

The larger context of Watt's study is constituted by (1) the number of recent writings on authority; and (2) the widespread belief that authority is in difficulties, in crisis, in decline. Suffusing this larger context is an egalitarian sentiment that renders all relationships of authority, which are necessarily unequal, suspect.

The aim of his study, then, is directly to examine the concept of authority by considering what it means in the different contexts in which we find it and how these different meanings are related. Indirectly, he proposes to respond to the more evaluative question of whether—or in what matters and in what measure—authority may be in principle dispensable, or whether, on the contrary, we cannot conceive of a human society without authority of some kinds. Withal, he intends to clear up some prevalent confusions about authority illustrated by the recent literature about it—including confusing it with its excesses and abuses.

Judging from his argument, and especially from its conclusion, one can say that, in his understanding, authority is indispensable to human society, even though it is also always possible and, to some extent, necessary to consider its limits and abuses, since even justified authority has limits and is open to abuse.

His view, in short, is that authority as such is not contrary to reason, but is itself reasonable, since one cannot understand it or comply with it except for reasons. And this is true, he insists, even though there is an element of arbitrariness in even the most reasonable instance of authority.

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