

According to De George, "in order to grant anyone epistemic authority y must know something about the field and enough to know that x knows more than y does." Thus it would be reasonable to acknowledge an authority in morality, say, only when "[t]he moral agent . . . understand[s] what it means to be moral and to think in moral terms. If [she or] he does not, [she or] he may simply do as [she or] he is told or advised from habit or fear or inclination or laziness. But if [she or] he does know what it means to be moral and if [she or] he wishes to be moral, [she or] he may well seek moral guidance, and, I would argue, properly so. In full knowledge of the diversity of moral opinion and the dubiousness of finding the complete truth, [she or] he may judge on the basis of [her or] his own experience who it is who can guide [her or] him in moral matters, either because that person seems to know more or seems to act better than [she or] he [her- or] himself. [She or h]e may seek the knowledge, clear thinking, and the approach to problems in the light of principle which is supplied by the scholar; or [she or] he may seek the insight of someone who appears to [her or] him to be holy or at least morally commendable; or [she or] he may emulate the example of some saint or moral hero.

"To so act is to act morally in the attempt to correct or form one's conscience. The autonomy of conscience does not mean that it is *sui generis* and cut off from the moral experience and knowledge of others. Conscience should not be forced or coerced, but its autonomy is consistent with information and guidance, held on faith from others. Ultimately it means that one must [her- or] himself decide to act, if the action is a moral act, by the best means [she or] he can. One must decide whether to take advice, act on guidance, or adhere to values embodied by others; and then accept the moral risk and responsibility of so acting" ("The Nature and Function of Epistemic Authority": 90 f.).

My question is whether, or to what extent, pretty much the same thing couldn't be said about authority in existential matters—or, more exactly, about epistemic, or nonexecutive, authority in such matters. Assuming that there are such things as existential reality and truth, one can allow the possibility of epistemic, or, more generally, nonexecutive, authority with respect to them. But, then, why shouldn't the same principles that apply to

epistemic (or nonexecutive) authority in general also apply to existential as well as to moral epistemic authority in particular?

Thus, for instance, the well-grounded rule that one must be able to ask the existential question and be concerned with answering it in order to understand any answer to it satisfies the requirement that y must know at least something about the field in which she or he takes x to be an authority before she or he can legitimately accept x as an authority in that field. In fact, it even satisfies the further requirement that y must also know that x knows more about the field than y does, since, in the sheer logic of the case, to know the answer to a question is always to know more than one knows simply in asking the question itself.

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