

## THE RULE OF ST. BENEDICT AND MODERN LIBERAL AUTHORITY

LINDA ZAGZEBSKI

*University of Oklahoma*

**Abstract.** In this paper I examine the sixth century *Rule of St. Benedict*, and argue that the authority structure of Benedictine communities as described in that document satisfies well-known principles of authority defended by Joseph Raz. This should lead us to doubt the common assumption that pre-modern models of authority violate the modern ideal of the autonomy of the self. I suggest that what distinguishes modern liberal authority from Benedictine authority is not the principles that justify it, but rather the first order beliefs for the sake of which authority is sought by the individual, and the degree of trust between the authority and the subject.

### I. INTRODUCTION

One of the ideas embraced by the West during the Enlightenment was the idea that the only authority that needs no justification is the authority of the self over the self. Any other kind of authority is derivative. Philosophers recognized that we cannot live without political authority, so an important project of the early Enlightenment was to show that the authority of the state can ultimately be justified by the authority of the self. Other kinds of authority were permitted to disappear, particularly moral and religious authority, both of which are still commonly dismissed as incompatible with personal autonomy. My purpose in this paper is not to critique modern ideas of autonomy or the self. Instead, I want to re-examine the common assumption that pre-modern models of authority violate the modern ideal of the ultimate authority of the self.

My focus will be a document written by Benedict of Nursia almost 1500 years ago describing an authority structure that has been followed in all subsequent centuries and on every continent. I have several reasons

for undertaking this unusual study. First, I want to show that authority as described in the *Rule of St. Benedict* satisfies Joseph Raz's theses of authority, one of the most influential contemporary accounts of modern liberal authority. This has some interesting implications. It shows that Benedictine authority need not refer to anything more than well-known post-Enlightenment principles for its justification. It also shows that what distinguishes the modern liberal state from Benedict's pre-modern authority structure is not the principles by which the authority is justified, but something else. The difference, I will suggest, is in the content of the first order beliefs for the sake of which authority is accepted, and the degree of trust binding together authority and subject.

My second reason for looking at the Rule is that I believe a good way to understand authority is to examine structures of authority that have proven successful. This has some advantages over the alternative of making up principles of authority *a priori*. I am not denying the usefulness of the latter, but I think there has been insufficient attention to the former.

Third, the political state is not a good model for authority in communities in which there are shared ends and a high degree of trust within the community. If we examine these communities closely, we might see that they have features that apply to communities that are not monastic, so the Benedictine model may have wider implications for the nature of authority in general.

## II. JOSEPH RAZ'S THESES OF AUTHORITY

In an influential account of political authority, Joseph Raz proposes several theses that he believes apply to authority *simpliciter*, and he then uses them to justify the authority of the modern state.<sup>1</sup> In this section I will briefly summarize Raz's theses. I will not defend them since for the purposes of this paper I am relying upon their influence, not their truth. But I think they are all reasonable principles, given a modern sensibility that detaches authority from dependence upon God, and which attempts to derive authority from the more basic authority of the self.

---

<sup>1</sup> Joseph Raz, *The Morality of Freedom* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986).

We begin with the assumption that authority is a relation between the person or institution in authority and the subject, in which the former has a special kind of normative power over the latter. The authority's command or directive gives the subject a reason to act in the way directed by the authority. Raz proposes that an authoritative directive has two constitutive features, both of which come from H.L.A. Hart.

The first is **content-independence**:

An authoritative utterance gives the subject a reason to follow the directive which is such that there is no direct connection between the reason and the action for which it is a reason.

That is, within certain limits, the authority's authority<sup>2</sup> does not depend upon *what* the authority directs. The subject has a reason to obey regardless of the content. For instance, the authority can command me to drive on the left side of the road or on the right. The authority can command military conscription or it can repeal it. Content-independence is necessary for a directive to be authoritative, says Raz, but it is not sufficient since threats and advice are also content-independent utterances, but they are not instances of authority (pp. 35-37).

The second thesis is the **pre-emption thesis**:

The fact that an authority requires performance of an action is a reason for its performance that replaces other relevant reasons and is not simply added to them.

This thesis is the distinguishing feature of authoritative directives. The subject's reason for following the directive is that it is a directive of the authority, not that the authority's directive gives the subject additional reasons for doing the act directed. The latter would not be a case of obeying authority, but a case of taking advice (pp. 42, 57-59).

Raz argues that there are cases in which a person ought to obey a directive pre-emptively by offering two other theses on authority which assume the primacy of the subject's own reasons for action: the Dependency thesis and the Normal Justification thesis. The first places limits on the kinds of reasons that an authority may legitimately use in giving its

---

<sup>2</sup> The term "authority" is ambiguous. Sometimes it refers to the person or institution that has authority, as when we say "The authorities closed down the streets around the bank after the heist." Sometimes instead, it refers to the normative power that a person or institution has, as when we say, "Political authority differs from religious authority". I will use the term in both senses and rely upon context to disambiguate it.

directives. The second concerns the type of argument that would justify a claim to authority.

Raz's **Dependency Thesis** is the following:

All authoritative directives should be based on reasons that already independently apply to the subjects of the directives and are relevant to their action in the circumstances covered by the directive.

The authority will consider more reasons for the directive than the reasons that already apply to the subject in the circumstances, but a constraint on his authority is that he must intend the directive to take the subject's reasons into account (p. 47). For instance, I have reasons for wanting affordable, high quality health care that I cannot lose, but medical care providers, insurers, and drug companies are also subjects, with different reasons which the authority must take into account in passing a law governing the way medical care is provided and paid for. Raz makes it clear that although the directive of legitimate authority must be intended to reflect the reasons the subjects have, it need not correctly reflect those reasons. The legitimacy of its authority is not dependent upon its issuing the right directive.

The normal way to justify authority is the **Normal Justification thesis (NJ thesis)**:

The normal way to establish that a person has authority over another person is to show that the alleged subject is likely better to comply with reasons that apply to him if he accepts the directives of the alleged authority as authoritatively binding and tries to follow them, rather than by trying to follow the reasons that apply to him directly (p. 53).

The idea here is that even an autonomous agent sometimes has reason to follow an indirect strategy in order to act on her own first order reasons. She is doing what she judges she should do on the balance of reasons, but in some cases the balance of reasons dictates obeying the authority. For example, I want to build a squirrel-proof bird feeder in my back yard, but I do not know how to do it. If I find an expert who offers his assistance, I have reason to follow his directions since I am more likely to act in a way that serves my ends if I do so than if I try to figure it out myself.

Raz proposes that the NJ thesis can justify the authority of the state. I have no position on whether he is right about that, but the NJ thesis

does plausibly link the reasonableness of obeying authority with reasons one has independent of the authority. A political authority is justified if it helps me to act on my duties to others. An extension of the same principle would justify religious authority if it helps me to act on my duties to God. Similarly, epistemic authority is justified if it helps me get the truth, thereby aiding me in satisfying a duty to myself. Since I have these duties anyway, it is reasonable for me to accept the authority as authoritative in a specific domain. And if the authority's legitimacy is justified by what it is reasonable for me to accept, then the authority's legitimacy can be justified in this way.

Authorities clearly differ in the degree of authority justified by the NJ thesis. It is reasonable for me to follow the directives of the bird feeder expert if I want a good bird feeder, but it is not reasonable for me to agree to be punished if I do not obey. It does not help me act on my first order reasons if I agree to such a strong kind of authority. But in other cases it does. I may do a better job of acting on some moral duties if I not only agree to obey a given authority, but also agree to be punished if I disobey. The authority of the state needs to be of this stronger kind. It must be strong enough to legitimate punishment for infraction of the laws.

There is one other thesis of authority that Raz considers, but rejects. He says that the Dependency thesis is sometimes confused with what he calls the **No Difference thesis**:

The no difference thesis asserts that the exercise of authority should make no difference to what its subjects ought to do, for it ought to direct them to do what they ought to do in any event (p. 48).

Raz says this is false. If Parliament passes a tax law, it does not follow that the citizens had reason to pay the tax before the law was passed. If my Church commands me to go to Mass on Sunday, it does not follow that I had reason to do so anyway. If the bird feeder expert tells me to buy a certain kind of bracket, it does not follow that I had reason to buy a bracket like that in advance.

If we combine the NJ thesis and the pre-emption thesis, and formulate it from the point of view of the subject, we get the following **general thesis of authority**:

When I have reason to believe that following the directives of a putative authority makes it more likely that I will act on my first order reasons

than if I try to act on those reasons directly, I should do what the authority tells me to do pre-emptively.

My reason for accepting the authority does not depend upon the content of the authority's directive (content-independence), and the authority's legitimacy is constrained by the principle that it must intend to reflect my first order reasons in its directives (dependency thesis).

I will end this summary with an objection to pre-emption and Raz's reply. Someone might argue that the reasonable thing to do when an authority satisfies the condition of the NJ thesis is to weigh the authority's directive more heavily than my other reasons, but still take my other reasons into account. Why isn't the fact of the authority's directive simply one more reason to act that I put into the mix of my total set of reasons? The answer is that when I have reason to think that an authority satisfies the NJ thesis, I will do better at acting on my first order reasons if I follow the authority's directive pre-emptively than if I do not. Raz says:

Suppose I can identify a range of cases in which I am wrong more than the putative authority. Suppose I decide because of this to tilt the balance in all those cases in favour of its solution. That is, in every case I will first make up my own mind independently of the 'authority's' verdict, and then, in those cases in which my judgment differs from its, I will add a certain weight to the solution favoured by it, on the ground that it, the authority, knows better than I. This procedure will reverse my independent judgment in a certain proportion of the cases. Sometimes even after giving the argument favoured by the authority an extra weight it will not win. On other occasions the additional weight will make all the difference. How will I fare under this procedure? If, as we are assuming, there is no other relevant information available, then we can expect that in the cases in which I endorse the authority's judgment my rate of mistakes declines and equals that of the authority. In the cases in which even now I contradict the authority's judgment the rate of my mistakes remains unchanged, i.e. greater than that of the authority. This shows that only by allowing the authority's judgment to pre-empt mine altogether will I succeed in improving my performance and bringing it to the level of the authority. Of course sometimes I do have additional information showing that the authority is better than me in some areas and not in others. This may be sufficient to show that it lacks authority over me in those other areas. The argument about the pre-emptiveness of authoritative decrees does not apply to such cases (pp. 68-9).

I think Raz's argument is sound. The decision to obey pre-emptively is the best strategy given the assumption that I have identified a person who is more likely to be right than I am about the best way to act on my own reasons for action. But we need models of the way to identify such a person. We will get to one way to do that in the next section.

Raz says he offers his work as a contribution to the literature on political freedom, and he aims to justify political authority within the framework of political liberalism (p. 1). He begins with the general realm of authority over action in order to present the contours of authority as he understands it, but he does so with an eye to applying his theses to the political domain. I suspect that this means he is operating with certain constraints.

One constraint is the desire to maximize political freedom and to minimize political authority. It is interesting that most modern political thought is motivated more by fear of bad authority than by desire for good authority. The idea is that it is more important to devise an account of authority that prevents tyranny than to give the bearer of authority the function of assisting the subjects in pursuing their individual and collective good.<sup>3</sup> With such an aim, it is reasonable to devise principles to restrict authority as much as possible, compatible with having a tolerably smooth-functioning society.

A second constraint is that the account must be applicable to authority over large populations with no presumption of personal trust between authority and subject. The strong personal bonds that exist in small communities such as the family or the village cannot be assumed when the authority is distant from the subjects and there is no personal interaction between them.

I am interested in the contours of authority in domains in which these constraints may not apply. Small communities with a great deal of personal interaction and bonding between authority and subject do not have the protection of the subject from the authority as a primary goal, which is not to say that subjects should not be protected. But I find it interesting to test the way in which Raz's principles would be applied in small, tightly-knit communities where the authority is stronger and

---

<sup>3</sup> Two exceptions are Yves Simon, *A General Theory of Authority* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1980), and Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Sovereignty: God, State, and Self* (N.Y.: Basic Books, 2008).

covers a much greater range of the subjects' lives than political authority does. If the community has a religious basis, is there something distinctively religious in the principles that justify authority in such communities? Could a modern liberal recognize the authority structure of these communities as legitimate? We are used to thinking of authority in the modern world as not only dependent upon certain principles deriving from the authority of the self, but as having a certain *result* – minimal intrusion in the lives of the subjects. In the next section I will turn to a model of authority that suggests that common assumptions about the difference between modern and pre-modern authority are false.

### III. THE RULE OF ST. BENEDICT

St. Benedict wrote his Rule in the first half of the sixth century. More than a millennium before the advent of Constitutional government, Benedict understood the need for a combination of the authority of persons and the authority of a written rule known to all. This combination is important to the justification of authority in a Benedictine community, and it indicates one of the ways that modern liberal authority has separable elements. There are successful structures of authority that have some of those elements and not others.

Benedict's first words are "Listen, carefully, my son, to the master's instructions, and attend to them with the ear of your heart. This is advice from a father who loves you." (trans. Timothy Fry).<sup>4</sup> Think of the nature of this appeal. Benedict does not say, "I am an authority and I claim that you have a duty to obey me." He sets up a relationship of trust. "My words are addressed to you especially, whoever you may be, whatever your circumstances, who turn from the pursuit of your own self-will and ask to enlist under Christ, who is Lord of all, by following him through

---

<sup>4</sup> *The Rule of St. Benedict in English*, trans. by Timothy Fry (Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Press, 1982). I use three translations of the Rule in the following discussion. The translations by Timothy Fry and Leonard Doyle follow Benedict in wording the Rule for communities of men. Since there were communities of women following the Rule from the beginning, the Barry translation explicitly words the Rule in a way that is applicable to these communities as well. My discussion will primarily focus on communities of monks, but will vary with the context of the translation I am using.



taking to yourself that strong and blessed armour of obedience which he made his own on coming in our world.” (trans. Patrick Barry).<sup>5</sup> In the next few paragraphs Benedict reminds the monk of the first order ends they share. He says, “Let us open our eyes to the light that can change us into the likeness of God,” and in the following paragraph he quotes the psalm, “Who is there with a love of true life and a longing for days of real fulfillment?” (Barry). In the following paragraphs Benedict reviews the aims of the Christian who follows the Gospel. “Brothers, now that we have asked the Lord who will dwell in his tent, we have heard the instruction for dwelling in it, but only if we fulfill the obligations of those who live there.” (Fry). And in the concluding paragraph of the Prologue he says,

Therefore we intend to establish a school for the Lord’s service. In drawing up its regulations, we hope to set down nothing harsh, nothing burdensome. The good of all concerned, however, may prompt us to a little strictness in order to amend faults and to safeguard love. Do not be daunted immediately by fear and run away from the road that leads to salvation. It is bound to be narrow at the outset (Fry).

Notice that there are ends stated at the beginning of the Rule, and Benedict knows that each monk or seeker testing his monastic vocation has a reason to act for those ends. Within the space of a few paragraphs, Benedict appeals to the monk’s first order reasons for living, and the monk’s second order reasons for thinking that living as a monk under the Rule will help him live in the way he aims to live. The rules of Christian life are detailed in Chapter Four. These are rules that apply to the Christian whether or not he decides to enter a monastery. Many readers have a second order reason to take the authority of the Rule as a better way to act on the reasons given in Chapter Four than if they attempted it on their own.

Chapter One presents alternatives to the authority structure of a monastic community under a rule with an Abbot (or Abbess) and gives reasons for rejecting them. This is a smart way to begin. Benedict is aware that there are monks who either live without authority or live without

---

<sup>5</sup> *The Rule of St. Benedict*, trans. by Patrick Barry (1997), in *The Benedictine Handbook*, introduction by Anthony Merritt-Crosby (Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Press, 2003).

a rule, and he knows his readers will be aware of them. He considers four kinds of monks. The anchorites (hermits) can be self-reliant and do not live under an Abbot, but that is only because they have already learned what they need to learn in a monastery. Otherwise, they will not be able to go it alone. For the sarabaites the law is whatever they want to do, whatever strikes their fancy. They are evidence of what happens when a monk follows his own will. The gyrovagues are the worst. They drift from place to place, taking from others, and never committing to a community. Since they move so frequently, their misdeeds are easier to hide. The crucial point of this chapter is that it is not enough for a monk to take a rule and attempt to live by it without living under an authority. The reason for living in a community as a cenobite is partly that living without authority tends to lead to gyrovagues and sarabaites, and partly that the tools of the spiritual craft require living in community. The goal of the individual monk is personal salvation, but Benedict calls the reader to trust him and his experience in judging that living under the authority of an Abbot according to the Rule is a better means to that end than following the monk's own will.

The Rule describes the qualities of the Abbot as well as the ordinary monk and those with particular roles like the Cellarer, the Porter, and the Prior. The Rule sets out most of the structure of the monastic life, including the hours of the Divine Office and the psalms that shall be chanted, the amount of food and wine to be consumed, the treatment of the sick, punishment for infractions of the Rule, and so on. It describes the way the Abbot is elected and the responsibilities of the Abbot to the monks, as well as the responsibilities of the monks to the Abbot, and the responsibilities of the monks to each other.

The Abbot is a teacher and spiritual mentor as well as a manager of the Abbey's affairs. A person who is good at one might not be good at the other, but it is clear that Benedict thinks that teaching is the more important role. The Abbot or Abbess "should give a lead to their disciples by two distinct methods of teaching— by the example of the lives they lead (and that is the most important way) and by the words they use in their teaching." (ch. 2, Barry). Benedict directs the Abbot to personalize his teaching and his discipline for the needs of the individual monk. One of his most touching pieces of advice to the Abbot is that he should "arrange everything that the strong have something to yearn for and the

weak nothing to run from.” (ch. 64, Fry). Benedict clearly intends the Abbot to be trustworthy, and the monk’s trust in him is grounded partly in the Abbot’s behavior, but for the most part it is grounded in the personal qualities that make him an exemplar of a life lived by the Rule.<sup>6</sup>

The Rule satisfies and expresses all of the theses about authority defended by Raz. Benedict clearly implies that the Abbot’s directive preempts the monk’s other reasons for performing an act. Further, the command should be obeyed immediately. “It is, in fact, almost in one single moment that a command is uttered by the superior and the task carried to completion by the disciple.” (ch. 5, Barry).

Raz’s Dependency thesis states that the directives of the authority should be based on reasons that independently apply to the subjects of the directives and are relevant to their action in circumstances covered by the directive. Benedict implies acceptance of this thesis in a number of places. For instance, in the chapter on the election of an Abbot (ch. 64) he says that “They [the Abbot or Abbess] must understand that the call of their office is not to exercise power over those who are their subjects but to serve and help them in their needs.” (Barry). It was radical in sixth century Rome to present an image of authority that exists for the sake of the subjects. The Rule restricts the purpose for which an Abbot may issue directives, and it reminds the Abbot several times that he is under the Rule himself and will have to answer to God: “And let the Abbot be sure that any lack of profit the master of the house may find in the sheep will be laid to the blame of the shepherd.” (ch. 2, Doyle).<sup>7</sup> The Abbot may issue directives for purposes of his own, but that is compatible with the Dependency thesis, as Raz mentions. The crucial point of the thesis is that the authority must intend to take into account the reasons that apply to the subjects individually in giving his directives.

When the monk agrees to live under the Rule, he is under authority because he has accepted it, and his acceptance is grounded in reasons

---

<sup>6</sup> I believe that exemplars of virtue are not only crucial in moral training, but can play the central role in a form of moral theory I call exemplarist virtue theory. I outline such a theory in “Exemplarist Virtue Theory,” forthcoming, *Metaphilosophy*, and give a detailed example of the way such a theory can be developed in *Divine Motivation Theory* (Cambridge University Press, 2004).

<sup>7</sup> *The Rule of St. Benedict*, trans. by Leonard Doyle (1948), (Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Press, 2001).

he had prior to his acceptance of the Rule. Benedict offers the monk a second order reason to follow the Rule, and the Rule gives the monk a reason to obey the Abbot, and to accept the Abbot's authority to inflict the punishments given in the Rule for violations of the rule, including public apology for certain minor offenses, eating and praying alone for more serious offenses, and excommunication for the most serious offenses. So both the authority of the Rule and of the Abbot satisfy Raz's Normal Justification Thesis. Benedict says:

It is love that impels them to pursue everlasting life; therefore, they are eager to take the narrow road of which the Lord says: Narrow is the road that leads to life (Matt 7:14). They no longer live by their own judgment, giving in to their whims and appetites; rather they walk according to another's decisions and directions, choosing to live in monasteries and to have an abbot over them." (ch. 5, Fry).

The Normal Justification thesis also implies conditions under which an authority loses legitimacy. Because of the modern suspicion of authority, this is an issue that now gets considerable attention, but Benedict has a different worry. His concern is that the fact that the Abbot is elected may not be enough to establish the legitimacy of his authority since the whole community might conspire to elect one who will consent to their "evil ways" (ch. 64). If that happens, it is the responsibility of the local bishop or ordinary Christians living nearby to intervene "to prevent so depraved a conspiracy." But a modern reader will ask, what if the Abbot is abusive and violates the Rule? There does not seem to be a formal procedure for such cases, but Benedict discusses visitations from other abbeys (ch. 61) and the fact that the Abbot will have to give an accounting to God for the way he governed the monastery. What Benedict expected was that the Abbot would become lax rather than tyrannical, and the history of monasticism indicates he was right. The many reforms over the centuries usually resulted in the monasteries becoming more disciplined, not less so.<sup>8</sup>

Benedict gives very clear directions on the qualities that an Abbot should have. He does not say that the Abbot loses his authority if he lacks these qualities, but he warns the Abbot again that there is a higher

---

<sup>8</sup> It is interesting that the only monastic order that has never needed reform is the Carthusians, which is also the strictest.

authority to whom he will one day have to answer. The Abbot has a strong motive to follow the Rule, and the Abbot is chosen from among monks who have already been following the Rule for many years. It is interesting that the Rule is regularly read aloud (ch. 66). Not only does the Rule specify that the Abbot must submit to the Rule, but everyone in the monastery knows that and is regularly reminded of it.

The Rule says that if the Abbot commands the monk to do something harsh, he should still do it. “The fourth step of humility is to go even further than this [obedience] by readily accepting in patient and silent endurance, without thought of giving up or avoiding the issue, any hard and demanding things that may come our way in the course of that obedience, even if they include harsh impositions which are unjust.” (ch. 7, Barry). In a later chapter he gives the steps a monk should take if the Abbot commands something too harsh (ch. 68). But there is no doubt that the Abbot does not lose authority by giving such commands, and the monk’s duty is to obey. Moreover, it is unlikely that this conflicts with the modern liberal notion of authority. Raz argues that an authority does not cease being an authority when the directives do not reflect the subjects’ first order reasons for acting. It is only necessary that the authority attempt to do so (p. 41), and Raz makes it clear that even this is an ideal. It is sufficient if the authority attempts to reflect the subjects’ reasons often enough to justify the power of the authority (p. 47). Similarly, an Abbot might not always attempt to issue directives that reflect the monks’ first order reasons, and Benedict does not say that he loses authority in such cases. But egregious abuse of power would normally be detectable.

It is significant that the monk can leave virtually any time he wants. (If he does, Benedict permits him to return up to three times). The NJ thesis gives grounds for authority in reasons the subject has for thinking that accepting the authority is likely to have a certain consequence. This does not mean that the authority loses its authority if the anticipated consequence does not occur, but in monastic communities and other voluntary communities, the subject has the option of rejecting the authority by leaving the community. That gives him a stronger basis for accepting authority because casting his lot with the authority is not an irrevocable decision. If at some point in time, the authority’s behavior leads him to reject his second order judgment about the authority, he is free to reject it by leaving.

Benedict, like Raz, rejects the No Difference thesis. Authority is not authority if it does not create new obligations. The point of the new obligations for Benedict is to create a special community in which Christian objectives and the following of the commandments of Christian life are easier to do. But it is important that obedience to authority in areas that do not directly pertain to his spiritual end as stated at the beginning of the Rule make it more likely that the monk will reach the spiritual end. So the monk may not see the connection in the particular case between the directive of the authority and the end he seeks. This might be a way in which the virtue of obedience in a monastic community differs from obedience to political authority. If the political authority issues a directive that seems to have nothing to do with their function, many of us would not trust the authority sufficiently to accept the directive as legitimate. For example, if the City Council issues an order that all persons must refrain from parking on the street on the first Tuesday of the month, citizens typically expect to have a reason to think that the directive is within the scope of authority they have agreed to assign the council— for instance, that that is street-cleaning day.<sup>9</sup> The citizen is under the council's authority in this respect even if the citizen disagrees with the need to refrain from parking for that reason, but the citizen needs reason to think that the council is issuing rules within the domain of its authority. In contrast, the authority of the Abbot extends to directives the relevance of which cannot be determined by the monk. But that difference, if there is one, is not in the conditions for legitimate authority, but rather in the trust that the subjects have in the authority. If the citizens trust the members of their city council to issue directives in the appropriate domain, their attitude towards those directives will not differ from those of the monk towards the Abbot.

Raz's theses of authority are general enough that they can ground both political authority in a modern liberal state and the tightly controlled community life governed by the Rule of St. Benedict. As far as I can see, there is nothing in the modern view of authority that would prevent a Razian liberal from becoming a Benedictine monk or nun. The liberal

---

<sup>9</sup> Presumably most of us would obey anyway to avoid a fine, but the question I am raising is whether we would think that we are obeying legitimate authority when we do so.

will be more aware of the limits of authority than we see expressed in the Rule, but I see no reason to think there is an incompatibility between the Rule and Raz's theses. Obviously, the conditions for agreeing to live by St. Benedict's Rule include much more than taking a certain line on authority, but it seems to me that those conditions have nothing to do with the view of authority *per se*. What is distinctive about Benedictine authority is acceptance of the first order reasons for living to which the Rule refers, and the degree of trust necessary to have a second order reason to accept the Rule as it is followed in a certain community as the best way to live by those reasons. What makes authority in these communities much stronger than political authority is the trust that binds authority and subject together, not the way in which the authority is justified or exercised. I see no reason to think, then, that political liberals should deny the possibility of a community that satisfies the conditions for liberal authority but has the radically pre-modern structure of a Benedictine community. The difference is in the degree of trust between authority and subject and the substance of the beliefs they share.

There is an objection to the justification of monastic authority that is sometimes made in the literature on autonomy, and is indicative of the common view that monastic authority is anti-modern. Thomas May discusses monasticism in the context of a discussion of whether a person can autonomously choose slavery.<sup>10</sup> He says the life of a monk in a rigorously disciplined monastery "closely approximates the life of a slave." (p. 138). The problem as May sees it is that the monk is not the "helmsman" in the determination of action.

The voluntary slave does not determine his action. Rather, he only determines that his action will not be determined by himself. While in cases such as the monk's this determination *may* perfectly well be justified, he nonetheless surrenders his autonomy to whatever authority he is obligated to obey." (p. 139).

---

<sup>10</sup> Thomas May, *Autonomy, Authority, and Moral Responsibility* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1998), 138-9.

May continues:

While it is true that the voluntary slave may “steer” toward slavery, once in slavery the slave is eliminated from the determination of his behavior. To voluntarily enter into slavery is tantamount to placing oneself under the direction of an “automatic pilot”; one may autonomously place oneself in this condition but cannot be said to “steer” while under this condition (p. 139).

May believes that the monk gives up his autonomy when he becomes a monk, and he seems willing to go farther than that and to say that the monk has agreed to become something that closely approximates a slave. The stronger claim surely is too strong since the monk’s lack of control over the structure of his daily life hardly puts him in the category of a slave in his daily acts. It is not as if he decided to hand over to someone else each day the decision to tell him when to rise, when to chant the Divine Office, when to do his individual work, and so on. The times for each of these activities are prescribed by the Rule and the practice of the individual monastery, and since they are invariant, they were predictable at the time he became a monk. At that time he decided to get up at 5:30 (for instance), chant Vigils at 6, breakfast at 6:30, and so on. So he is hardly subject to another person’s changeable whim.<sup>11</sup>

But May finds lack of autonomy in being on “automatic pilot.” That suggests that he thinks of the monk as someone who mindlessly goes through a routine, thereby saving himself the trouble of having to make up his mind about what to do at each hour of the day. But that is a misunderstanding of monastic life. Nobody can be the “helmsman” for her every act, so presumably the autonomous person exercises direct control over some of her acts, and indirect control over others, and a person who acts on authority justified by the Normal Justification thesis exercises indirect control over the acts that fall under that principle. The issue is which acts are direct and which are indirect, not whether there are any instances of the latter.

The answer to that question depends upon what a person’s first order reasons for action are. He might have reasons to act that are important

---

<sup>11</sup> Actually, the monk’s level of direct control over his daily activities is at least as great as the control persons have in the typical eight-hour daily job. The hours in which the monk does not have direct control are just distributed differently.



to him, and he might judge that he is much more likely to act upon them if he does *not* exercise direct control over many day-to-day acts which, according to his own beliefs, are of trivial importance. In the chapter from which the above passage is taken (ch. 6), May defends the position that authority is compatible with autonomy, and he accepts the Normal Justification thesis.<sup>12</sup> So suppose a person has first order ends the probable attainment of which requires acting on authority in a domain including such things as when one rises, what and when one eats, and what prayers are said on certain days. Then, given that May accepts the NJ thesis, he should agree that that person would be justified in acting on authority in those cases. And since he believes that authority is compatible with autonomy, he should agree that the person would be acting autonomously. It seems to me, then, that May can deny that the monk is autonomous only if he thinks that the monk's first order ends themselves contradict autonomy. That would mean that autonomy is not a principle or value that says an agent should be governed by his own reasons; it precludes the possession of certain reasons. I find this implausible if autonomy is something valuable, and in any case, it goes counter to the presumption of political liberalism that persons are permitted to determine their own ends.

## VI. MODERN AUTHORITY, MONASTIC AUTHORITY, AND RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY

Our foray into the Rule of St. Benedict has some interesting implications for the relationship between modern and traditional authority, and I think it can help us understand the justification of authority in the modern world outside the walls of a monastery, including communities that are neither monastic nor political.

Treatments of authority virtually always interpret modern authority as differing from pre-modern authority in (a) structure and degree, and (b) the principles used to justify it. Indeed, it is generally assumed that the contrast in (a) can be explained by a contrast in (b). That is, the

---

<sup>12</sup> May, 136-7. May argues for a revision of Raz's Dependency thesis in that chapter.

explanation for the striking change in the strength and range of authority in the modern period is that the modern liberal interprets authority as deriving from the individual's authority over herself, whereas nobody would have justified authority that way before the modern era. Instead, pre-moderns believed that all authority comes from God. I think that the Rule of St. Benedict shows that this assumption is mistaken. The structure of Benedictine authority is obviously pre-modern, yet it can be justified on the same principles that justify the modern liberal state. The differences in the outcome of the application of those principles must therefore be due to other features of the community over which the authority governs. I have proposed that the difference is in the content of the first order reasons for the sake of which authority is accepted, and the degree of trust between authority and subject. If I am right about that, liberal authority is no more justified by reference to the authority of the individual than is Benedictine authority. I am not, of course, suggesting that Benedictines should think of authority in their communities as justified by Razian principles. But those persons who accept such principles should judge that Benedictine authority is legitimate for those with the relevant first order ends. As I mentioned, they might personally disagree with those ends, but a mark of political liberalism is the presumption that individuals have the right to set their own ends. With that assumption, it is very hard to see on what grounds the political liberal can claim that authority in a Benedictine monastic community is illegitimate.

In spite of the fact that Benedictine authority is considerably stronger and has much greater scope than the authority of the modern state, it has some of the central features of a constitutional democracy. Authority exists for the sake of the governed, the Abbot is elected, and the Rule has a function similar to that of a constitution. We are used to thinking of these features as accompanied by other features of a representative democracy, and so it may be surprising to see how unlike a democracy an authority structure with these features can be. The difference in the trust between authority and subject is no doubt related to other differences, in particular, the fact that the constraints on political authority mentioned at the end of section II are not applicable in many communities. Political authority must apply to large and often diverse populations, and there is no escape from it. It cannot be assumed that the subjects have common ends, with the exception of the recognition of basic human rights, but

some of these are designed to protect the subjects from the authorities rather than from each other. Historical memories are of abuses of power, and so modern political thought tends to be motivated more by fear of bad authority than by desire for good authority. With these constraints it is no wonder that modern accounts of political authority attempt to not only ground authority in the rational will of the individual subject, but they also aim to minimize political authority as much as is feasible. In contrast, authority in a monastic community is not accepted as a necessary evil, but as a means to obtaining goods for the subjects, and the historical memory is not dominated by stories of tyranny. Because the communities are small and voluntary, they do not need to operate with the constraints necessary for governance over large and diverse populations. But if I am right, these features do not affect the principles justifying authority, but rather the form it takes in different communities.

This suggests that since Razian principles do not dictate that authority has a particular structure— e.g., a democracy, it is possible that there are other communities whose authority structure is justified on modern liberal principles, but which differ significantly from the structure of governance of the modern state because of a difference in the ends of the subjects and the level of trust within the community. Given that a subject can be reasonable in obeying pre-emptively the directives of a trusted individual, it also seems possible that a subject could have a reason to obey a trusted institution whose historical tradition is one with which she identifies, and which she reasonably believes is a better guide to her ends than she is when she is acting on her own. That is, she might reasonably trust the institutional embodiment of a tradition with an authority structure that issues directives governing some part of her life more than she trusts herself in that domain. If so, Raz's NJ thesis justifies her in acting pre-emptively on the commands of the institutional authority.

Institutions such as the Catholic Church have some of the features of political authority and some of the features of monastic authority. There are obviously many shared first order reasons for action within the Church, but the number of subjects is huge and the level of trust varies. But I suspect that authority in some religious institutions such as the Catholic Church might be justified on Razian principles even though the structure of authority in these institutions is nothing like that of the

modern liberal state. In any case, the way in which the structure and strength of authority is separable from its justification is worth further investigation for the case of religious authority.

I think that these considerations also suggest the desirability of further work on the connection between authority and autonomy, particularly in the case of religious authority, and probably also moral authority. Kant thought that the autonomous person needs self-discipline in order to avoid having a heteronomous will, a will determined by inclination— either one's own or that of a dominant other. The autonomous person is rational, and it takes self-control to be rational. Sometimes the autonomous person needs to have the self-discipline to obey when her own reason tells her to do so. At least, I have not yet seen a convincing argument that a monastic does not have such a reason, nor that monasticism takes away autonomy. If it does not, that leaves open the possibility that there are other forms of authority that are compatible with autonomy.