

SOURCES OF MORAL AUTHORITY:
THINKING BEYOND RELIGION AND POLITICS

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Abstract

Religion and politics served as sources of moral authority for centuries, but are limited as such, especially in modern, diverse societies like the United States. Many people feel as though they are not understood, and that their traditional beliefs are not considered when moral decisions are made. Such feelings can incite contempt between people who would otherwise be friends. This lack of harmony can lead to civil unrest and an unhappy society. Therefore, it is important that we strive for a source of moral authority that treats all people as equals. Because not all people can be assumed to operate under the same religious and political beliefs, it is difficult to devise answers to moral questions that appeal to everyone. Furthermore, both religion and politics have been shown as limited in moral applications in Biblical, and historical contexts. Because traditional beliefs are valuable to society, I do not propose that we rid ourselves of them entirely. Instead, I suggest that we supplement our moral decision-making with the original position: a theoretical framework that tasks one with constructing moral principles that they would wish to be employed in society if they did not know what their place in society would be (i.e. gender, race, religion, class, etc.). With enough practice, the use of the original position can help alleviate inequalities that exist when moral decisions are based entirely off traditional beliefs.

Religious and political beliefs give rise to some of the most tension-laden relationships that can exist between human beings. This phenomenon can permeate our social interactions, with many people considering it rude to hold political or religious conversations in the company of an acquaintance. For example, we would consider it bizarre for two immediate strangers to exchange their stances on abortion or the goodness of God. More likely, they would speak about something neutral like the weather. Religious and politically-fueled tensions affect established relationships as well, as some people holding discordant beliefs choose to terminate existing relationships because their counterparts think too dissimilarly. Human beings place immense significance upon religious and political beliefs, as they have been providing answers to moral questions for centuries. Despite this, I argue that both religion and politics are limited as sources of moral authority for two main reasons. First, they contain internal inconsistencies that render them ineffective in preparing moral decision-makers. Second, they do not promote fairness between all people. Furthermore, an effective source of moral authority should not be entirely contingent upon peoples' cultural circumstances. If we are pioneering for a source of moral authority that promotes fairness between people, it must be able to remain internally consistent and impartial in providing fairness to all people. Using the original position, we can develop a source of moral authority that does just that via process of self-understanding and empathy. First, I will address how religious and political beliefs, by method of traditional practice, became so tightly woven into our moral decision-making processes. Then, I will address what constitutes a moral authority and explain the ways in religion and politics are limited as sources of moral authority. Lastly, I will offer an alternative (or more realistically, supplementary) source of moral authority.

Political and religious beliefs are often rooted in the traditions of one's household; we inherit the beliefs of our family members, taking their stances on moral cases truth. As children, we assimilate to the beliefs of our parents because our parents serve as the source for all our knowledge. Not always, but often, these beliefs persist through our youth and stabilize in adulthood because frankly, we have little reason not to believe what our parents believe. From birth onward, children are fed, protected, and taught by the adults in our lives. We trust our parents—just as they trusted their parents—and generally, we are not granted reasons to distrust. It is difficult to contrive reasons why the adults who have always cared for us would try to trick us into believing such lies. In any case, there are some people who stray from their family's religious and political affiliations. Nevertheless, the fact remains that even if they disagree with the views of their families and favor a different framework, they are essentially adopting a different set of views from within society, or a different tradition in order to assess moral cases. It seems there is little else we can do, as we have been taught that we need established standards for right and wrong. For many members of society, religion and politics are the most accessible sources of moral authority.

Subscribing to a set of moral principles leads people to behave in corresponding ways. For example, if a woman believes that abortions are immoral, she is unlikely to get an abortion. People habitually treat their religious and political views as referential maps while navigating the moral territories of life. When faced with an ethical dilemma, they turn to traditions for an answer. In the United States, one religious tradition is more popular than others. As Widdows states, "the foremost traditional source of moral authority in the West is Christianity."¹ Political

¹ Heather Widdows, "Religion as a Moral Source: Can Religion Function as a Shared Source of Moral Authority and values in a Liberal Democracy?" *Heythrop Journal: A Bimonthly Review of Philosophy and Theology*, 45 (2004), 197, <http://web.b.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=1&sid=9b29cddb-5ff4-41a7-88ca-41685d2fa52a%40sessionmgr102> (accessed September 10, 2017).

traditions are consulted for moral answers as well. Wall believes that “political traditions are traditions of behavior, not simply traditions of thought.”² We do not merely refer to traditions for answers; we act upon the answers that we find. We also generalize them. A loyal Christian may donate a portion of his/her income to charity because it is “the Christian thing to do.” Other things Christians may do include going to church for worship, praying before dinner, and turning the other cheek after having been wronged—that is the Christian (or moral) thing to do.

Likewise, a staunch Democrat votes in support of bills that will keep abortion legal because taking away a woman’s right to choose is gravely unethical and opposes progressive society. This same Democrat is also more likely than his/her Republican counterpart to vote for decreased military spending, increased educational spending, and welfare projects. These are the values for which Democrats vote, and a “good democrat” votes with the party’s moral values. Again, these decisions are made because abiding by one’s traditions is a reasonable and familiar way to address moral cases. Interestingly, people often take for granted that often, their beliefs originated within societal traditions. Any conservative, Christian woman in America could have just as easily been raised an atheist, liberal woman, had she been born to different parents in a different time or place. If it were possible to experience this theoretical tradition-swap firsthand, we could more easily realize that what we think of as the sole “correct” moral authority is indeed subjective and dependent upon the chance of cultural circumstance.

Before we address the shortcomings of religion and politics as sources of moral authority, it is important that we expand our understanding of tradition and how it relates to the issue at hand. For legitimate reasons, cultural traditions are valued, practiced, and preserved as they are

² Steven Wall. “Political Morality and the Authority of Tradition,” *Journal OF Political Philosophy*, 24 (2016), 138-139, <http://web.b.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=4&sid=9b29cddb-5ff4-41a7-88ca-41685d2fa52a%40sessionmgr102> (accessed September 15, 2017).

passed along from generation to generation. Because traditions imbedded in cultural histories, and people will always be attached to their cultural histories, Kellison posits that people can never truly be free of tradition or history³, making attempts to disassociate futile. She thinks that modern philosophers misunderstand the purpose of tradition when they assert that we should think independently and “liberate ethical thought from the bonds of tradition.”⁴ Instead, she declares that tradition does not have to be restrictive. After all, many traditions are valued because they helped the survivability of humans. For example, washing one’s hands before a meal was religiously ceremonial before hand-hygiene was empirically shown to have health implications. Practiced in many cultures today, hand-washing minimizing the chance of ingesting dangerous bacteria that accumulate upon the hands throughout the day. Such traditions are passed down to younger generations so that the community can thrive in good health.

The relationship between traditions and history changes when it includes morality, as moral traditions are intrinsically tied to particular communities. Because of this, Kellison acknowledges that many moral concepts are not abstract or universal,⁵ but are culturally specific. Despite this, she asserts that tradition-based morality does not have to lead to ethnocentrism⁶ because there is not a restrictive dichotomous relationship between one’s tradition and one’s moral freedom to make decisions.⁷ We are not restricted in *our* moral freedoms if we can thoughtfully assess both our own historical traditions and those of other cultures. To be informed in moral decision-making, it is critical that we understand the ways in which traditions structure

³ Rosemary Kellison, “Tradition, Authority, and Immanent Critique in Comparative Ethics.” *Journal of Religious Ethics*, 42 (2017), 715,
<http://web.b.ebscohost.com.carroll.idm.oclc.org/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=1&sid=95ae4317-32de-4bb0-9d83-8bc8bad084a6%40sessionmgr102> (accessed September 14, 2017).

⁴ *Ibid.*, 713.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 715.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 715.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 713.

and inform their adherents by tying them their cultural histories.⁸ Recognizing the historical importance of traditions can help us understand the behaviors of all people, despite cultural differences. For example, by acknowledging the historical value placed upon women's premarital chastity in many societies, we can better understand the common tradition of waiting until marriage to engage in sexual intercourse. Some people may not come from cultures that practice such a tradition, but that does not have to limit their understanding of another culture's morally traditional practices. In other words, instead of valuing moral traditions within the context of our own cultures specifically, we can understand objectively how history gives people reasons to engage in certain traditions.

Although Kellison builds a strong case for tradition as a culturally relativistic source of moral authority, I believe that she undermines the significant way in which traditional authority shapes peoples' thoughts and behaviors, specifically when it involves a moral case. Kellison asserts that "traditions maintain authority only so long as communities continue to treat them as authoritative—only so long as they pass the test of human rationality..."⁹ As I have already discussed at the beginning of this essay, communities do treat traditions as authoritative, and act in accordance with them because they are seen as rational. After all, if traditions were not *viewed* as rational, people would not practice them. This isn't to say that all traditions *are* rational, but simply that they are perceived to be. While traditional authority does not demand ethnocentrism, it is nearly impossible to for people to think and behave impartially when considering moral cases. Acknowledging the difference between moral traditions and remaining objective are two separate issues. Consider the example of premarital chastity. If someone does not come from a culture in which premarital chastity were traditionally expected, she could still acknowledge with

⁸ Wall, op. cit., 139.

⁹ Kellison op. cit., 717.

relative ease the historical foundation of such a tradition within a different culture, and she would not be challenged to view her own traditions are superior. This is because the tradition is not wholly morally provocative. However, if she were to learn that all women who did not practice premarital chastity within that culture were put to death, she would become morally outraged and assert that her own culture's moral traditions are the better of the two. Ultimately, she would not engage in cultural relativism. This is an extreme example, but it showcases the way in which traditional authority does shape the way we engage with people in other cultures. In the case of the culture that enforces premarital abstinence, its traditions are authoritative in that they guide adherents' actions by giving reasons to behave in ways "that they would not otherwise have had."¹⁰ Women would not be put to death if their source of moral authority suggested otherwise, or did not suggest at all. In the case of the outraged individual of another culture, she views this culture antagonistically because she was never raised to think in accordance with it; her moral traditions have taught her to behave differently, and she would believe that the other culture should drop its traditions and engage in her own. If we are striving for a shared source of moral authority that maximizes harmony within and between cultures, morally-based traditions are clearly problematic.

Now that we have a basic understanding of tradition's relationship with behavior and moral cases, I will discuss reasonable requirements for a source of moral authority. According to Arendt, authority must demand obedience, but must never use force, coercion, persuasion, or violence through its instruction.¹¹ It follows that the people subscribing to an authority have faith in their source, acting upon their informed beliefs and always through free will. If an authority informs people on how to behavior moralistically, it is a moral authority. Gauthier suggests that

¹⁰ Wall, *op. cit.*, 137.

¹¹ Hannah Arendt, "What is Authority?" in *Between past and future*. (New York: Penguin Books, 1987), 92.

morality be identified “with the constraints rational persons would agree upon when choosing the terms of their interactions.”¹² Using these definitions, a source or moral authority should guide its adherents in ways that promote fairness between all people by curbing our “favoritism and partiality,” and working for the well-being of all human beings.¹³

As we have already discussed, traditional practices have ultimately served as sources of moral authority across cultures. While historically this did not pose an issue, as most people within a culture practiced the same traditional beliefs, it does pose an issue in the modern age due to the rise of multicultural societies. The issue lies in the fact that the moral assumptions people once made do not apply to diverse societies.¹⁴ People can no longer be assumed to operate under the same religious and political beliefs. Thus, we find ourselves at a gridlock when exploring moral cases with people who traditionally disagree with our views, as it is difficult to find objective values with which everyone agrees.¹⁵ Even if people do agree on certain moral claims, such as “murder is wrong,” we can derive immensely controversial topics from subcategories. For example, people disagree on whether abortion is murder or not, or if the death penalty is inhumane or just. There is no viable way in which to choose whose source of moral authority prevails in any moral case. I argue that both religion and politics are limited as shared sources of moral authority, despite their popularity, for two main reasons. First, they contain internally inconsistencies that render them ineffective in preparing moral decision-makers. Secondly, they do not promote fairness between all people. Furthermore, an efficient source of moral authority should not be entirely contingent upon peoples’ cultural circumstances. If we are

¹² David Gauthier, “Why Contractarianism?” in *Ethics: History, Theory, and Contemporary Issues*, ed. Steven m. Cahn and Peter Markie (New York: Oxford university Press, 2016), 593.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 594-595.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 594.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 594.

pioneering for a shared source of moral authority, it must be able to remain internally consistent and impartial in providing fairness to all people. It should be noted that in this essay, I do not aim to debunk religious beliefs or undermine the importance of politics. Religion and politics are valuable elements within cultures, and their practice is important and justified. I'm merely suggesting that as a society, we develop a view of morality that is less reliant on subjective and/or flawed institutions.

First, will focus on religion. Some people think that with the decline of religiosity, humankind experiences a decline in shared morality.¹⁶ This is mostly because many people receive moral guidance from their distinct religions. For the sake of accessibility, and because it is the most highly practiced religion in the United States, I will use Christianity as my primary example for religion. According to Widdows, many people regard Christianity as one of the origins of morality.¹⁷ However, any single religion cannot function as a shared source of moral authority for both practical and theoretical reasons. Practically, a single religion is limited in a diverse society because not all people can be assumed to operate under that religion.¹⁸ Many religious people are prone to believing that morality practiced by humankind is a product of God's will and that God's will is good because God is good.¹⁹ This popular interpretation of morality among Christians is referred to as divine command theory. In short, it suggests that if the divine commands it, it must be moral and right. I will use divine command theory to demonstrate the ways in which Christianity is limited as a source of moral authority based on its inconsistencies.

¹⁶ Widdows, *op. cit.*, 197.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 198.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 197.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 198.

It is important that we address the foundation upon which divine command theorists treat God as a moral entity. Namely, that God is good.²⁰ If God is good because He believes He is good, we are faced with the problems that arise when moral authority is inconsistent and unstable. If God can change his mind, then surely, He has the ability to believe He is not good if He so chooses. Now, some may argue that God is necessarily good. However, this statement would contradict divine command theory. A moral attribute cannot be necessary to God because He is “free to command anything he chooses, including cruelty for its own sake.”²¹ This suggests that qualities such as lovingness and justness, while they may be properties of God, are not essential properties of God. Whether God would *actually* choose to view himself as “not good” is beside the point; the importance lies in the inconsistency that arises in His *capabilities to choose* between being good and not being good. For this reason, we cannot accept that God is good solely because He believes He is good. If God truly is good, it must be for a different reason.

For God to be good—for the divine command theorist’s moral foundation to remain intact—God’s goodness must originate from within a source distinct from Himself. For people to be on board with this view, they must also agree that the source of goodness at hand is somehow beyond the reaches of God. We have already addressed the issues that arise when we believe that God dictates goodness. Therefore, goodness itself must exist as a separate entity. This independent overarching property of “goodness” is what both God and humankind tend to rely upon when making moral decisions. I say “tend” because the actions of people, and even God, stray away from what is believed to be good. To further exemplify this, it is helpful to assess defenders of God’s command for Abraham to kill his son Isaac. Most people would not

²⁰ Ibid., 200.

²¹ Ibid., 200.

believe that killing Isaac was the right thing to do, or that it would be considered “good.”

However, they would believe that Abraham trusted in God’s wisdom and ability to compensate him for his actions—whether it be in this life or the next.²² Abraham *knew* that God was commanding him to commit an immoral act, and yet he trusted God to somehow make it right. Thus, “God has reasons which justify His immoral commands, implying that morality is distinct from the will of God.”²³ After all, if even God must justify His actions “according to moral criteria,” that must mean that God himself is not the ultimate source of moral authority.²⁴ If this is the case, then human reasoning “must play a part even in divine command theories.”²⁵ If it does not, then the foundation of “God is good”—which validates the sacredness of God’s will—loses its meaning. If the property of “goodness” does not exist distinct from God’s will or the opinions of humans, then “goodness” would be a very inconsistent quality indeed. In other words, “we could not apply the predicate ‘good’ to God unless we already understood what it meant to say that something was good, unless we had some criterion for goodness.”²⁶ By making this distinction, we have simultaneously left unadulterated the foundation of Christian thought that “God is good” and exposed divine command theory’s limitations in treating religion as a source of moral authority.

Furthermore, asserting that only the people who believe in the correct God can “share moral values... is politically disastrous in a multicultural context.”²⁷ If society aims to maximize harmony, assuming superiority to others is a dysfunctional tactic indeed. However, a relationship between these views is exceptionally dangerous when we acknowledge a larger implication: If

²² Ibid., 202.

²³ Ibid., 202.

²⁴ Ibid., 202.

²⁵ Ibid., 200.

²⁶ Ibid., 200.

²⁷ Ibid., 202.

only those who believe in God have moral values, and we want to maximize harmony in society, then the only way to “establish moral cohesion” is to convert peoples of other belief systems to your own.²⁸ Not only would this kill diversity, but it would limit the freedom of the nation’s people. Instead of harmony, restricting the religious practices of certain individuals would bring us back to the past—to times when only the practice of the dominant religion was allowed. Obviously, this would be cause mayhem and political upheaval in a multicultural nation like the United States.

The realm of political tradition consists of similar limitations when concerning moral authority. Because most people live in political societies, it is impossible for them to completely escape the influence of political traditions. “All members of society as subject to it.”²⁹ This puts pressure on members to adhere to a political system or political party. In the United States, the two major political parties are the Democratic Party and Republican Party, known for their respective liberal and conservative tendencies. While philosophically disparate, both parties are concerned with restoration of the country, and each would lose its purpose were it not for the presence of the other.³⁰ They have a dichotomous relationship that showcases truth equally distributed between the two through their sometimes drastically different “scales of value,” and yet Americans are expected to subscribe to the ideals of one party or the other. Furthermore, one seeking the truth in political world is hard-pressed to find sources of information that are impartial. Inability to be properly informed leads to many people basing their political opinions on tabloid publications or biased news stations.

²⁸ Ibid., 202.

²⁹ Wall, *op. cit.*, 139.

³⁰ Arendt, *op. cit.*, 101-102.

This issue becomes more robust when we consider that political traditions, like all traditions, are authoritative in the way that they guide their subscriber's actions by giving them reasons to behave "that they would not otherwise have had."³¹ In other words, people are motivated to engage in certain behaviors if they view their traditions as a source of reason, even if the source itself is very unreasonable. For example, a German couple who subscribed to the National Socialist German Workers' Party in the 1930's would be proud that their twelve-year-old son was a part of the Hitler Youth because their political party gave them reason to approve of the movement. On the other hand, if a German couple detested the Nazi party, they would be ashamed if their son were to become a member of the Hitler Youth, and if their abhorrence of the Nazi party were great enough, they might even risk investigation by German authorities by refusing their son to join. In this example, we can see that like other traditions, "political traditions are traditions of behavior, not simply traditions of thought."³² If people will behave in ways that align with their political beliefs, we must consider how this implicates moral behaviors. In my analysis of politics as a source of moral authority, I will explain the practical flaws and logistic fallacies innate within political beliefs when applied to moral cases.

Political traditions are "formed ways of acting" that have been transmitted from the past.³³ People often claim, when attempting to validate the role of tradition in their decision-making, "it's always been done that way." Now we must ask the question: does the sheer fact that something has been done a certain way in the past justify the practice of it now? Most reasonable people would agree that bare fact does not ratify any current practice.

Understandably, defenders of political tradition will take up the position that if there are decent

³¹ Wall, *op. cit.*, 137.

³² *Ibid.*, 137.

³³ *Ibid.*, 138.

reasons as to why something was done in the past, then we should advert to those same reasons and continue to do so in the present.³⁴ Therefore, the sanctioning of political traditions falls back upon reason. The relationship between past actions and reason becomes especially pertinent when we address political traditions.

While some traditions are transitory, political traditions tend to exist throughout generations of people. Wall states that, “they direct attention backwards to past generations and forward to future ones. By doing so, they impart continuity to the politics of a society.”³⁵ Take for example the United States’ long-standing tradition of owning property. Since settlers came to the “land of the free” from overseas, staking a plot of land and cultivating a farm was a God-given right—and we still believe that today. If citizens were no longer granted land ownership, private farming businesses and similar industries would crumple and the economy would suffer. Traditions such as this are both difficult and frankly, unreasonable to dismantle. They have stood the tests of time and reason, while other traditions have been rightfully banished from the American way of life. So, it seems that defenders of political tradition are legitimate in their plea of “past-practice reliability,” because usually, enduring political practices are reasonable. However, this relationship does not apply when considering modern moral issues; political traditions cannot provide the reliable, time-tested reasons that it can provide in other realms. Because modern moral issues are temporally current, they cannot be effectively processed through the past-practice reliability of political traditions.

Defenders of political tradition sometimes make the mistake of attributing value to practices through an assessment of their founders. They trace back the traditions to a founding

³⁴ Ibid 139.

³⁵ Ibid 139.

moment, and the founders are often portrayed as supremely wise or divinely inspired.³⁶ These views are referred to as “sacred traditionalism,”³⁷ and when its applied to politics, it can be very damaging. First and foremost, the founders of several traditions were certainly not supremely or divinely anything. Simply put, the founders of political traditions were people appealing to the zeitgeist of their age, deriving what seemed like good ideas at the time. Slavery, for example, was once seen as permissible and efficient. After all, exploiting the time and energy of people one viewed as less than one’s self would be an ideal way to get work done without exerting much energy or money. However, time and human decency has shown that slavery as a tradition does not stand the test of time or public conscience. This is because moral cases cannot and should not be addressed through the scope of political authority. Political authority can be useful when we acknowledge non-moral cases, such as landownership or the right to vote, but it applies very disgracefully to moral cases. The political tradition of slavery died when someone’s empathic self-understanding shifted to their perspective of other people. While political authority can certainly enforce (via the law or social expectations) how people deal with moral cases, it cannot stifle the way they innately come to feel about them.

Relying upon traditions too strongly has its limitations when concerning moral cases. For this reason, I suggest that we supplement our traditional moral systems with a practice that can benefit everyone, regardless of religious and political beliefs. After a thoughtful analysis of Annas, Gauthier, and Rawls, I believe have developed a mental framework that is accessible to everyone, and relies on the processes of self-understanding and empathy. First, as I have already discussed, in a diverse society the moral standards that exist within one individual’s traditions cannot be applied to those who practice different traditions. Second, many moral issues society

³⁶ Ibid., 140.

³⁷ Ibid., 140.

faces today are recent, and do not have roots in established traditions. This is problematic when considering that many people treat their religious or political beliefs as capable of supplying correct answers for every moral issue.³⁸ At some point, we need to move beyond religious and political institutions for answers regarding 21st century moral issues. For these reasons, I suggest that we aid our moral decision-making processes by utilizing the mental framework supplied by the original position. The original position is a thought experiment, and so is easily accessible and practicable for everyone, regardless of religious and political affiliations. It is also egalitarian, promoting equality between all people through the mental requirements it poses upon its user.

Before I get into the ins-and-outs of how this system can be applied to moral decision-making, it is important to understand exactly what the original position is. The original position is a hypothetical state of unfamiliarity in which, after stepping behind the “veil of ignorance,” no individual knows his/her place in society, class, mental/physical abilities, gender, religion, wealth, etc.³⁹ However, they do maintain knowledge of how society works, and is completely aware of societal issues, like prejudice, class stratification, etc. While behind the veil of ignorance, individuals are to construct principles that they wish to be administered to society; they are to create moral rules that apply to everybody. In this hypothetical situation, it is important that the individual in question is behind the veil of ignorance while they construct moral principles. If they are not in a state of unfamiliarity while doing so, they will choose moral rules that materially reflect the life prospects he/she already has, which entirely defeats the

³⁸ Julia Annas, “Being virtuous and Doing the Right Thing,” in *Ethics: History, Theory, and Contemporary Issues*, ed. Steven m. Cahn and Peter Markie (New York: Oxford university Press, 2016), 703.

³⁹ John Rawls, “A theory of Justice,” in *Ethics: History, Theory, and Contemporary Issues*, ed. Steven m. Cahn and Peter Markie (New York: Oxford university Press, 2016), 572.

purpose. It is like Annas states: “we are not blank slates; we already have firm views about right and wrong ways to act, worthy and unworthy ways to be...”⁴⁰ Therefore, it would be difficult for any person to choose moral rules subjectively if they did not imagine an unfamiliar relationship with her own identity.

The value I see in utilizing the original position while making moral decisions is found in the reality that people are largely self-serving, prioritizing their own needs over the needs of others. At first, this may seem counter-intuitive to the type of moral authority that I am promoting, which aims to inspire equality between all people, regardless of traditional beliefs. After all, moral principles derived out of human selfishness are surely biased. However, this would not be the case of people committed themselves to the hypothetical original position. Consider these facts about the original position: once in the original position, one does not know his/her identity or place in society whatsoever, but does maintain knowledge of the way society works. Given these circumstances, the rational person will develop moral principles that benefit him/her in society no matter who he/she turns out to be. Committing themselves to the idea that their identities are uncertain once they exit the original position, those behind the veil will construct moral rules that will benefit them if they are male, female, wealthy, poor, liberal, conservative, Christian, atheist, or anything in-between. If one lives in a society in which women are treated as second-class citizens, for example, a rational man may step behind the veil and imagine the quality of life if he happened to be a woman. Because human beings are selfish and understand their own needs better than the needs of others, this man is inspired to create principles that would benefit him if he were female; thus, he dismantles the notion that women

⁴⁰ Annas, op, cit., 704.

are second-class citizens. Ironically by thinking in terms of maximally benefiting one's self, one develops a society in which no person is advantaged or disadvantaged.⁴¹

It is understandable to criticize the practical employment of the original position in every moral decision-making process. After all, it would take time to constantly step behind the veil of ignorance every time one faces an ethical dilemma. Furthermore, it is extremely difficult—if not impossible—to entirely rid one's self of biases. In an ideal world, one-hundred-percent commitment to identity unfamiliarity is possible, but not in a world consisting of real, breathing, experienced human beings. To completely detach one's self from learned beliefs and prejudices is no easy task.

To the first criticism—that the original position is too time-consuming—I admit yes, stepping behind the veil will take time, at least initially. However, I do not think that this critique is self-sustaining when one considers a longitudinal practice of the original position. Like all developed abilities, such as riding a bike, playing violin, or speaking a new language, the first trials are always the most difficult, and require the most concentration. However, one would not contend that these abilities are not worth developing because of the initial inconveniences. The same can be said for the practice of the original position. Like any learned ability, time and practice lead to automatic responses. Once someone solidifies her ability to ride a bike, she no longer methodically thinks through every action she takes, she simply rides the bike via automatic processes—it becomes muscle reflex. The same principle applies to practicing the original position. With enough repetition, thinking through an objective lens will become automatic and second-nature, no longer taking up unreasonable amounts of time. Eventually, one

⁴¹ Rawls, *op. cit.*, 572.

will develop a virtuous disposition that allows them to sustain empathy and objectivity during times of moral strife.

To the second criticism—that the original position is realistically impossible to practice—I also admit viability, but with a less satisfying rebuttal. Much like my previous suggestions regarding the time-consuming nature of the original position, I believe that practice would allow one to become more skilled at reaching a state of impartiality while behind the veil of ignorance. However, I am not naïve to the ways of the human mind, and I do not think it is ever really possible to attain complete identity unfamiliarity. To abandon one's history, beliefs, and passions is easier said than done, and arguably, not a fair requirement of a moral system. As I've stated already, traditions are important, and hold significant value within society. I do not think that abandonment of these traditions is necessary in order to attain a moral system that benefits everybody. However, I will continue to stress the importance of fairness and empathy as they pertain to addressing moral cases. Therefore, while it may not be ethically required, or possible, to achieve the mental framework of one in the original position, it is still important the individual behind the veil of ignorance try to the best of his ability to practice objectivity through self-understanding.

If we treated our internal sources of empathy as sources of moral authority, instead of entirely relying upon our circumstantial traditions, we would be better equipped in treating others with fairness. Human morality is much too complex to expect one system to supply all the answers, which is why religion and politics must be supplemented in their roles as moral sources. Neither can we develop a system that tells us exactly what to do in any moral case, without any more effort. Certainly, my proposition is going to take work. In our diverse societies, peoples' well-being and general happiness is reliant upon cooperation and understanding within and

between communities. With a source of moral authority that promotes equality and fairness between people, empathy for one's fellow human will be easier to nurture.

In the modern age, with many people having extremely divergent traditional views, it is still possible to have a source of moral authority that helps us address the needs of people unlike ourselves. Morality entirely based upon religion or politics is impractical, and constrains our moral choices actions⁴² through their limitations in moral application. By placing ourselves behind the veil of ignorance and using the original position as a moral decision-making-tool, we can develop a source of moral authority that is equally accessible to everyone, and allows us to explore empathy through a non-biased source that is not instituted upon subjectivity. As our diverse society thrives and sub-cultures across the nation practice their individual beliefs, it is reassuring to know that there are ways in which we can cooperate to create fairness between all people.

⁴² Gauthier, *op. tic.*, 598.

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