INTRODUCTION

Morality, authority and power are central concepts embedded in the life-blood of the polis. While it has always been tempting to compare modern society to Greek and Roman antiquity, scholars understand that the images we see are through “modern” lenses (De Coulanges, 1873). Having said that, however, scholars are left with recorded deeds and verse that hint at vestiges of behavior and practices that reveal something about the collective practices we strive for or submit to in present day society. The relationships between beliefs and social practices are found in seminal sociological concepts like those mentioned above, and tell us something about the collective morality of a group or culture (Arendt, 1958; Berger, 1969; Nisbet, 1966; and Trilling, 1972).

The distinction between power and authority lies not so much in the testimonies or actions of (one in) authority, but in the prevailing attitude held by those who are influenced by the authority, those who have bequeathed authority, and those who may have the presence of authority. Authority is exercised over those who voluntarily accept it; it will not affect those who do not recognize it as legitimate unless those who respect the authority coerce those who do not. By placing ourselves in the hands of (an) authority, we make a moral commitment and expect that it will be honored. We are lulled into doing whatever is deemed best by the authority simply because we ought to. Politically, authority means the right to act. Morally, it is the duty to do so. This is the de facto implication of our relationship to authority, which arises out of the de jure. As long as the people respect the legitimacy of the authority, the de facto state is ever present.
It should not be surprising that complacency among a public in the form of the philosopher’s “naturalistic fallacy” (just because something has x, x must be good) is a self-perpetuating norm within a society. But the more firmly rooted in established traditions an authority is, the more it depends on its own continued success than the support of the people – more so if the people have become complacent.

This becomes a powerful lesson for our students to grapple with: we are the authors of authority. We are influenced and affected by institutionalised authority (church, government, school systems, science) and individual authorities (pastors, senators, teachers, scientists) to the extent we trust them with guiding and somehow enhancing our social existence. By accepting “what is”, we have consented to be dominated (or at the very least – become complacent); we have accepted the power of the authority.

How can our students or an entire society move beyond blind acceptance of authority that may lead to the abuse of power? The agents that grant authority, members of the society from which the authority springs, must have the ability to evaluate the actions of authority. More specifically, citizens must inquire about the rights and duties of the agencies that are granted authority. Does a particular agency have the right to commit the actions in which it engages? Has that agency moved beyond the rights afforded to it by the people? Not only is it important to consider how extensively power is applied, it is equally appropriate to consider cases in which authority fails to apply its power. Has the agency fulfilled its duty? Has the agency accomplished that which it is morally bound to undertake? Failure to uphold duty as well as overextension of rights marks a breach in the moral commitment formed when citizens granted authority.

Evaluating the issues that surround authority and power, rights and duties involves moral reasoning. Lawrence Kohlberg, arguably the most instrumental theorist in moral development and education, posits that the primary aim of education should be the development of moral reasoning (Kohlberg & Mayer, 1973). In the Kohlbergian model, individuals progress through a series of six, sequential and invariant stages that define the processes by which people consider moral situations (see chapter 1 in this volume for a more complete discussion). Accordingly, the optimal way to facilitate students in evaluating authority would be to promote moral stage progression, that is, provide an educational environment that encourages development of post conventional reasoning. More recent theorists note the importance of factors other than reasoning on morality. Rest, Narvaez, Bebeau, and Thoma (1999) propose a four-component model that adds moral sensitivity, moral motivation, and moral character to moral judgment, a category built upon Kohlbergian moral reasoning. Berkowitz (1997) offers another taxonomy termed moral anatomy; it subsumes some of the ideas presented in the four-component model as well as other aspects. Moral anatomy consists of moral behavior, moral character, moral values, moral reason, moral emotion, moral identity, and meta-moral characteristics. Both models imply that moral decision-making and behavior are contingent on factors beyond reason; therefore, development of post conventional reasoning should be one of many aims for an education program that seeks to arm citizens with the skills needed to evaluate authority.