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Advocacy and the Challenging of Authority

Perhaps one of the most challenging elements of advocacy for many persons is the very real prospect that at some point they may have to confront authority. This can cause anxiety, dread, insecurity and many other emotions to be felt depending on the particular make-up of the advocate. In many cases, it can lead to the advocate, both consciously and not so consciously, avoiding situations that hold the promise of conflict with people in authority. For an advocate hoping to be effective such an outcome is highly undesirable though not uncommon. For those being advocated for it may well mean that their needs and interests can be compromised if not otherwise damaged. Given these kinds of possibly weighty consequences it becomes all that more important to strengthen advocates so that their chances of being successful in their role are heightened.

At the outset it should be recognized that the intention of advocacy is to speak on behalf of and defend the interests of people and, in particular, people who are devalued and mistreated. This can often be accomplished without any specific confrontations with authority. It is generally a good rule of thumb to consciously keep conflict to a minimum, especially those conflicts that are avoidable and unnecessary. i.e. picking one's battles. This clearly means that the advocate ought to be skillful in how he or she approaches situations so that the best of their energies are devoted to the essential matters at issue rather than being drawn off into unproductive tangents. Even so, it cannot be expected that the kinds of troublesome circumstances that advocates will necessarily find themselves in will readily yield to this preference for a kind of economy of conflict. Consequently, it becomes necessary to consider the potential and implications for situations in which conflict with authority is not readily avoidable.

This needs to begin with the recognition that there exists within most people some measure of reflexive willingness to defer to authority. The roots of this vary, but certainly a major element must be that most people are raised to respect and cooperate with legitimate authority. For most people, there is little in their lives that prepare them to question and doubt authority and yet such skepticism is quite rational given the predictably normative (and occasionally quite ample) shortcomings that exist in most authorities and their conduct. This reluctance to overtly disagree with authority is certainly not something that many authorities will discourage in people thereby rendering an emotional advantage to those with authority. The mere presence of authority may be intimidating to some people given that they lack confidence and experience in dealing with power and authority. All of this propels people more

to compliance than it does challenge and confrontation. What should not be lost here, though, is that what can be learned can often be unlearned at a later date providing that there is a will to do so and the person is supported in the task. Thus it is useful to consider what it is that would be useful to learn and internalize if the prospective advocate needs to be able to adaptively deal with conflicts with authority.

a) The Legitimacy of Questioning Authority

One's posture towards authority will inevitably be shaped by the norms of one's family and community and community. For instance, in various Asian societies' it is considered very impolite to directly challenge the authority of an elder person if one is younger. Yet such an act in many western societies would not draw that much notice or sanction due to the norms of conduct that prevail. Thus it is useful to begin with whether such overt challenging of authority is considered by the advocate as inimical to their sense of propriety. If the very act of challenging authority is considered illegitimate then advocacy of this kind will be impossible. It is therefore useful to first establish, with both clarity and confidence, the grounds upon which it may be both polite and necessary to disagree with authority. In western societies with an open democratic tradition, this legitimacy is often found in the political philosophy of pluralism and the consequent open expression of dissident opinion. This is commonly reinforced by a resultant pattern of habitual public questioning and even scolding of those who carry authority and responsibility by the press, politicians, intellectuals, activists and even religious authorities.

b) The Internal Resolve To Challenge Authority "If Need Be"

Even where such "pro forma" norms may exist, it is not surprising to find people who may normally agree with such norms but who may still find it personally difficult to act on them. At some level, such persons may still be unconvinced that it is both right and necessary to overtly take on persons with authority. Equally, they may be very unused to the role of questioner, particularly in very public and confronting ways, and thus shy away from such encounters. Fear, doubt or a momentary loss of courage may simply overcome others. Yet for others, they may resist acting in this way because of political or personal calculations regarding the wisdom of becoming offside with authority. In other individuals, there may be pressures on the person from others that serve to inhibit their instinct to challenge.

In all of these instances there is unlikely to be much challenging of authority if the person is not sufficiently comfortable with the idea that the overt expression of dissent may be both necessary and conscionable. It takes time to habituate oneself to facing and challenging authority directly and thus it can be looked upon as a "learnable" task and personal capacity. As indicated earlier, there is not likely to be much advocacy of this kind if the legitimacy of

quarrelling with authority has not become deeply ingrained in a person. In this sense, the belief in the “questionability” of authority is not sufficient if it is not accompanied by the resolve to act where such action is needed.

c) The Willingness To Recognize And Bear The Costs of Dissenting Advocacy

It is always desirable for advocates to be able to pursue their interests in the context of whatever political and moral consensus can be drawn upon. Nevertheless, such favorable conditions cannot be expected for the most part in the case of persons and causes that inconvenience or threaten the will, preferences and interests of powerful groups or persons. This presents for the advocate not merely the occasion to test their beliefs and resolve but also their degree of willingness to endure the prospective or actual punishments, costs and other consequences that could accompany the stand they take. It should be noted here that a good number of people may be constitutionally unsuited to some advocacy missions and ought to recognize this possibly grave limitation. For instance, there are people who might have what it takes to buttress their advocacy with a willingness to risk income, security, relationships and even their freedom. Others may find such sacrifices fundamentally incompatible with their personal “calling” and thus would be posturing, perhaps recklessly, to take on sacrifices they cannot bear.

Many individuals might mistakenly believe that there exists a general “all round” advocate who is suited to all advocacy missions simply because in the case of some the person is competent and successful. This would be mistaken as advocates must be seen as having within their ranks many different kind of people who vary widely in what they are good at and what it is that they do poorly with. Clearly, the wise advocate will be the person who recognizes where they shine and where there is more doubt. So it is with the task of bearing with the sacrifices of the advocacy role. The wise advocate will be the one that knows their limits and stays within them. Unfortunately, this will mean at a point in time, that the type of advocate that is most needed may simply not be available. Nevertheless, there is not likely to be much gained by people pretending to be something they are not just because they recognize the need.

d) An Appreciation For The Artfulness of Challenge Done Well

It is a quite common recognition that some people are able to make very difficult things appear easier than they really are. Virtuosity of this kind naturally extends to all roles that people undertake including that of advocacy. As indicated already, there is a kind of underlying suitability that some people seem to have towards certain tasks and challenges that simply are unavailable to others. This is rarely just a question of talents and skills though these are surely part of the mix. So it is with challenging authority. If the “right” person

is doing it the chances are considerably better that it will be done well. It is essential that it be recognized that it is quite possible to challenge authority poorly. This could have the probable effect of injuring the advocacy interests that ought to be advanced rather than harmed. Thus there needs to be a calculation made in all these instances of the capacity of the advocate to perform as they should.

If advocacy could be likened to a “craft” then the master craftsperson would be the one who most consistently performs well. To do so is not to presume that mere innate ability will prevail, as there are likely to be many other factors that go into such success. One of these is surely the judgement the skilled advocate puts into how the confrontation ought to be undertaken, if at all. This may, in itself, require judgement as to the likely advantages and disadvantages of varying approaches. Thus a decision to not confront may be taken by the very person who is most able and apt to confront because of the discipline this person brings to their craft. Equally, the novice with much promise and predilection towards the astute confrontation of authority may unwisely confront authority simply because it comes so easily to them. With the seasoning of experience such an advocate may combine wisdom with ability and thus be able to improve their odds for success with their advocacy.

5) Cultivating The Right Spirit of Advocacy

It is not infrequent that the advocate brings to their advocacy deeply held attitudes towards authority that may color their approach even unconsciously. Many may be almost reflexively angry at authorities of all kinds. Others may see no good whatsoever in even the presence of authority and thus see all acts of authority as illegitimate no matter what. Others may project on to authority motives, interests and actions that are utterly inconsistent with the facts but very coherent in terms of the advocate’s “a priori” convictions about authorities. In some instances the advocate may even feel no compulsion to act ethically in regards to the authority on the premise that they do not deserve this given that they simply possess authority. These are simply examples of the fact that the advocate may bring animosities, prejudices, hatreds and any assortment of beliefs, ideologies and even vendettas to the exercise of advocacy that act to create an atmosphere of violence and abuse towards authorities. Naturally, this may be unrecognized by the advocate as being their own doing as the temptation to place blame on the party with more power may be too tempting.

The remedy to such a poisonous attitude may well rest with whether there exists in the advocate some capacity to take responsibility for themselves. It is very unlikely that the right spirit for advocacy can be cultivated without the advocate seeing the necessity for themselves to be both ethical and humane even to authorities that are perhaps even criminally errant. This aspiration towards a more consistently universal morality towards

all human beings lies underneath all walks of life as a challenge for those interested in being good towards others. It is not particularly self-evident what the right and good spirit is that one ought to bring to advocacy that might involve confrontation with authority but it is certainly a very profound question that should not be ignored by those who advocate. Certainly, there may even be witnessed, on occasion, those rare individuals whose saintly ways are very much bound up with a much needed, unflinching and humanizing dissent from authority.

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