Reason and Reliance...

The next two significant modes of moral evaluation are reason and analysis and authority. Reason and authority function throughout all the human processes of thought. In our ethical method, these two spokes, like individual and group experience, are taken together. They provide a system of checks and balances. One is not meant to exclude the other. All the evaluational resources, of course, are interrelated but some more so than others. Here we will show first how the spoke on reason and analysis contributes to ethics and then we will discuss the spoke on authority.

Reason and Analysis...

Reason is as broad as human life. We can see it at work everywhere from science to poetry, though with varying degrees of ascendancy and in varying forms. Although our reasoning process should be qualified by
the challenge we address, reasoning always means thinking thoroughly and clearly. In ethics, one would rightly expect reason to take on and reflect the nature of moral experience. The ancients saw *recta ratio*, right reason, as the guiding light of ethics. But if it were to function in the same way as it does in other areas of experience, such as in mathematics, where reason can reach high levels of abstractness, it would mean that moral experience is not distinctive.

The Pythagoreans of ancient Greece believed that numbers and proportions constituted the basis of reality. This was their dominant metaphor. Since our thought bears the marks of our metaphors, we find that the Pythagoreans took the idea of the mathematical *mean* and, in ethics, made good behavior the mean between two extremes. Metaphor and mathematical bias are not useless, but they introduce a certain abstractness or artificiality that does not always meet the demands of moral meaning. The Pythagoreans were an early influence on "right reason" theories in ethics. These theories see the good only as that which is rational and intelligible. The mathematical basis of the Pythagoreans gave a highly intellectualistic cast to the idea of reason. But a mathematical paradigm falls short because it is not conducive to a conception of ethical reason that integrates intellect and affectivity. Cold, naked reason can be cruel. Cold calculations of "acceptable levels of unemployment" and counts of "sorties" in war may be mathematically sound but miss the moral tragedy of the unemployed and the dead.

To explain the proper role of reason in ethics, we will list some of its tasks and show how it relates to other evaluational processes. We will also clarify the distinctiveness of reason as it functions in the mind of the ethicist.

There is no substitute for homework and preparation in ethics or in any field. This kind of labor is reason's task. Reason has more to do with perspiration than with inspiration. It is not content to wait in passive intensity but throws itself into the task of truth-finding. *Reason is working intelligence.* Thus, we combine it with analysis to emphasize its laboring function. Analysis means to break up, or to break open. Early impressions in ethics and elsewhere come to us largely in undifferentiated globs. Reason and analysis break them up and sort them out so that we can know what we are talking about. Often the task is mammoth but always essential. We can quickly see that this spoke on *reason and analysis* relates especially to the *what* question in the hub of the wheel model. If you are going to talk about the moral advantages of affirmative action, you had better know what it is and how it affects the labor pool. You had also better know all the objections to it. If you do not face the objections to your position, you do not know your position. Reason struggles with all the objections. There was a period
in the Middle Ages when it was felt that the best way to know your position is to look first at all the objections to it that you can find. There was wisdom in that tactic.

Reason has its work cut out for it in every area of moral experience. Among its critical tasks are: to find and compare ethically meaningful data; to search for the unasked questions; to test the regnant authorities before which minds may be playing dead; to cope with the inevitable partiality of our knowledge; to jog the lazy memory; to fight the allure of too facile consensus; to break the stranglehold of habituation; to check our myths and other filters; to solve the conflict between and among principles; and to tend to the reformulation and correction of principles in view of new experience and moral insight. In a word, reason works to be critical and to fight the superficiality that is the fruit of homework undone. Reason can also be the forebear of creativity. It is not pure luck that fully explains a creative contribution. Hard-working reason and analysis are often the preparing factors for creative insight. Reason can serve to prepare the mind by bringing critical thought to the discovery of shallow consensus and ideological blinders. It can provide the research and the solid information base that are the prerequisites for creativity. Reason must also make sure that the mind stays in process and that it does not take its ease by pretending that reality is immobile.

Reason and Affection...
Unlike all other disciplines and studies, ethical reason is distinctly in pursuit of moral values — those which touch upon what we are as persons. In the previous spoke, we discussed how values are appreciated affectively. We do not reason about person-related values like we reason about mathematical theorems. We are affectively engaged from the start. Our vested interests, our characters, our mood and emotional state always influence moral reasoning. This is not necessarily bad. Well and sensitively tuned affections are a component of moral wisdom.

Reasonable or Rationalistic...
Reason has two verbal relatives that are scarcely on speaking terms. They are reasonable and rationalistic. One has felicitous connotations, the other does not. Reasonable, the good relative, is not just an adjective that relates to reason. It has a broader meaning and is instructive about the role and nature of reason. To be called reasonable is a compliment. No one would want to be considered anything else. Wrong, maybe, but never unreasonable! “Reasonable” connotes an openness to reality and ideas, balance and thoroughness. In a notable way, this sense of reasonableness emerges in the “reasonable man” criterion employed in court decisions. Such usage exemplifies jurisprudential confidence in
the reasoning mind and in the category of reasonableness. It amounts to saying that the reasonable is equivalent to the good, the legal, the proper. The implication is that what is reasonable is moral. The word "reason" does not bear all these connotations in general parlance. But it should bear them in a thoughtful ethics. Reasonable, on the other hand, does not always imply the serious work that reason does. With the right qualifications and with the full meaning of ethical reason in view, it is possible to say that the reasonable (i.e., morally informed reason) and the good are synonymous, an idea that can be found in certain "natural law" theories of ethics.

"Rationalistic," the other verbal relative of reason, cannot easily be caught in a precise definition, but it implies that reality can adequately be grasped by and confined to our rational abilities. Sole concentration on reason turns rationalistic. In an Irish colloquial expression, rationalistic thinking is "entirely too smart." It is reason shorn of its necessary modesty and limits. Rationalistic thinking in moral matters is cut off from collaborative affectivity and it can easily become heartless head. Rationalism is too fastidious and neat, prone to tidiness even when the truth is sloppy. Rationalistic views are not sufficiently hedged by a sense of mystery and by the modesty that mystery engenders. The hubris of rationalism is to think that the mind can take the full measure of the real. The rationalistic is overconfident reason. Reason can be misused in moral evaluation, even though it always presupposes hard work. Sartre’s words are again relevant: the worst evil of which we are capable is to treat as abstract that which is concrete. Rationalistic thinking does just that. We may lose the good of persons in abstractions.

Rationalistic notions of "efficiency" can smother the good of persons. Rationalistic theories of sexuality, for example, have become so removed from sexual reality as to label such actions as masturbation to be always wrong. Similarly, rationalistic reasoning has defined sex in exclusively heterosexual terms, thereby missing the possibility of wholesome and humane homosexual relationships. Rationalism devises tidy schemes and denies validity to whatever does not fit into its artificial grids.

Because it can be abused and because it is work, reason can be less revered at times and can find itself in recess. Our age is inclined to bypass the laborious horizontal explorations of ethical reason and to move by a vertical stroke to hasty moral conclusions. The philosopher E.W. Kluge is of the opinion that "if there is one thing that characterizes the current moral scene, it is the abandonment of deliberate reason in favor of unreasoned personal preference." Such an approach leaves us at the mercy of whimsey even though whimsey may defend itself in terms of conscience. Ethics in any age must defend the proper
role of reason, and especially in an age when reason recedes before the impervious emotions of personal opinion.

Authority and the Art of Reliance...

After all the praises of reason and analysis have been sounded, it is still probable that most of the moral conclusions we make are not the result of a reasoning process but are directly due to the influence of someone we admire or love, or to the influence of traditional and accepted wisdom. Principles and other teachings that we have never questioned, the pressures of society and customs, influence us through the authority they contain. Authority is a formidable influence and power over us. Its force can direct our behavior and govern the moral decisions we make. Reliance on authority of one kind or another is probably the most common way of moral evaluation. We all have our own authorities and even those who feel highly independent and liberated are not immune. We are more docile than we suppose.

Through our cognitional experience we may come to understand and appropriate what we accept on authority. Acceptance, however, without critical examination is an unfortunate commonplace. Sometimes we rely on authority to avoid making our own moral decisions. It seems less burdensome to us to devolve our moral responsibility upon those in authority. But authority can attempt to control the thoughts and actions of others without giving convincing or conclusive arguments, and it can defend positions that need correction. It could simply be maintaining a taboo. Authority must be open to moral growth. If it insists on its positions regardless of new moral insight, it can become a brutal force. Because authority can be wrong, it should be open to change when new moral insights emerge. It may be holding on to ideals that were never morally sound or to principles that are no longer tenable or applicable. Some moral positions and principles may be based on originally misplaced values, prejudiced opinions, and faulty reasons that have taken on the appearance of respectability through tradition. Moral wisdom is a process of growth. What was once held may not with the same force be held today.

Reliance on authority in doing ethics, then, might seem at first to be a problem, a defection from the work of intelligence. However, in presenting authority as one of the evalutational processes of ethical method, we are viewing it as a positive resource for understanding. Like all the other evaluational resources illustrated by the spokes of the wheel model, authority can be used or abused. The study of authority is fraught with some special difficulties. There are times in our individual lives and in our society that we may indulge in the illusion of thinking ourselves free and independent of all authority. Let us first see reliance
on authority as a fact of life and then move on to see its potential for use and misuse in ethics.

**Types of Authority...**

Persons, even sophisticated ones, are conspicuously prone to “buy a bill of goods” with uncritical acceptance. There are a number of perennial authority sources from whose sway none of us entirely escapes. Let us look at some of the more potent forms of authority that operate in our social world, namely, peer authority, expertise, religious and crypto-religious authority (including nationalistic authority), tradition, and charisma.

First, there is the domineering authority of peer group. It is no easy task to stand apart from its dictates. What the peer group does among young and old is to establish an evaluational orthodoxy from which it takes courage and strength of mind to depart. Staying within it is not without its alluring satisfactions. It seems that everyone wants to belong to a club with all its rules, regulations, and amenities. There is an identity that comes through the peer group. Moral value positions are closely linked to our sense of identity and to the emotions that go along with it. Dissenters against established positions are perceived as threats and outcasts. Hence, the peer group consensus will be re-enforced by a number of sanctions ranging from excommunication to ridicule. This phenomenon of peer group authority is as visible in countercultural groups as it is in the board rooms.

Second, the perennial authority that has taken on a revolutionary new force in an increasingly complicated and data-loaded world is the expert. Clearly the expert is an essential authority in a time when the idea of universal knowledge is seen as chimeric. The expert is the only relief from swelling complexity. The problem with experts is that they can become oracles and command even our common sense to recede before the prestige of their special qualifications. But experts are not beyond questions and accountability, for they, too, can have vested interests and their knowledge can be biased and misleading. Some estimate that one-third of all surgery done in the United States is unnecessary. Sooner than get second and third opinions, people bow to the expert and accept an unnecessary invasion of their bodies. In some ways expertise has gone mechanical in our day with the advent of the computer. The computer adds the attractiveness of apparently unalloyed objectivity.

Third, authority always operates powerfully in religious and crypto-religious contexts. Wherever the aura of the sacred accrues, there is a tendency for critical judgment to give way to awe. Since moral experience brings us into contact with the phenomenon of sacredness, one could expect religiously tinged authorities to operate here. The major
religions have been active in assuming an authoritative and divinely inspired role in matters moral. We find authoritative moral teachings and scriptures in most religions: the Vedas of the Hindus, the Koran and the Hadith of the Muslims, the Dharma of the Buddhists, the Tanak and Talmudic writings of the Jews, and the scriptures of the Christians. Religions meet a socially felt need in spelling out the meaning and shape of the good life.

What is important to note is that much that is numinous in character is located within the apparently secular; this fact is crypto-religion. Supposedly secular attitudes found in nationalism and patriotism have been recognized as “full of Gods,” in the words of the ancient Thales. A nation is no merely pragmatic association of persons but, rather, a social entity endowed with a sacred mystique that can evoke complete devotion from its citizens even to the point of the “supreme sacrifice” of their lives. National heroes assume sainted roles. The foundational documents and constitutions of nations acquire a sacred quality. Official communiqués are often accepted by the press as scripture. Those who hold high office achieve an authority that has hallowed overtones. In classical times the national leader or emperor was thought to be divine. (There was a slight modification of this when the Emperor Aurelian renounced his claim to be a human God and declared himself with only slightly less pride to be no more than God’s vicegerent on earth.)

In the modern state the sacrality of the leader is more muted, though it shows through in inaugural ceremonies and in the protocol that attend officials of state. We have not yet outgrown the sacralized tribe. Sacralized civil authority is extant. It is visible in caricature form in the “super-patriot” whose zeal could only be described within the categories of religious devotion. It also can appear in more subtle form in the conceptualization of citizenship. Religious authority, whether implicit and crypto or explicit and denominational, remains a major force in the valuations of both private and political ethics today.

Fourth, tradition is another common authority. Tradition breeds familiarity, and the familiar is likely to seem reliable and true. The “traditional” has some likely claims to reliability, since that which has stood the test of time is probably not without some merit. However, since error can become as traditional as truth, this authority too must be tested.

Fifth and last, charisma is a widely influential form of authority. The term need not be limited to the magnetic qualities of political figures, but it can refer to the personality strengths that are present more or less in almost everyone by virtue of which we can sway and influence others. In any group, charisma will function and will exert influence on the group members. Charisma has many ingredients. The attractiveness
of persons, the attitudes and confidence they project, the emotions they engender, and so forth, all give persons influence or charisma. Achievement lends charisma, as does the mere fact of being famous. Nations can gain charisma because of inspirational achievements or simply because of their technological prowess. The forces that generate charisma might be worthy or irrelevant. For this reason, a sensitive ethics must alert persons to the presence of charismatic influences in their thought processes. Charisma can function negatively or positively, but the point here is that it is a pervasive, persuasive force where persons interact and evaluate. No workplace or professional setting is without the ambivalent power of charisma.

Authority and Personal Responsibility...
As we can see, authority functions in myriad forms. The human mind accepts on authority ethical positions that it has not thought through. Yet, it seems that all forms of traditional authority are coming under attack in our present-day society. That there has been a change is undeniable. Authority, today, must show that it is trustworthy and that it promotes the good. Authority must be earned and evaluated and proved authentic. It does not come ex officio. There is progress here because there is a slight move away from magical forms of oracular authority that prevent moral discussion and moral growth.

Excessive dependence on authority is a one-sided approach to ethics, an approach that ultimately represents a despair of our capacity to know. However, in an integral approach to ethics, there is a healthy reliance on authority. The authority found in principles or in persons with experience may enlighten others. And sometimes a person who grows in moral experience will come to realize the wisdom of authority.

Proper reliance on authority is both a practical necessity and a community-building form of trust. Dependence on authoritative sources is required by our finitude. Complexity is expanding exponentially and, as a result, knowledge is more specialized. The dream of comprehensive knowledge has passed and any attempt to retrieve it would condemn us to superficiality and frustration. But reliance on authority must be critical and not naive. Since authorities can disagree, they must be tested and seen to be credible and trustworthy. We should always be aware of the authorities influencing us. The spoke on authority represents one of the many evaluational processes by which we grope toward the truth. It is not the only one. When possible the mind should not rest with accepting something as true on the authority of another. It should attempt to know what it accepts. Just because a committee has been assigned to study some subject, that does not mean that they have become infallible. The whole committee may have become sidetracked or dragged into uncritical "groupthink."
Although authority should not do our thinking, one of its positive roles is pragmatic. We often need the help of others and in accepting authority we get that help from those sources that we judge reliable. Because authority is a personalizing and community-building form of trust, there is a deeper meaning to it. The tendency we have to rely on the opinions of others is more than pragmatic. It is also a manifestation of our social nature. In a matter of merely technical expertise, the trust element will be less important than the indicators of genuine knowledgeability. But when authority functions at a more personal level, a process of trust is in effect. Valid moral authority functions only in an atmosphere of trust. Good leaders and managers and teachers are those who earn trust and don’t just assume and demand it.

Authority in moral matters operates powerfully within a matrix of personal exchange. We will trust the value inclinations of persons whom we find worthy. Contrariwise, those factors that hinder personal relationships also block the functioning of authority. The deeper and fuller a relationship is, the greater will the individuals in that relationship become authorities to one another. Friendship breeds trust in the value orientation. Even if we rarely think of it, a true friend is a moral authority.

Acceptance of authority is not just an impersonal acceptance of a source of information. It is also a personal response to the personal source of that authority and a favorable assessment of the moral qualities involved. Thus it is a socializing act. Authority is not an alien intrusion on the autonomy of a rational person. Rather, it is part of a system of reliance and trust that increases our contact with persons and intensifies our relationships. This reality is a normal part of developing moral consciousness. The inability to accept authority influences is not only a social and psychological problem; it is a problem in ethics. Yet, total reliance on authority shows diminished moral growth and a lack of personal responsibility.

**Concluding Reason/Analysis and Authority...**

Reason and reliance on moral authority, though apparently as antithetical as independence and dependence, are conjoined in the service of moral truth. Each is a way in which our pluriform consciousness seeks attunement with the moral good as it emerges in the swirl of social historical existence. Reason and authority are both broad concepts. The fuller meaning of each for ethics will be seen in the elaboration of other parts of this ethical method. Each is a check against the other and must be seen as operating in a balance for greater moral truth. Reason is involved in the whole expository phase of ethics and is a collaborative force in most of the evaluative processes. Authority operates in a number of ways aside from those mentioned in this section. Principles, for
example, come to us with the authority of cultural acceptance and they are often religiously and legally fortified. The discussion of group experience will illustrate the ways in which the individual is drawn into the moral patterns of the group. Here the attempt has been to show, as any exposition of ethical method must, how the mind should pursue moral truth through the work of reason and the virtue of reliance.