

On Authority

1. The primal ontic source of all authority can only be reality itself, even as its primal noetic source can only be common human experience. What is somehow authorized by experience of reality as corresponding to it or agreeing with it is insofar authoritative; what is not thus authorized is insofar not authoritative.

2. If reality is "what we in some way find ourselves obliged to take account of" (William James), it may be said to include both ultimate and immediate reality, the first being everything that we have to take account of in the vertical dimension, or existential aspect, of our experience; the second, all that we must take account of in the horizontal dimension, or empirical aspect, of our experience. Thus ultimate reality includes everything that we experience nonsensuously—ourselves, others, and the whole of which we and others are all parts—while immediate reality includes everything about this threefold reality that we can also experience through our senses.

3. Ultimate reality, like immediate reality, may be the primal ontic source of authority not only in one respect, but in two: (1) in respect of its structure in itself; and (2) in respect of its meaning for us. In the first respect, ultimate reality is the primal ontic source authorizing *true metaphysics* and *true ethics*, the first being explicit understanding of ultimate reality in its structure in itself that corresponds to or agrees with that structure; the second, explicit understanding of how, in principle, we are to act and what we are to do consistently with ultimate reality's having the structure in itself that true metaphysics shows it to have. In the second respect of its meaning for us, ultimate reality is the primal ontic source authorizing *true religion*, in the sense of the explicit understanding of human existence necessarily implied by authentic self-understanding in relation to ultimate reality and necessarily implying true metaphysics and true ethics.

4. As for immediate reality in the first respect, it is the primal ontic source authorizing *true science*, in the sense of explicit understanding of immediate reality in its structure in itself. In the second respect of its meaning

for us, immediate reality is the primal ontic source authorizing *true technology* and *true policy*, moral and political, in the sense of explicit understanding of how, in fact, we are to act and what we are to do regarding means as well as ends consistently with immediate reality's having the structure in itself that true science shows it to have.

5. Any religion as such makes or implies a claim to decisive authority and therefore also claims to be the true religion, i.e., *the* true religion, in that it is not only *substantially* true in the sense just clarified (§ 3), but also *formally* true, in the sense that it itself is the formal norm or canon by which the truth-claim of any other religion has to be validated—namely, by its substantial correspondence to or agreement with that religion. Thus any religion simply as such understands itself to be uniquely authorized by the primal ontic source of ultimate reality in its meaning for us.

6. Of course, it is typical of religious traditions that they are heterogeneous in composition to the extent that, through special acts of self-definition, they acknowledge certain of their elements as authoritative and therefore normative for some or all of their remaining elements. Thus elements acknowledged in a religious tradition as authoritative for *all* of its other elements constitute its *primary* authority and therefore its formal norm or canon.

7. But no religious tradition is constituted as such simply by its primary authority or formal norm and whatever secondary authorities or norms it in turn authorizes or norms. Any authority, properly so-called, is and must be authorized by a source beyond itself, just as any norm in the proper sense can only be, in the theological term, a “*normed norm*” (*norma normata*), even if what norms it, although the source of its normativeness, is not itself a norm in the same proper sense. Therefore, any religious tradition is also constituted—indeed, is constituted, first of all!—by an explicit *primal source* of authority and therefore of normativeness as well. To be sure, the primal source of a tradition's authority insofar as it is authorized is reality itself as experienced—more exactly, ultimate reality as experienced in its meaning for us (§§ 1, 3). But ultimate reality in its

meaning for us, even as in its structure in itself, remains merely implicit and cannot function as the primal ontic source of authority for any religious tradition except through some *explicit* primal ontic source of authority corresponding to it, or agreeing with it, in its meaning for us. This explicit primal ontic source of a tradition's authority is the explicit self-understanding/ understanding of existence constituting it as a religious tradition whose claim to decisive authority, and thus also to be the formally true religion, is a valid claim. As such, a religion's *explicit* primal ontic source of authority is itself authorized—namely, by ultimate reality itself functioning as the *implicit* primal ontic source of all religious and existential authority. And yet, although it is indeed thus authorized, it is not, in the proper sense, *an* authority, not even *the* (i.e., primary) authority, for its religious tradition. For although any religious authority, properly so-called, is itself also a source of authority, the converse statement is false: *not* every source of authority is itself also *an* authority in the proper sense of the term.

8. If a religion's implicit primal ontic source of authority, being ultimate reality itself in its meaning for us, must, in the nature of the case, be *transcendental*, its explicit primal ontic source can, for the same reason, only be *historical*. This means, among other things, that, although both sources—implicit/transcendental and explicit/historical—have a constitutive significance with respect to the religion of which they are the authorizing sources, only the first source, not the second, has a constitutive significance with respect to human existence and its authentic possibility, the significance of the second source in this respect being not constitutive, but representative only. Thus, although a religion's explicit primal ontic source is uniquely constitutive of it as a religion, even it is at most representative of the meaning of ultimate reality for us, which is constituted solely and sufficiently by ultimate reality as such in its structure in itself.

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