

# ***THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES***

## **Examination of Authoritarianism as a Source of Knowledge**

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### ***Abstract:***

*This paper examines authoritarianism as a source of knowledge in critical form. Knowledge as the conscious acquisition and comprehension of believed facts that are truly justified comes from many sources like perception, reason, memory, testimony, senses, intuition, instinct, revelation, anamnesis, experience, spiritualism and authority. However, the type of knowledge the philosophers are interested in is propositional knowledge which answers the name only when belief, evidence and truth according to Hospers and Scheffler are satisfied as conditions. Authority is the reference point of pronouncements, laying down what is right or wrong and deciding what to be done. In education, authority refers to an individual regarded with such power and right to make pronouncements sequel to his mastery, records and achievements in an area of knowledge. Authoritarianism is, therefore, making use of the force authority; blind subjection and submission to authority in terms of knowledge without verification and objection. It sources knowledge of course, as in revealed and textbooks plus verbal utterances but results to conventionalism, conformity, lack of self-reliance, closed mindedness, docility, inconsistency and ruling out the three conditions of knowledge. So, authoritarianism should only guide individuals to become authority not subject them to.*

***Keywords:*** Authoritarianism, Source, Knowledge

### **1. Introduction**

Verily, knowledge comes from many a source among which is authority, the basis of authoritarianism. Before going ahead to the examination of authoritarianism as a source of knowledge, it is necessary to see the two key concepts: "knowledge" and "authoritarianism" in their contextual and operational attributes. Later, comes how authoritarianism sources knowledge, then hence critical examination.

Its note worthy that knowledge is of three broad levels: knowledge of acquaintance, knowledge of knowhow and knowledge of know that which is propositional knowledge. The last one 'know that' is the one under treatment and which philosophers are interested in (Maina, 2011).

### **2. The Concept of Knowledge**

Many scholars define knowledge in their different perspectives. Knowledge is defined as a collection of facts, information, and or skill acquired through experience or education; the theoretical or practical understanding of a subject ([www.enwikipedia.org/wiki/knowledge](http://www.enwikipedia.org/wiki/knowledge)).

In another vein, [dictionary.reference.com/browse/knowledge](http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/knowledge), (2011) defines it as acquaintance with facts, truths, or principles, as from study or investigation; general erudition.

The above definitions consider only the outlook of the concept "knowledge" ignoring the other intricacies of stilts and attributes. Therefore, knowledge can be seen as the conscious acquisition and comprehension of believed facts material and immaterial that is truly justified. For this, knowledge is a synonym of consciousness, acquaintance, apprehension and apperception. However, the concept of knowledge is central to grasp (Kneller, 1984).

Turning to the sources of knowledge, different but similar assertions are presented by scholars.

[www.philosophy-index.com/sourcesofknowledge](http://www.philosophy-index.com/sourcesofknowledge) identified the following as the sources of knowledge:

- Perception
- Reason
- Introspection (through internal self evaluation)
- Memory

- Testimony

On the other hand, [www.mrhoyestokwebsite.com/sourcesofknowledge](http://www.mrhoyestokwebsite.com/sourcesofknowledge) gave the following as sources of knowledge:

- Senses
- Authority
- Reason
- Intuition
- Faith (revelation)
- Instinct
- Racial memory
- Extrasensory perception
- Anamnesis (recollection from a past life)
- Spiritualism and the occult.

However, Hospers, (1956) said that the sources of knowledge are:

- Sense experience
- Reason
- Authority
- Intuition
- Revelation
- Faith

The three sets of sources above are almost saying the same thing though with slight changes and in different words. Notwithstanding, despite their inconsistencies, it is clear that there is no objection on the sources, only that unnecessary repetitions are visible especially in the second one. For instance, “faith/revelation” and “spiritualism and the occult” should be merged. “Instinct” and “intuition” should be merged, and “racial memory” and anamnesis” should be one for that they mean the same thing.

However, it is hardly to produce any source of knowledge that isn't mentioned above, so they can be considered as the sources of knowledge.

No fact is really considered as knowledge until it satisfies the three basic conditions that warrants knowledge. Hospers, (1956) and Scheffer, (1965) were of the view that anything called knowledge must be true upon the evidence backing it and person (s) must have belief in it. Therefore, belief, evidence and truth are the three conditions of knowledge.

### 3. The Concept of Authority and Authoritarianism in Education

According to Schofield, (1972) the word “authority” comes from the Latin word “auctoritas” which simply and literally means “presence” or “bearing”. In operational context, it means the presence of a dignity” which warrants an idea of associating authority and power. In other words, authority operates with power, which indicates that there are persons and systems that control affairs in educational sector and the knowledge itself. Peters, (1958) sees it as a word with aura about it but not a kind of force as many think. He suggested that authority deals with conformity that is confined to men. He then says that the idea of “right and wrong” in human action introduces the idea of authority of set standards of the “right/correct”, originate them, apply them, decide them and make pronouncements. Originally, he said, authority as a word was derived from “auctor” and auctoritas” which referred to a producing, inventing, or cause in the sphere of opinion, counsel or command. The authority is therefore, the reference point of pronouncements, laying down what is correct and deciding what is to be done. In education too, the same principles apply, such that an individual can become authority in an area of study by virtue of his competence and mastery in the area.

The two scholars have at least congruent views on authority, though with less emphasis on “system as an authority” as greater part of their argument signals individual (person) who is “an authority”. A system deciding what in educational realm can also be called authority as a sources of dos and don'ts, in to which one can find himself to be called “in authority”, but that's not the interest in this piece.

In short, “Authority” in educational context, is the one who is regard as having right to make “pronouncement” sequel to his mastery, training, competence, records, history, success and personal achievements in a specific area of knowledge; just like to say R.S. Peters is an authority in philosophy of education or chief Gani Fawehinmi is an authority in law. It can also mean the decision making system or body in, and of educational “institution”, and any other source that “dictates” knowledge in its many spheres together with laws of its affairs.

On the same exist, authoritarianism seems different from authority but yet similar. Mayer, (1958) was of the view that:

“Authoritarianism is a term in philosophy which states that the source of knowledge can be found in an absolute standard; this standard can be represented by an ecclesiastical organization, a sacred book, the persona; will of a god, history, or the laws of society. In education, this implies a stress upon formal standards”.

Of course, authoritarianism means making use of authority to stress upon formal standards in the knowledge itself and its policies, regulatory laws and structure.

In another vein, [www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/44640/authoritarianism](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/44640/authoritarianism) described authoritarianism as the principle of blind submission to authority, as opposed to individual freedom of thought and action. It is also the habit of conduct, thought, and speech expressing total submission to rigid principles and rules. [www.thefreedictionary.com/authoritarianism](http://www.thefreedictionary.com/authoritarianism) said it is clear that when

authority is enforced, authoritarianism emerges. Therefore, the two terms authority and authoritarianism are simply synonyms. However, many thinkers pair authority with responsibility as the later is a substance of the former.

#### 4. Authoritarianism as a Source of Knowledge

Under this sub heading, emphasis would be stressed on assertion that authoritarianism sources knowledge or otherwise, some with closed mind, some with criticism.

www.mrhoyestokwebsite.com/sourcesofknowledge stated that:

“We can’t experience the past or personally repeat every experience, so we must trust the specialists, they accept, though not blindly, the discoveries they record for us. The key thing with knowledge from authority is that it can be “double-checked” and the work of scientists and historians is continually being “double-checked” as other workers in the same field (even some time us in the classroom) repeat their experiments or investigations”.

This view recognizes knowledge from authority for reasons but skeptical on its reliability.

In another vein, www.mrhoyestokwebsite.com/sourcesofknowledge records that:

“Authoritarianism is a source of knowledge that gives us knowledge from reliable person or source that has acquired that knowledge from another source. To this opinion, knowledge comes from authority “reliable person” but without bothering to trace authority’s source let alone its authenticity.

Mkpa, (1990) also stated that:

“Sometimes, people acquire knowledge by accepting it on the authority of its source. One may have such confidence or faith in an individual or source that any information from that source is considered. In that case, one may need not to subject that information to verification... similar information may be found in such an authoritative book like encyclopedia. Any knowledge found in that source should be accepted without the need to verify its validity. Mathematical theorems and principles that have been applied to the solution of a variety of scientific problems should be accepted without skepticism on the authority of their sources. Certain Standardized or authenticated information such as the speeds of light and sound, the laws of motion, and the law of relatively should be accepted authoritatively”.

He went ahead to lament that revealed knowledge is authoritative as it is genuine and free from error.

“Revealed knowledge is divinely disclosed to man in the holy books of religions as the word of God, the contents of the holy Books are believed to be incontrovertible because God does not make mistakes and should not give wrong information”.

His statement denotes that authoritative knowledge like revealed is intact as God divinely disclosed to man. But the question is, is it the same God that revealed all the claimed holy books in different religions?

Is not disputable anyway that authority sources knowledge but with negative implications as said a scholar that “authoritarianism is also a large factor in the development of belief systems. Reliance on authority as a source of knowledge leaves societies open to all kinds of distortion of the truth (www.en.wikipedia.org/authoritarianism).

Similar opinion was also presented by Prabhupada that to accept authority does not mean one should be blind but the real source of knowledge comes from authority (www.vaniquotes.org/wiki/sourcesofknowledge).

The last two citations have no much to be criticized as they conform to our perception on the whole issue.

Schofield, (1972) also opined that:

“Like Plato’s artisans, they cannot pass beyond the boundaries of opinion, and they have to rely on the interpretation of reality, which is provided by authority. They cannot experience reality for themselves. But Authority can only convey “ideas of reality’ to the masses by the use of language”.

If one must rely on authority for knowledge, precisely, interpretation as carried in the above citation, then there is every tendency of distortion of information before it reaches the receiving end for the use of language and conveyance from one point to another are involved.

Knowledge from authority should be thoroughly verified since it’s not justified by proofs, arguments and evidences because it is authoritative from a revered source (Gribble, 1966).

Hospers, (1956) was of the view that authority cannot be a primary source of knowledge because there is no certainty that the authority’s statement is true without investigation even if all his previous statements are proved true. Besides, belief in authority does not guarantee truth in statement and pronouncement, therefore if accepted, then, it is at a risk.

Mayer, (1958) was of the view that:

“The rational and irrational sides of authority as source of knowledge that it creates literacy, but not independent thinking; it develops sameness, but not individuality; it stresses vocational efficiency, but not self-examination; it exalts the average, but not the natural aristocracy of talents”.

He went ahead to say that authoritarianism as that which defeats the true end of education, namely, the development of genuine individuality.

Peter, (1966) however, agree that when somebody want to know something, he consults authorities which means authority still serves as the genuine source of knowledge, though in knowledge there is no ultimate appeal to authority for validity unlike in legal system.

Peters, (1959) was saying that:

“Nothing is true or right just because someone who is an authority says so, so teacher is just provisional authority because he occupies the position only before he put others in his position, by equipping them, with critical tools to enable them manage even without him, which takes a lengthy time”.

For example, it will take a long time before a pupil can argue to fault his mathematics teacher on a proof. In another vein Peters, (1959) was of the view authority must be exercised by one generation, so that another generation can learn to do without it. But if this is to happen, authority must be exercised in a reasonable way. This means authority is must, but reasonably. However, he maintains that the progressive see the use of authority as inefficient and immoral way of passing on skills, information and treating a child.

Hirst and Peters, (1970) believe that experts in the various branches of knowledge are just provisional authorities, not ultimate as there are no final arbiters in the sphere of knowledge, their pronouncements must be treated with skepticism and caution.

There is no doubt anyway, based on the available facts that authoritarianism is one of the sources of knowledge in spite of all the criticisms and perhaps, its shortcomings in sourcing authentic knowledge without repercussion. In fact, a greater percentage of the knowledge we acquire today comes from authority that we dare not challenge for reasons like convention, laziness and tradition, especially the documented knowledge in print and electronic publications. Authoritarian nature of some teachers today contributes to that because some never accept any information different from what they gave to their students, especially in exams, so even understanding is not encouraged, not talk of critical reasoning or verification of the information. We also have an attitude of blind belief and submission to published facts as if it's not human being that make them in their form, so this act earns us nothing more than total reliance on authority as a source of knowledge.

### **5. Critical Examination of Authoritarianism as a Source of Knowledge**

Having seen all the discussion above, it is obvious that authoritarianism sources knowledge, but the issue is: is it reliable? Should we answerably accept any knowledge from authority as true? Would authoritarianism always fetch true knowledge?

There is as a stilt, conventionalism in authoritarianism which is characterized by favouring absolute obedience to authority, as against individual freedom and autonomy, propagandizing the noble light of ideology.

The three established conditions of knowledge (belief, evidence and truth) cannot be harmonized practically when it comes to authoritarianism. There may be belief and assumption of truth, but evidence would not be there. In fact, if knowledge is justified with proof upon its supposed truth and belief, then, it's no longer a product of authoritarianism since it is not accepted blindly without evidence. The principle of freedom is also necessary without which the pursuit of truth would be impossible.

In authoritarianism, the students are expected to be conformists to accept whatever the teacher or any authority say as absolute truth; hence, they are not required to think for themselves because they are subjected to the pronouncements of the authority. It is indirectly indoctrination since people are deprived of right, freedom and autonomy as they are only taught "what" to think while should be "how" to think.

Authoritarianism as a source of knowledge also produces students who lack self rebalance and initiative for the simple fact of preconceived truths, absolute standards, memorization, drill and discouraging independent decisions. Since critical thinking is curtailed, then resistance to change is inevitable.

Authority interprets and conveys ideas through the use of language, if so, is accuracy assured in conveying the ideas? Besides, if the knowledge from authority as such is just accepted, wouldn't the fact be distorted? As human being, the authority may inject in the information personal and subjective interest to suit one's desire or send to people a sort of propaganda.

By authoritarianism, we mean sourcing knowledge from reliable person, is the reliability in mastery or competence honesty? Whichever, there is every tendency of slip of tongue or pen from the authority which necessitates verification since there is, no matter how minute, a level of imperfection in humanity if at all the authority is honesty enough to tell naked "truth"

Turning to the theory of causality, if we trace the successive causes of authorities, we would arrive at the first authority; then who is he and how did he became one? If there is at all any explanation, that he became through any other means besides authoritarianism, then, it is apparent that any other person now and in future can become one through similar efforts, so there should be no total reliance on authority for knowledge.

New issues are born by the modern age which the authorities didn't even know let alone to work on them, how do we come up with them if authoritarianism is relied upon? Or must we fold our arms and wait for contemporary authorities to do for us?

Authorities often contradict one another, especially if they have different stands. For example, the words of the authority of religion "A" would go contrary to those of religion "B", of who we accept, all being authorities? Even if there is no relativism, the two extreme opposites cannot be right at the same time.

However, we must accept knowledge from authority to some extents because we cannot witness to prove the past, not can we prove all the statements and laws written down by authorities for that life is short. For instance, if we are to investigate all statements and laws in pure and natural sciences, it will take more than our lifetime. Yet, knowledge from authority should be accepted with skepticism and verified if possible.

### **6. Conclusion**

Of course authority sources knowledge and should be accepted to a certain degree, but would not be free from being subjected to verification to ascertain its truth. By the way, it should not be totally relied upon, rather, be used as a guide for individuals to know how to become the authorities. Authoritarianism indeed has a rational side that it source knowledge, but it also has irrational side with repercussions especially when blindly conform to.

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