

On Moral Authority and Its Shaping

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Citation: Xiao T (2024) On Moral Authority and Its Shaping. American J Sci Edu Re: AJSER-221.

Received Date: 05 December, 2024; Accepted Date: 12 December, 2024; Published Date: 19 December, 2024

Abstract

The dilemma of morality stems from the decline of moral authority. Moral authority refers to the spiritually coercive, persuasive, and inducing effect and prestige that ethical principles and norms have on moral subjects in moral practice by relying on the integration of society, the guidance of value mechanisms, and the enhancement of moral beliefs. There are five types of moral authority: taboo-based moral authority, religious and ethical authority, power-based moral authority, theological moral authority and inner law-based moral authority. The first three types of moral authority have gradually lost their value over the course of history, and the fourth type of moral authority only applies to those who believe in religion, while the "inner law" type of moral authority has a long way to go.

Keywords: moral authority, moral dilemma, character morality.

1. Introduction

Immanuel Kant, the famous German philosopher, stated in his renowned work Critique of Pure Reason: "There are two things that, the deeper and more persistently I contemplate them, the greater the wonder and awe they evoke in my heart: the starry sky above me and the moral law within me." The reason why the "moral law in people's heart" can evoke wonder and awe is that it represents the power of moral authority. Today, the phenomena of moral depression, moral indifference and moral crisis reflect the weakening of moral authority. Economy, as the "strongest driving force" of social development, yet aims at pursuing self-interest, cracking human desires and spirit; ethics and morality defend their own nobility, aiming to cultivate the "best driving force" to people, yet they find themselves in a state of neglect or "silent" position. The loss of moral authority is not only caused by social and economic development, but also by the weakening of the moral subject's consciousness. The weakening of morality as a spiritual driving force for social development will inevitably hinder the progress of civilization. If morality loses its voice in the process of social development, like Wittgenstein's notion of "whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent," society is bound to fall into the quagmire of chaos. Therefore, the cultivation of moral authority is becoming a serious and urgent task in social development and moral construction.

2. What is "moral authority"?

"Authority" is a convincing and dominant force formed in the mind of the subject of practice by the combination of power and prestige. Authority is not an entity, but a spiritual inner "order", "inducement", "domination". The so-called moral authority is the effectiveness and prestige of ethical principles and norms in moral practice, which exert spiritual coercion, persuasion, and guidance on moral subjects through social integration, value-driven mechanisms, and the enhancement of moral beliefs.

According to the historical evolution of moral development, moral authority can accordingly be categorized into several types.

(1) Taboo-based moral authority. One of the main sources of morality at the beginning of the emergence of taboos, taboo

moral authority makes human social relations complex and civilized. As taboos evolve from being explicitly recognized by a few to becoming a shared awareness among the majority, morality, supported by these taboos, undergoes a long historical process from its inception to full development. In this way, morality becomes a universal and collective social demand, thereby establishing moral authority.

(2) Patriarch system. This moral authority is established through the moral constraints maintained by customs and ethical rules passed down from ancient times to the present. During the governance of the patriarchal system in ancient China, Confucian ethics, after being adapted to serve imperial autocracy, evolved into ethical principles and norms. Through the transformations of successive dynasties, this gave rise to institutional (traditional) moral authority. This type of moral authority advocated the maintenance of the imperial sacred order and represented a conservative force.

(3) Power-based moral authority. This type of moral authority relies on power - a power to impose one's will on the other and to make them obey - to establish ethical norms and thus to realize the mandatory constraints on the subject of behavior. Power-based moral authority is mainly personal charisma-based moral authority, which is built on the admiration and faith in one or more leaders or great individuals with exceptional inspirational influence. Personal charismatic moral authority often serves as a "great revolutionary force" in special historical stages and social changes, and exerts a great influence on social moral conditions.

(4) Theological moral authority. In the field of religion, all major religions in the world have a supreme "God", whose divine commands or decrees, often conveyed as commandments or moral codes, serve as a source of moral authority. For example, the revelation of "God" in Christianity, the "precepts" in Buddhism, and the "divine incantations" in Taoism. They all rely on a mysterious power to establish moral authority.

(5) The inner law-based moral authority. This type of moral authority relies on the moral subject's inner understanding, respect, and adherence to moral "laws." It is rooted in the individual's will to establish moral laws for themselves and to consciously act in accordance with these laws—a concept Kant

referred to as “self-legislation.” Kant further explained, “The will does not simply obey rules or laws; it obeys because it is itself a legislator. It is precisely because these rules and laws are self-imposed that it must comply with them.” [1] Morality becomes the Kantian “law within the heart,” from which the subject derives the necessity of their actions. Guided by this lofty sense of necessity, the moral subject gradually progresses toward moral freedom. With the development of social history, taboo-based moral authority, institutional moral authority, power-based moral authority has gradually lost the existence of the inevitability and social effect, and theological moral authority is only effective for people who has religious belief. In modern society, we need to shape the "inner law" type of moral authority, in order to shape the inner law-based moral authority, in order to construct a harmonious moral ecology.

3. What makes moral authority effective

Moral authority is an essential pathway to constructing a virtuous society, but what are the mechanisms through which moral authority operates?

First, "Reason (Li)" - the external binding mechanism of moral authority. The term “reason” refers to an external normative system, including public ethical standards in society and guidelines for people’s daily lives. Rawls in his Theory of Justice in this sense called it a "pre-moral stage" of morality [2]. Institutionalized and systematized ethical norms in the “heteronomy stage” enhance the influence of social environments and social forces on individual moral behavior. This process elevates moral activities from uncertainty and spontaneity to certainty and universality, thereby generating positive moral effects. However, morality, as an essential and higher-level human need, cannot rely solely on external authority while neglecting the enhancement of individual awareness and decision-making abilities, or the motivation for people to consciously promote good and restrain evil. Without this, it is impossible to achieve an understanding of the “necessary principles” behind the “why” and the transcendence of the “ought.” Therefore, such authoritative morality can only play a limited role in fundamental social arrangements.

Second, "Righteousness (Yi)" - the internal driving mechanism of moral authority. If the heteronomous stage of “reason” corresponds to one of the two logics of morality concerning human behavior and social order—namely, the “logic of compulsion,” or “must”; then the stage of “righteousness” aligns with the second logic—the “logic of value,” or “should”, which imbues rules with a deeper value-based meaning. Morality, as a conscious grasp of objective necessity under certain conditions of social and material life, is a special form of social value. For moral authority to be effective and reflect moral values, it must be evaluated, recognized, and consciously accepted by the moral subject; otherwise, it holds no significance. The formation of the intrinsic driving mechanism of moral authority paves the way for entering the stage of moral “autonomy”.

Thirdly, "Integration of Emotions and Righteousness" - the individual psychological mechanism of moral authority. The moral subject should have the subject consciousness, correctly realize the moral cognition, moral practice, moral evaluation, and reflect a kind of initiative, initiative and creativity in this activity; and the generation of the subject consciousness is the formation and development of individual morality, and the subject consciousness includes self-consciousness, consciousness of responsibility, consciousness of truth, goodness and beauty, and so on. Moral subject consciousness is

formed and developed by individuals in social practice through interaction with others and social groups. The sub-systems and their elements that make up the moral subject consciousness system contribute to the formation and development of the individual's moral psychological mechanism.

When the constant and stable psychological mechanism of moral individuality matures, the moral behavior of the moral subject becomes natural, conscious and free. Moral practice truly becomes “the activity of individuals pursuing their own purposes,” while the moral subject “achieves freedom precisely because of the active force that expresses their genuine individuality.” [3]. The formation of the individual psychological mechanism of moral authority is also the production of virtue, which is "an acquired human quality, the possession and practice of which enables us to obtain those benefits which are inherent in practice, and the lack of which seriously prevents us from obtaining any such benefits." [4]

4. The shaping of moral authority

The rationalization and intellectualization of moral authority represent a shift away from authoritarianism, a process of breaking free from the interference of political power and entering the public sphere. It is an interaction and elevation of “practice” and “spirit.” Specifically, the shaping of moral authority involves the following aspects:

4.1. A Good political and social environment - the soil for the growth of moral authority.

The loss of authority and effectiveness of morality is to a large extent due to the interference of political power in the moral sphere; on the one hand, coercive political authoritarian power jeopardizes citizens' access to public power and respect for private power, and on the other hand, the corruption of power (political immorality) serves as a cover for the corruption of morality, which fissures the morality of societies and accelerates their destruction. However, this does not justify Plato's assertion that "politics is harmful to virtue", because the interference of political power and a favorable political environment are two different concepts. For morality, a just, fair and reasonable political and social environment is the soil for its growth. A good political and social environment not only provides institutional, supervisory and democratic safeguards for the elimination of corruption; it also ensures that the legitimate interests of the people are realized and provides value support for the cultivation of the people's moral authority.

4.2. Ethical systems - a framework for building moral authority.

An ethical system is the sum of an organized set of ethical norms designed to foster individual moral consciousness, motivate or rescue moral individuals, and coordinate social development in the construction of morality.

An effective ethical system enables people to comply with moral norms and thus develops social moral consciousness. Institutional norms for the formation of social moral habits in two ways: First, moral violators, evaders, and disruptors should be subject to condemnation on grounds of conscience and ethics, as well as behavioral constraints. Through a regulatory mechanism that suppresses wrongdoing, they can be made to understand what is permissible and what is not, ultimately cultivating moral self-awareness. Second, virtuous deeds in society should be praised, and learning from heroes, role models, and exemplary individuals should be encouraged. Through inspiration and encouragement, moral norms can be instilled and promoted, fostering a willingness and joy in doing

good. Just as John Rawls stated: "To discuss personal moral cultivation and improvement, or even impose strict moral demands on individuals, without considering the system, is merely to assume the role of a preacher..." [5]

An effective ethical system provides moral security, nurtures the moral force of salvage, and makes this scarce resource manifest in moral concern. Everyone exists within countless connections with others, and the responsibilities and obligations in interpersonal relationships are often uncertain or not explicitly defined. Social ethical systems play a crucial role in fostering altruistic moral forces and eliminating indifference in human relationships.

An effective ethical system demonstrates institutional ethical power that plays a positive role in discarding the old and introducing the new, as well as bridging the past and future. To a certain extent, it prevents a "moral vacuum" during periods of national or social transformation and avoids moral disorder, thereby facilitating smooth societal development. Therefore, the role of ethical systems in promoting moral development and establishing moral authority is evident.

However, the establishment of an ethical system has a limited effect on the establishment of moral authority. From the perspective of the connotation of ethical order, the establishment of ethical systems constitutes only a limited part of ethical order—social ethical order encompasses not only the order of ethical norms but also the inner order of the people's hearts. From the viewpoint of historical development, the establishment of an ethical system has not accomplished the task of constructing a virtuous social ethical order. In terms of practical outcomes, ethical systems alone cannot fully reveal the authentic meaning of morality. The moral governance of the world should not rely solely on the external enforcement and authority of ethical norms but should focus on enhancing individuals' sense of subjectivity and decision-making abilities, motivating people to consciously promote virtue and suppress vice, and elevating their moral character.

4.3. Morality of Character - The Line of Aliadni to Break out of the Dilemma of Losing Moral Authority.

The famous German philosopher Karl Theodor Jaspers once pointed out that the ills of contemporary society are centered on the deep spiritual crisis that contemporary people cannot break free from. Similarly, the loss of moral authority is precisely due to the intrinsic lack of people's character morality (i.e., virtue). The idea of virtue is the most essential and fundamental part of Aristotle's ethics, "Virtue can be divided into two kinds: rational virtue and moral virtue." [6] Virtue is the quality that enables an individual to achieve "Shan" (a state of happiness and ultimate well-being). Possessing it allows one to reach this goal, while lacking it hinders progress toward that goal. Therefore, virtue is intrinsic to human activity itself. Inheriting and developing Aristotle's theory of virtue, MacIntyre argues that virtue is a disposition of qualities that "sustains practice and enables us to realize the goodness that is inherent in it". The "Shan" that is inherent in practice will not be realized without virtue. This way of thinking is the embodiment of a "practical-spiritual" approach to grasping the world. MacIntyre pointed out that we live in a period "after virtue," characterized by unresolved debates and inescapable dilemmas. This moral crisis stems from the reliance on external rule-based paradigms to dictate human behavior, rather than addressing the intrinsic goods of virtue and practice, the unity of virtue with personal life, and the inherent qualities and relationships of virtue with the vitality of social traditions.

Therefore, he firmly believes that to get out of the ethical dilemma, it is necessary to bring virtue back to the earth, to return it to practice, to pursue after virtue, and to revitalize the prestige of virtue. Only when a person has moral value when he has virtue; without virtue, a person has no moral value at all. [7]

Then, how can we acquire virtue, as a disposition to quality? The key lies in cultivating one's moral subjectivity. First, "go back to real life". In the complexity and diversity of modern social life, with its greatly expanded living spaces, the realization of morality must be achieved through a "practical-spiritual" approach to understanding the world. This involves elevating subjectivity and decision-making abilities from real-life experiences and ultimately guiding human behavior back to practical actions, returning to the realities of everyday life. Secondly, if morality is to be put into practice, it is necessary to find a psychological base, so that morality can become a deep psychological factor in the subject's structure. Moreover, we must explore the role of the subject's emotions in realizing morality. In the process of moral development, although reason liberates individuals from ignorance, enabling their actions to become conscious and self-directed. In other words, being rational is not the same as being virtuous. Moral emotional judgment, originating from "benevolence," is of great significance in promoting moral subjectivity and strengthening moral responsibility. Thirdly, the cultivation method of dual refinement of heart and character. The task of moral cultivation is to internalize external ethics into personal moral qualities. The history of human civilization has confirmed that civilization includes not only rational civilization, but also mental civilization. How to place people's mind in order in modern society has become an issue that has attracted great attention from modern people. Fourthly, to establish moral belief. "Belief is the unwavering trust and persistent pursuit of an object that individuals believe embodies the highest value of life." [8] Moral belief that leads to goodness and upward mobility is the value of the whole society, and it is inconceivable that a society's moral condition can be improved without a concept of faith that unites people's hearts and urges them to move upward. Moral faith helps elevate shared societal moral values into the concept of moral authority. Once a society falls into a moral faith crisis, it inevitably leads to widespread suffering and disorder. Without timely reconstruction of moral faith, society will lose its cohesion and ultimately forfeit its moral authority. Therefore, for the sake of the common goal of interpersonal harmony and happiness in life, it is the wish of all to create a popular atmosphere of truth-seeking and goodness in moral life and to safeguard the nobility of moral authority.

5. Conclusion

"Virtue also means attainment. It refers to attaining the Way (Dao) within one's heart and holding steadfastly to it without losing it." (Zhu Xi, "Four Books and Sentences - Analects Note") Morality is the process of generating virtue that is "internally attained by oneself." For morality to play a guiding role in practice, the key lies not in external norms imposed on the subject but in the subject's pure motives and self-discipline. It depends on cultivating the "inner law" form of moral authority within the moral subject, as well as the return of "moral sense" and "moral self." In short, without moral authority, morality is meaningless to us. From the perspective of the ideal future state of moral development, the shaping of moral authority is an essential part of the "modern moral project." From the perspective of the current moral state of society, the shaping of moral authority is still "on the way."

Conflict of Interest: The author declares no competing interests

Author contributions: The article topic, logical framework design, and paper writing were all completed by myself.

Funding support: No funding support

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