis of authority I have referred to cannot be considered in isolation from a wider and more pervasive crisis of morality. But it is perhaps important to begin by emphasising that by "a crisis of morality" I do not mean a decline in moral standards to be seen as a regrettable development that should be deplored from a narrow or prudish perspective. What I have in mind, rather, is the conspicuous absence of a rational basis to secure moral agreement in contemporary societies. As Alasdair MacIntyre reminded us in his classic study of moral theory, *After Virtue*, a distinguishing feature of the moral debates that we commonly engage in is that they almost exclusively express disagreements, – and that these disagreements are invariably interminable and inconclusive. This is not to say, of course, that contemporary moral debates are irrational. It is clear that any moral argument can be shown to be logically valid in the sense that the conclusions follow from the premises. What is absent, however, is a rational way of weighing the claims of one premise against another. As soon as this is attempted, argument ceases and debates disintegrate into a game of pure assertion and counter-assertion. Factual judgements may be true or false, but moral judgements are neither: they are mere expressions of preference, attitude, or feeling. From this it follows that any agreement in moral judgement is not to be secured by rational argument, but simply by producing certain non-rational effects on the emotions or attitudes of our interlocutors.

According to MacIntyre, the problem with this state of affairs is that it is inherently inconsistent. The very argument that moral judgements cannot be rationally defended because they express mere preference, attitude, or feeling, is itself an argument that cannot, by the same definition, be rationally defended. If the argument is true, it follows that our moral language, with its implicit (and often explicit) appeals to reason and goodness, is not only misleading but also fundamentally incoherent and should therefore be abandoned. The fact that very few thinkers seem happy to draw such an obvious conclusion is enough to highlight the argument's fundamental inconsistency. Only rarely do contemporary thinkers – and practically none among those working in the tradition of Anglo-Saxon analytical philosophy – attempt to deny that moral reasoning is perfectly possible and that there can be logical links between various moral judgements. Yet, there still seems to be very little agreement about the rational basis of morality. Contemporary philosophers claim to be able to formulate principles upon which we should agree, but they seem unable to secure agreement on their formulation. That they fail to do this, even among those who share their basic premises, is profoundly symptomatic of the crisis of authority that concerns us.

© The Dominican Council 2004

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2004.00052.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

Is it not a cruel irony that those very people from whom we have every reason to expect authoritative statements should no longer seem to have the authority to make them?

Asking himself how this peculiar situation could have arisen in the first place, MacIntyre makes the perceptive observation that our moral language – the moral language in current and generally accepted usage – is in fact the product of a type of society that is fundamentally different from our own. The type of society that produced the moral language that we still use conceived itself as a body, as an organism working in unison towards a specific end. Its rationality, therefore, was one in which the end – or to use the more accurate Greek term, the *telos* – was absolutely fundamental. Without a *telos* the whole social and rational edifice collapsed. In sharp contrast to this conception, modem societies conceive themselves primarily as meeting-places for individual wills. Each of these wills has its own preferences: each understands the world as a provider of opportunities to procure enjoyment or to avoid boredom. Even those who do not have adequate resources can share in this conception of society in fantasy or aspiration. But modern societies themselves have no *telos*, and nor, consequently, does modern rationality. Reason in contemporary culture is essentially calculative. It deals with means: about ends it must be silent.

The history of how this transformation occurred is a complex one. But according to MacIntyre one of its clear consequences – which is also one of its causes – is the modern enshrinement of the now almost universally accepted distinction between "fact" and "value", between that which *is* and that which *seems to be*. In our society "fact" is value-free. In the type of society that created our moral language, by contrast, a value-free fact would have been an absurdity. Given that human actions in such societies could only be explained in terms of a *telos*, any such explanation would necessarily involve a reference to a hierarchy of goods, which alone could provide the proper *telos* for human action. Any such reference, by definition, could not be value-free.

Now it is clear that our society by and large congratulates itself on having freed itself from such teleological presuppositions. Value-free facts appear to be objective; and objective knowledge seems more rational and more in tune with the dictates of justice, liberty, and equality than the apparently subjective and unscientific knowledge allegedly engendered by a *telos*. Suggestions that modern societies would benefit from recovering a view of human nature as directed towards a *telos* are, therefore, usually seen as threats to individual freedom and autonomy; threats which, as Isaiah Berlin often insisted, may even carry within them the seeds of totalitarianism and terror.

Convincing as it may appear on the surface, such an argument hides a fundamental inconsistency. Its claim to scientific objectivity,

© The Dominican Council 2004

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2004.00052.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

for instance, implies that its method should draw a sharp dividing line between "fact" and "value" in a way that mirrors the method of experimental science. Scientists do indeed give priority to the lenses of telescopes and microscopes over the lenses of the human eye, or to the statistical data compiled for and processed by computers over the commonsensical observations of human observers or analysts, however perceptive or intelligent they might be. Scientists thus redraw the line between what is and what seems to be (fact and value), and create new forms of distinction between appearance – and also illusion – and reality. But, interestingly, the advocates of value-free facts do no such thing. They are in fact the heirs of empiricism – a philosophical tradition that emerged as an attempt to address the epistemological crises of the seventeenth century and which was specifically intended as a device to *close* the gap between what is and what seems to be. So, if anything, the method of the advocates of value-free facts is in reality the exact opposite of that proposed by the scientists. It consistently claims that every experiencing subject must be a closed realm and that there should be nothing beyond individual experience. In such a context, it is clear that the contrast between "seems to me" and "is in fact" cannot conceivably exist.

Given this inconsistency, the real puzzle that MacIntyre went on to address is how the two systems managed to coexist within the same culture and, moreover, how they managed to persuade themselves that they were expressions of one and the same world-view. One clear element that helped to obscure the incoherence was the extent to which both systems agreed on what was to be denied and excluded. The entry on "empiricism" in *A Dictionary of Philosophy* (edited by Antony Flew), for example, states quite openly that "empiricism can be better characterised in terms of what it denies". It is no great surprise to find that it joined forces with experimental science precisely in its stern denial of any world-view that presupposed a *telos*. The common assumption was that the classical and medieval thinkers had been deceived about the factual and the social precisely by interposing such a world-view between themselves and experienced reality. "Modern" thinkers, by contrast, had managed perfectly well without any such theories or interpretations, without any kind of *telos*. Instead they confronted "fact" and "experience" in the raw. Hence their self-confident identification with "Enlightenment" as opposed to "the Dark Ages": what *telos* had obscured, they could now see.

Now most historians of philosophy are well aware that the inconsistency was detected long ago. No reader of Kant or of Nietzsche, or of anyone who has learnt anything from them, would be so deceived. But it would be rash to assume that the problem has disappeared. Take the average modern bureaucrat, for instance. Here we encounter perhaps the one member of contemporary society who can make a

© The Dominican Council 2004

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2004.00052.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

reasonable claim to possess "authority". Bureaucrats can make such a claim because they treat ends as given, as outside their scope. Their concern is with technique, with effectiveness. They do not engage in moral debate but restrict themselves to the realm where they think that rational argument is possible: the realm of "fact". In this way bureaucrats can claim to respect and uphold the democratisation of moral agency upon which contemporary society claims to rest. No bureaucrat, for instance, would be so rash as to deny that individuals in contemporary society should find no limits set to that on which they may pass judgement. That would amount to denying that any such limit could only derive from rational criteria that are in fact unobtainable, and this clearly poses an unacceptable threat to the sovereignty of the modern individual's inalienable right to criticise anything from any standpoint. The irony, of course, is that this bureaucratic defence of the democratisation of contemporary moral agency is invariably carried out from the perspective of an unashamedly elitist monopoly of managerial expertise. Whereas in the domain of morality disagreement is dignified by the term "pluralism", in the realm of bureaucratic "fact" there are strict and well-tested procedures for eliminating disagreement and imposing the kind of "authority" that bureaucrats claim to derive from their membership of particular hierarchies where certain skills and certain types of knowledge are imputed.

As Max Weber once famously put it, "bureaucratic rationality" is the attempt to match means to ends efficiently. This view presupposes that reason has nothing to say about questions of value and, consequently, that conflicts about rival values cannot be settled rationally. Instead, individual wills simply choose between various options, and values are created upon decisions made by individuals who regard the dictates of their conscience as irrefutable. And yet, in a way that parallels the incoherent eighteenth-century coexistence of empiricism and experimental science, Weber insists that agents may be more or less rational in acting consistently with their values. It seems, therefore, that Weber attempted to preserve the distinction between power and authority. He based this part of his argument on the classical distinction between means and ends: whereas power serves means, authority serves ends. But this should in no way be interpreted as a sign of willingness on Weber's part to leave the door open to the dreaded *telos*; for, as we have seen, the choice of any one stance or commitment had to be purely subjective. This effectively meant that "ends" could not be other than mere causes to be served, so that no type of authority could rely upon any rational criteria to justify itself, except perhaps the type that appealed merely to its own "effectiveness".

Now, as MacIntyre observes, it is hard to see how this kind of "authority" could be anything other than successful power. What we

© The Dominican Council 2004

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2004.00052.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

call "authority", in other words, is merely a way of describing a regrettable but necessary infringement of individual liberty in the name of bureaucratic planning and regulation. The most striking, and at first sight puzzling aspect of this development, of course, is that those very advocates of individual freedom and autonomy – by which I mean the great majority in contemporary societies – seem themselves to be completely impotent against the claims of "bureaucratic authority". But this apparent contradiction is in fact perfectly logical and coherent. For bureaucracy and individualism are only antagonistic on the surface. Deep down they are just the other side of the same coin: both take for granted the central importance of the distinction between "fact" and "value", and both are firmly convinced that any solution that involves the acceptance of a *telos* would be an unforgivably retrograde step.

I want to suggest that the current crisis afflicting British universities has much more to do with this inherent inconsistency than with any financial considerations, however real these might appear to be. Consider, for instance, the much maligned RAE. It is well known that a large majority of academics working in Britain – not least among them the "experts" on the RAE panels – consider that the whole exercise is actually counterproductive and a farcical waste of time and money. But the real farce is that everyone goes along with it. And everyone goes along with it because there are no convincing arguments against the bureaucratic "authority" imposed in the name of efficiency, transparency and accountability. So the solution is simple enough: jump through the hoops and you will get your reward. Point out the farce, on the other hand, and prepare yourself to join the wretched club of those crying in the wilderness: at best you will be thought a hopeless idealist; more often you will be seen as a subversive threat to the bureaucratic virtues. The reason for this is that the farce is only properly discernible form a perspective that regards academic institutions as organisations with a purpose that transcends bureaucratic virtues. And here again we are up against that dreaded *telos* which in the past gave morality its rational foundation and authority its *raison d'être*.

It is clear, therefore, that the crisis of British universities is part and parcel of the peaceful coexistence of individual autonomy and bureaucratic regulation that has become emblematic of contemporary societies. The fact that it seems to affect the academy – that is, the one body that we should expect to be best equipped to voice a criticism of the development, particularly given that it threatens its very *raison d'être* – in very much the same way as it affects schools, hospitals, or even companies and banks, is symptomatic of how deeply ingrained the development has become. It would seem that contemporary social life is unconsciously re-enacting eighteenth-century philosophy; but with one key difference: whereas our

© The Dominican Council 2004

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2004.00052.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

eighteenth century predecessors believed that a system of scientifically managed social control was in fact realisable, contemporary societies have only managed to produce a mere skilful dramatisation of such control. If the eighteenth-century predictions had been vindicated, then it is possible to imagine convincing arguments in defence of a genuine notion of authority based upon bureaucratic efficiency. As we have seen, however, it is difficult to distinguish between the kind of "authority" that contemporary bureaucrats represent and mere successful power, which in turn explains why effective bureaucratic management seems so often to be dependent upon adequate acting skills.

Now, it would be difficult to deny that universities are deeply implicated in the failure to champion any coherent criticism of the relentless advance of bureaucratic "authority" in contemporary societies, and in some respects we should be pleased that they are beginning to pay the price for such a failure. But perhaps we should not be too harsh in our judgement. If, as I believe, MacIntyre's analysis is correct, then it is clear that any coherent criticism of the process cannot be separated from a redefinition of the notion of authority as power legitimised by morality. The obvious problem here is that any such redefinition would inevitably strike at the roots of contemporary society's self understanding by opening the doors to the dreaded *telos*, and it is therefore perfectly understandable why universities have been loath to voice it openly. As we have seen, contemporary societies conceive themselves as meeting points for individual wills, and their ideal is that everybody's will be done. What individuals actually will does not matter much: as long as it is *their* will they have an inalienable right to it, unless, of course, it happens to interfere with somebody else's will. This is the only instance where contemporary societies find some use for authority. Ideally, individuals ought to be able to get along without it, and it is only because this ideal is impossible to achieve in practice that we need some kind of authority in charge of sorting out individual conflicts. But the point is that any use of authority is and must always remain a necessary evil. Any other notion of authority, especially if it is related to a *telos* or to any kind of morality, is anathema.

There are, of course, plenty of persuasive academic explanations that set limits to this notion of society. Anthropologists and historians, for example, frequently point out that the notion of society as a meeting-point of individual wills is a relatively recent invention that would make no sense in traditional, pre-industrial societies. The most common and understandable modern reaction to such information is to think of such societies as in some way primitive or defective, or, if political correctness is an imperative, quaint, or simply different. But the point that needs to be made is simply that the notion of society as a meeting-point of individual wills is, as Herbert McCabe was fond of

© The Dominican Council 2004

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2004.00052.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

reminding us, "entirely mythical". For society is not made up of individuals but precisely the other way around. Unique individuals existing prior to and in isolation from the many societies in which they have a role do not, indeed cannot, exist. We all come into existence as the fruit of society. We all develop our personalities through a process of being brought into and having a role in a succession of societies: family, school, university, church, political party, trade union, club . . . These are all forms of human relationship. They all indicate that the way to our true personality is not, as the modern individualist would have it, through the search of some private self existing prior to our relationship with others, but precisely *in* our relationships with others.

These considerations should set the notion of authority in an entirely new light. By removing the problem of its terrifying conflict with the individual will, they should open the door to a genuine receptiveness to past ages and different cultures, and to a much richer and philosophically coherent understanding of contemporary society. When, for instance, modern individualists sit down to read *The Iliad* or *Beowulf* they invariably think it rather odd that morality and social structure seem one and the same thing in both works. Their observation is of course perfectly correct: evaluative questions *were* questions of social fact in the societies that produced *The Iliad* and *Beowulf*; for in such societies all morality was tied to the social, and there was no way of being properly moral except as part of a social tradition. Where modern individualists go wrong is in thinking that this way of conceiving morality is the result of a primitive or defective rationality, or, if political correctness is an imperative, of a different or exotic type of rationality. Once the myth of the individual will has been exposed, the rationality of *The Iliad* and *Beowulf* seems in fact thoroughly realistic. In comparison, it is the individualist stress on the freedom of choice of values that appears defective, for it is much closer to the freedom of a ghost than to that of a socially engaged human being.

We can now return to Professor d'Entrèves's framing of authority as "power buttressed by morality" without the hurdles that we encountered at the beginning of our discussion. Having exposed the myth of the individual will, together with the logical inadequacies of the philosophical traditions that underpin it, it is possible to propose an understanding of morality that our contemporaries might find acceptable. We could understand morality, for instance, as a well-tested social tradition. Of course, we should not be misled here by the negative connotations that the term "tradition" has acquired in contemporary society, where it has become almost synonymous with a systematic opposition to reasoned argument and political conflict. It should be clear from our discussion that it is impossible to conceive of any kind of human reasoning in isolation from a tradition of

© The Dominican Council 2004

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2004.00052.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

thought. And if such a tradition is well tested, it will have been constituted by a series of arguments about the goods that it should pursue in order to fulfil its particular purpose. In this sense, as MacIntyre points out, a tradition necessarily embodies continuities of conflict that, in turn, facilitate the pursuit of future projects in the light of what the past has made available to the present.

There is nothing in this understanding of morality that contemporary society would find in any way restrictive or limiting. Nor does it necessarily entail a return to classical or mediaeval teleologies. But even if it did entail such a return, the results would be far less threatening to the modern conceptions of individual freedom than is commonly assumed. The frequently-expressed fear of a re-emergence of past authoritarian structures, for example, among which the Inquisition occupies a central place in popular mythology, has been progressively challenged by recent scholarship. The most authoritative historical investigations into inquisitorial practices and other medieval and early modern mechanisms of social control in fact put our own century in a rather negative light by comparison. So, too, the renewed interest in classical, medieval, and early modern political thought is making us aware that we cannot be so complacent about the alleged superiority of the modern outlook. Neither Aristotle nor St. Thomas Aquinas, for instance, would have made any sense of the modern – in origin Kantian – tendency to draw a sharp dividing line between duty and inclination. Its concomitant understanding of "virtue" as that which allows humans to act *against* their inclinations would have seemed a bizarre absurdity to them. Both authors in fact thought the exact opposite. By "virtue" they meant the very quality that enabled humans to flourish *as* humans, thereby allowing them to act not against but *in tune with* their natural inclinations.

It is no surprise, therefore, that there is practically no mention of rules in the accounts of morality to be found in Aristotle or Aquinas. According to them, morality was not primarily a matter of the will, as it is to us, but of the *intelligence*. And exactly the same was true of their understanding of authority. To accept authority and to live under it was not, as the modern individualist would have it, to give up the individual will by submitting it to the will of another. As Aristotle and Aquinas understood it, authority was simply not possible unless those who exercised it and those who "obeyed" them had come to share the same mind. It is well known that the Latin for "obey", *obedire*, comes from *ob-audire*, to listen. To obey someone in authority was first of all to learn, to share in another's practical wisdom. And just as stupidity precluded goodness, so, too, it precluded genuine authority. Kant, of course, thought otherwise; and this is perhaps the key to understanding why stupidity and authority – or a peculiarly modern misunderstanding of the term – have

© The Dominican Council 2004

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2004.00052.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

become such good bedfellows in contemporary bureaucratic rationality, even – or should we say especially? – in universities.

So it seems to me that the first step that universities need to take in order to get out of the current crisis is to expose the myth of the individual will and the inadequacies of its philosophical underpinnings. I would contend that they can do this with the genuine authority of those who have become convinced of the intrinsic truth of an argument. Once this step has been taken they will be in a good position to express and defend their own authority in a way that no longer appears to threaten the fundamental freedoms of individuals. For, when properly understood, authority is nothing but the very foundation that allows individuals to live in community and solidarity. In such a context, universities will once again be able to express and defend their *telos* and thereby to challenge the relentless advance of bureaucratic tyranny in an effective and constructive manner. But this is a subject for a different article, one which, unless the current bureaucratic climate radically changes, will need to await a future AUT strike.

Fernando Cervantes
University of Bristol

© The Dominican Council 2004

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2004.00052.x Published online by Cambridge University Press