

# **Power and Authority: A Philosophical Reflection on Bertrand Russell Thoughts**

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## **Abstract**

This work studies Russell's concept of power and authority with a view of understanding his intent and signification in human society. The study adopted textual and expository analysis. Russell, coming from the context of the political and social upheaval that prevailed in the world during his time specifically in Germany, former Soviet Union and Italy that experienced authoritarian and dictatorial regimes which led to the abuse of the fundamental human rights of the citizens. The abuse of the rights of the citizens in these countries and the world over was caused by the misapplication and misunderstanding of the concept of power and authority which Russell tries to deal with as it affects the individual or citizen in practical human society. The findings of the study revealed that Russell is interested in the understanding and analysis of nature and functioning of authority in relation to the individual in the concrete human society and not interested in mere abstract, conceptual or theoretical analysis of Authority. Russell considers political authority in terms of government and used authority and government interchangeably. Political authority or government that is able to obtain the obedience of the people it governs. Russell refers to a legitimate government as a government that governs with legitimacy. And to obey government is to legitimize it as obedience government by way of consent and acceptance.

**Keywords:** Authority, Government, Legitimacy, Obedience, Power.

## **Introduction**

The concept of power is one of the most fundamental concepts to state, nation or political society and politics which cannot be divorced from any serious studies that concern the state, government and/or politics. The concept of state naturally presupposes the existence of some sort of administration, governance or government, hence, the term state is often used

interchangeably with government, for example, when we talk of state/government land or property; state/government approval; state/government authority or authorities, and so on. From the foregoing expressions, we can observe how state and government can be considered to be the same, even though in certain respects the state may stand for the entire nation where the government refers to the administration in the state.

The organization of a state demand politics in terms of issues, policies, debates and conflicts/controversies and attempts at decisions in a way resolutions and compromises with a view to a better organization of the state for wellbeing of the citizens and development of humanity and human essence, consequent upon good governance. But the question of politics is always the question of power, which in other parlance is described simply as the quest for power, that is, the question of how to conquer power, exercise and maintain the same. The question of power is above all, the question of who holds power, that is, which is empowered to handle the affairs of the state. Hence, politics is often considered or described in terms of struggle for power, and this accounts for J.H. Price's description of political study as "study of the exercise of power".<sup>1</sup> Given this fundamental connection between power on one hand, and state, government and politics on the other hand, we cannot overemphasize the need for a clear and distinct understanding of power in our political affairs in the modern state today. The importance of concept of power makes any misconception or misrepresentation of it dangerous to politics for muddled or confused conception of power is certain to lead to confused and chaotic politics.

Related to the concept of power is yet another socio-political concept which is authority. The concept of authority is one concept that is so connected to and interrelated to that of power with the result that in our everyday life there is the tendency to be confused with the two concepts. In the daily political practices, it seems very

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<sup>1</sup> J.H. Price, *Comparative Government*, (London: Hutchinson, 1975), Pg. 19.

difficult to ordinary citizens to separate an act that emanate from authority from one that is due to power. In simply terms, the question is whether an exercise of power is the same with the exercise of authority and if so, there is no point talking about them as two different concepts. Observing the erroneous tendency on the part of ordinary citizens to confuse these two concepts of power and authority, D.D. Raphael maintains as follows:

It is important to be clear about the distinction between power and authority, since they are often confused, in language as well as in thought. We speak of status giving a Minister 'power' to do this or that, when mean giving him authority. Similarly we speak of going beyond one's 'legal power or acting 'ultra vires', where again the word 'authority' would express our meaning more clearly.<sup>2</sup>

It is this tendency as observed in D.D. Raphael above about confusing the concept of power with that of authority that necessitates our task which is primarily concerned with an analysis of both concepts with a view to making a clear distinction between the two, so as to eliminate any possibility of doubt about their distinctness, without losing the sense and understanding of their relationship or relatedness.

The problem then is, to what extent should we get along without a clear understanding of the real meaning of power and its proper relationship with the state on one hand; and on the other, what kind of state can we have where the knowledge of the relationship between power and authority is muddled up and raped in a misconception that denies us a proper understanding of the differences between them? The ultimate problem here consists in the danger of continuous existence of the state in perpetual crises such as those that are connected with friction between the Executive and the Legislature; between the Executive and the Judiciary, and of course, most times as we have experienced in recent times herein Nigeria, the crises between an

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<sup>2</sup> D.D. Raphael. *Problems of Political Philosophy*, (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1979), Pg. 66.

uncompromising or never bulging President resulting from unpopular policies, legislation, and acts considered by the majority of the citizenry to be inimical to them and the society at large.

Such friction/tension results from lack of proper distinction between the concepts of Power and Authority. The attendant question is to what extent can such a state in perpetual crises, either in terms of frequent industrial action or strikes, or in the form of constant or frequent threats of impeachments of either by Federal Legislature against the president or the State Legislatures against the Governors, guarantee the desired progress and Development? It is our believe that enlightened understanding of the nature and role of the concepts of power and authority, their relationship and differences will go a long way in reducing these political tension and crises in the State.

Given the fact as we have argued earlier, that lack of proper understanding of the terms, power and authority militate against desired progress and development in the state by creating frequent or an unending crises in various forms and shapes that often times threaten the co-operate existence of the state, a better and proper understanding is bound to have the desired effect of impacting positively on the state, vis-à-vis peace, progress and development. This is so, for as we have observed somewhere above, some troubles or crises besetting the co-operate existence of the state, whether in the form of friction between one section of government and another, as in the relationship between the Executive and the Legislature, or between the executive and the Judiciary, or even between the Federal and State Authorities, can be traced to misconception of what amounts to peoples', the citizens' mandate in the manners of power (empowerment) and Authority (Legitimacy and Authorization). When things, ideas, concepts and notion get mixed up, in practical terms/operations, conflicts and crises are bound to ensure.

### Power and Authority: A Conceptual Labyrinth

The concept of power is such a diffuse one that appertains to everything, much as we can talk about power in relation to everything, both organic and inorganic things. Power as an attribute of what is, that is, whatever exists, is a household word. This is why many a time we hear such expressions as the power of the politician, the power of speech, the will power, horse power, electric power, and even “bottom power”.<sup>3</sup> Notwithstanding this diffuse nature of power concept, the real meaning and nature of power seem to be elusive as the commonness of its use fails to ensure common knowledge and understanding of it. It is based on the above that the clarification of the concept becomes apparent.

It must however be stated here that, the kind of power that preoccupies us in this paper is political power, and with the adjective or predicate 'political', our task in understanding power takes a different or special dimension. It is perhaps noteworthy at this juncture to observe that in the rest of our work here, by the term power even without the qualifier political, we intend the same, that is, power in the political sense. Having said this much, the question that demands our attention here is what in general is political power?

The concept of power in this context as Agundu argues is “one of the perennial social political concepts that have elicited responses in the field of political science and political philosophy”.<sup>4</sup> Etymologically, power derived from French term *pouvoir* and Latin *potestas*, with the verb *pouvoir*, *posse*, and *potere* in Latin, meaning 'to be able'.<sup>5</sup> Following this etymological meaning, power can simply and generally be said to be 'ability', and this explain the use of the concept of power variously and the

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3. This connotes the use of sexuality by women to get things from men. It also connotes a person's use of sexual attractiveness to gain advantage get things done either in business or any facet of life. See Chimamanda Adichie's *We Should all be Feminists* for her discourse on the fact that bottom power is no power and that women who use bottom power are not actually powerful.

4. Agundu, O. T. *Social and Political Philosophy in the age of Globalisation*. (Abuja: DonAfrique Publishers, 2019), Pg. 316.

5. D.D. Raphael, *Problems of Political Philosophy*, Pg. 68.

fact that it vary widely in relation to everything that may have a claim to action or effect, just as we have observed earlier above as in power of speech, power of love, in fact, power of anything imaginable that possesses the capacity for an effect in a certain way that impacts on or constrains the other. Away from the etymological definition of power, Thomas Hobbes are cited in Agundu argues that “power is the present means, to obtain some future apparent good”.<sup>6</sup> Citing Keith Dowding, Agundu further argued that power in the general sense (which he called 'outcome power' or 'power to') is the ability of an actor to bring about or help bring about outcome”.<sup>7</sup> Deducing from the above, one can argue that power is the ability to bring about an intended state of affairs.

Generally speaking, whenever the concept of authority is mentioned in ordinary discussion, people simply think of one form of control or the other. Mere mention of authority evokes in the ordinary people, the masses or the ordinary citizenry, the idea of an individual or group of individuals, or in general terms, an institution concerned with control of people of certain groups or people of the society in general through the threat of force or violence in a way of getting the ordinary people comply with the wishes of the individuals or group of individuals in this case considered to be in authority or seen to be authoritative.

This state of affairs with regard to the layman's opinion of authority, and also the opinion of some educated individuals regarding authority, has often resulted in authority suffering a massive misperception and misconception. This common man's position on authority seems to be a product of ignorance of the true meaning and nature of authority, and given this common ignorance, the tendency is to confuse the abuse of authority in the way it functions in the society, with the essence of it in general. Referring to this erroneous phenomenon, S.I. Udoidem asserts that

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<sup>6.</sup> Agundu, O. T. *Social and Political Philosophy in the age of Globalisation*. Pg. 317.  
<sup>7.</sup> Agundu, O. T. *Social and Political Philosophy in the age of Globalisation*. Pg. 317-318

“the problem is that people often confuse the necessity of authority with the manner of exercise of authority”.<sup>8</sup> When they are not satisfied with the exercise as in the case of misuse or abuse of authority has led many socio-political thinkers and philosophers to dedicating much of their time to a proper understanding and analysis of authority in order to set things alright. One of such thinkers and philosophers concerned about a clear understanding of authority and its dynamics in the human society is the encyclopedic British philosopher, Bertrand Russell.

Etymologically, authority derived from Latin word *auctoritas*, and according to Hanna Arendt, “... *auctoritas* derives from the verb *augere*, 'augment', and what authority or those in authority constantly augment is the foundation”<sup>9</sup> As we can observe here, the closest English equivalent of the original Latin version is the verb “to augment”, and to augment is to make larger, bigger, greater, or to increase the number, that is, to add to what is already in existence. In everyday use of English, “to augment” is used in connection with increasing or adding to what is not sufficient, what is being managed, as for instance, augmenting one's salary means adding to the meager salary for better management of economic life and existence. Authority by this analysis therefore is that which increases or that which makes something bigger, larger or greater, in another parlance a repository, an icon or symbol of something.

Away from the etymological conception of authority, the concept of power and authority are not to be used as meaning the same thing despite their interrelatedness. Agundu corroborated the above when he argued that power should not be confused with authority. He further stressed that while Hobbes defines power as the present means that can be used to get to some future

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8. S.I. Udoidem, *Authority and Common Good in the Social and Political Philosophy of Yves Simon* (USA: America Press, 1988), Pg. 6.

9. Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1977), Pg. 121-122.

apparent good, he defined authority the right of doing an action.<sup>10</sup> What that means is that one can have power and not have the right to exercise such powers. The concept of authority has been defined as “the legitimacy and capacity to secure willing obedience. According to Shively, as cited in Agundu, authority is power based on agreement that the person or group has the right to issues certain sorts of command and that those commands should be obeyed.<sup>11</sup> Accounting for the components of authority, Agundu intimated that:

Technically, authority consists of two important components, namely, power and legitimacy. Legitimacy of rule or decision implies that the members of the society treat that rule or decision as beneficial to the society as well as themselves. So they tend to be willing to abide by it. Power on the other hand involves the capacity to get a decision obeyed against their will.<sup>12</sup>

### **Russell on Power and Authority**

Having considered the concept of power in the preceding subsection in general terms, tracing it from its etymological meaning to the point of consideration of it by various thinkers, and socio-political philosophers, here we intend to consider the concept of power as against the background of our author's conception of it. In this connection, Bertrand Russell considers power in the following terms:

Power may be defined as the production of intended effects. It is thus a quantitative concept: given two men with similar desires, if one achieves all the desires that the other achieves, and also others, he has more power than the other. But there is no exact means of comparing the power of the two men of whom one can achieve one group of desires, and another: e.g. given two artists of whom each wishes to paint good pictures and become rich, and of whom one succeeds in painting good pictures and the other in becoming rich, there

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10. Agundu, O. T. *Social and Political Philosophy in the age of Globalisation*. Pg. 317.

11. Agundu, O. T. *Social and Political Philosophy in the age of Globalisation*. Pg. 325.

12. Agundu, O. T. *Social and Political Philosophy in the age of Globalisation*. Pg. 325.

is no way of estimating which has the more power. Nevertheless, it is easy to say, roughly, that A has more power than B, if A achieves many intended effects and B only a few.<sup>13</sup>

In Bertrand Russell's conception of power above, we find a definition of power similar to that of Thomas Hobbes who conceived power in terms of "ability" in relation to obtaining some future desire or good. Both authors consider power in terms of desired effects, and the problem here is since it is the power communicator, that is, the prospective powerful person or one who is to be adjudged powerful is the one that determines what amounts to desired effect, as in Russell, as well as in Hobbes, their general concept of power remains subjective. In effect for example, a criminal whose desire is to loot and maim his victim should feel free to consider himself powerful when he realizes his objectives, irrespective of the fact that his fellows who can achieve the same fit but distaste such acts as either immoral or inhuman do not consider themselves as such. The subjectivism of power concept and the problematic in comparing one's power with another's make the concept of power need be understood together with what kind of power that is sought or exercised. We have observed earlier above this necessity of the context of power where he maintains that as long as the discussion on power concerns the individual or groups, the context can be easily understood, but when we seek a general theory of power in the society at large, the problem of understanding the context for objective appreciation of power sets in.

Bertrand Russell discusses different types of power in his book, *Power*, using different criteria at different times. He talks of naked power as one that derives from natural instinct for power which he considers bestial, flagrant and illegitimate in a civilized society. Under naked power, he lumps various forms or uses of

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<sup>13</sup>. Bertrand Russell, *Power*, (London: Unwin Human Publishers, 1975), Pg. 24.

power that fail to society which respects the freedom and dignity of man, and considers totalitarianism and dictatorial regimes of all kinds as the modern face of naked power. He categorizes the exercise of power derived from people's customs and habit as traditional power, and making a distinction between traditional, revolutionary, and naked power he argues thus:

The distinction between traditional, revolutionary, and naked power is psychological. I do not call power traditional merely because it has ancient forms: it must also command respect which is partly due to custom. As this decays, traditional power gradually passes over into naked power. The process was to be seen in Russia in the gradual growth of the revolutionary movement up to the moment of its victory in 1917.<sup>14</sup>

Russell also talks about another form of power which he calls hereditary power, which according to him “has given rise to our notion of 'gentleman'”, and he associates this with both aristocracy and monarchism. Here, he maintains that, “the qualities which are admired, where power is hereditary, are such as result from leisure and unquestioned superiority.”<sup>15</sup> Power in democracy does not escape Russell's analysis and in this regard, he says that; “political power, in a democracy, tends to belong to men of the type that differs considerably from the three that we have considered hitherto.” Here he is referring to the traditional, revolutionary and naked power distinctions, and on the nature of a powerful politician, he states that; “a politician, if he is to succeed, must be able to win the confidence of his machine, and then to arouse some degree of enthusiasm in majority of the electorate.”<sup>16</sup> From the foregoing and within the context of political power in democracy, we can observe what summarizes Russell's conception of political power in the modern society. For him, the power of a politician in a modern democracy has to be based on his, the politician's, ability

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<sup>14.</sup> Bertrand Russell, *Power*, Pg. 28.

<sup>15.</sup> Bertrand Russell, *Power*, Pg. 30.

<sup>16.</sup> Bertrand Russell, *Power*, Pg.32.

to "win confidence . . ., and arouse . . . enthusiasm in a majority of the electorate', and with this we can conclude this subsection and turn our attention to general conception of authority.

Before we delve into Russell's conception of authority as contained in his work entitle *Authority and the Individual*, it is important to observe that Russell is interested in the understanding and analysis of the nature and functioning of authority in relation to the individual in the concrete human society, and not necessarily interested in a mere abstract conceptual or theoretical analysis of authority. He sees the necessity to authority as consisting in the natural instinct of cohesion, for if man by his nature has to live or cohere with his fellows, the need naturally arises from an authority charged with the responsibility for maintenance of natural justice, equity and good conscience. Yet, he feels that authority in this regard need not be unlimited but rather should be such that the individual should have enough freedom individual initiative and personal development. In his own description of his intension in this work of his where he talked about the exercise of authority and power in relation to this which happened to be his Lectures on the subject of "Authority and the Individual", individual's/citizen's human freedom, innovativeness and social cohesion in human existence in practical society, he states thus:

The fundamental problem I propose to consider in these lectures is this: how can we combine that degree of individual initiative which is necessary for progress with the degree of social cohesion that is necessary for survival? I shall begin with the impulses in human nature that make social co-operation possible.<sup>17</sup>

Considering the above quotation from Russell on his intentions regarding authority and the individual, we can observe that his concern is about the necessary limit of authority of the

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<sup>17.</sup> Bertrand Russell, *Authority and The Individual*, (London: Unwin Paperbacks, 1977), Pg. 11.

government over the individual. The question of necessity of authority is to Russell as foregone conclusion, though he believes as he argues severally that authority though necessary, has to be put in check or be limited to certain degree in order not to suffocate the individual. Too much authority for Russell militates against the individual initiatives necessary for both individual progress and development as well as that of groups and of course, of the human society at large. Given this belief of his, the problem then as he declares above is to find the proper and essential limit of authority healthy for human progress and development, and this he considers under human instinct for cohesion, that is, the instinct for association based on sociability inherent in mankind.

In his practical consideration of the concept of authority, Russell considers political authority in terms of government and as such he uses the terms authority and government interchangeably, and in this his work to be precise, he talks more of government than authority. In relation to social cohesion and government, he states thus:

Men of the New Stone Age were already quite different; they had government, authorities capable of exacting obedience, and large-scale enforced co-operation. This is evident from their works; the primitive type of small-tribe cohesion could not have produced Stonehenge, still less the Pyramids.<sup>18</sup>

Russell therefore considers government in terms of authority, though one that is able to obtain the obedience of the people it governs. This, in other words, refers to a legitimate government and as such we can say that political authority for Russell is the government that governs with legitimacy, since to obey government is to legitimize it as obedience legitimizes government by way of consent and acceptance. Though it is sometimes contestable to assert this doctrine of obedience as the legitimization of government for the fact that obedience may in a

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<sup>18.</sup> Bertrand Russell, *Authority and The Individual*, Pg. 23.

given case not be a voluntary one, like when one obeys to avoid a threat of punishment or unfortunate and undesirable circumstances, yet obedience remains the only practical way of legitimization especially where it is difficult to ascertain who obeys out of fear and who obeys willingly. Legitimacy on the other hand means consent and therefore whoever obeys the command of the other consents to the right of the commander to give his command, and the right to give or to have one's command obeyed is authority, otherwise the command has to be questioned by the person commanded. In the final analysis, we can infer or deduce that political authority is for Russell the control which is necessary for the maintenance of "social cohesion necessary for survival" of the individuals constituting the political society.

### **A Philosophical Reflection on Russell's Conception of Power and Authority**

We have finally come to the point of considering the relationship between power and authority, and this means in effect that though as we have maintained earlier that power concept is completely different from that of authority, yet they equally relate. But before we go into considering their relationship proper, we have to first consider their proper distinction in the present subsection and then move on to the next to consider their correlation. To this end therefore, we have to assert immediately that they are so different that power is such an independent concept from authority for it can exist without authority. Power as an ability to get people carry out ones wish is like influence which can exist without authority, which in turn is the right to be obeyed. Both concepts demand some kind of obedience, but obedience in the case of political power is without constraint, coercion or force and as such obedience to the powerful is not compulsory but voluntary, while on the other hand one in authority deserves to be obeyed as a matter of right and therefore it is mandatory to obey the authority that be. Hannah Arendt on the distinction between authority and power argues as follows:

Since authority always demands obedience, it is commonly mistaken for some form of power or violence. Yet authority precludes the use of external means of coercion; where force is used, authority itself has failed. Authority, on the other hand, is incompatible with persuasion, which presupposes equality and works through a process of argumentation. Where arguments are used, authority is left in abeyance.<sup>19</sup>

In the foregoing, we observe an apt distinction between authority and violence demonstrating the fact that authority is not questioned. We also gather from the above, the authority does not seek to persuade or argue with the subordinate for any attempt to do so reduce authority to parity with the subordinate meant to take orders from the authority. Authority is authority because, in principle it has to be obeyed, and in practice because it is obeyed. Disobedience is therefore the greatest threat to authority for it annihilates it as it renders it non-functional. Obedience to authority comes from inner conventions about the necessity of the authority. It is fundamentally moral for one obeys properly out of inner conventions rather than out of fear of punishment by laws. We can summarize the difference between power and authority by asserting that given their different definitions and descriptions above, an exercise of power is an exercise of "ability" while an exercise of authority is an exercise of "right", a right subject to the authority's readiness to do what is common desired, the common good with the promise and hope of obedience of the citizens to one's action.

Whatever argument we may have observed in differentiation of power and authority, the fact remains that in practical terms power and authority are correlated. Existence of power as we have seen in quite abstract as mere "ability", and it is calculated, appreciated and understood in practical terms so much as it is exercised successfully in effect. In this regard, political power can

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<sup>19</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, Pg. 92-93.

exist without political authority much as it is observed in its effect as human exercise or activity. But authority on the other hand, exists in abstract, formally, theoretically and conceptually either in an institution, individual or in a group of individuals, and only becomes real, concrete, and practical when and only when it commands obedience in an unquestioned, uncontested or unchallenged manner, and without argument, persuasion or coercion. When this takes place, that is, when authority is obeyed, it means that power has been exercised. On the other hand, for authority to be real, genuine and complete, power is needed because obedience to authority has to take place without force, persuasion or coercion. Once force or coercion is engaged, what is supposed to be authority becomes violent and as such unfit to be described as political authority for its lack of civility which politics proper entails. Authority therefore resorts to violence when it fails to maintain itself, for violent authority is not really authority but a failed authority, which resorts to violence and relies on the instrument of force and not on instrument of politics which is primarily communicability with a view to persuasion and conviction.

Power can and does exist independent of authority because the acceptance, consent and obedience which authority needs in order to be exercised are the elements of political power in its effect, for an effective use of political power presupposes acceptance, consent and legitimacy, otherwise how can it impose itself without degenerating into violence. This last argument is based on the concept of political power as that which precludes obedience due to violence, and in this case power is defined as the ability to let the other carry out one's wishes orders. Finally, we can conclude this subsection by saying that power is the substantiation of authority.

This can be a lesson to us Nigerians where often we hear people talk about political violence which with the analyses we have gone through makes little or no sense. As we observe in Hannah Arendt, when politics fails, violence speaks violence and

when violence speaks politics becomes silent, and given the fact that the essence of politics is to avoid the violence of the chaotic state of nature, cohabitation between politics and violence becomes a monster.

### **Conclusion**

In concluding this paper, it is important to remind ourselves of the salient points encountered in the course of the studies involved in it. We have been able to see how the concept of political power differs from that of authority after trying to understand each in its own right. We have been able to see that political power excludes violence and such power associated with violence in Russell's own description is a naked power which according to him is military and bestial. We also discovered that authority as such, that is political authority proper, does not require and does not operate with violence for the essence of authority is its right of obedience, and its effect derives from its legitimacy which implies people's consent, acceptance or approval as having the right to be obeyed.

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