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## WHAT PEACE IS

**Mortimer Adler**

3 of 3

6

These simple facts help us to understand the distinction between authority and force, or power; and also to see that any principle of government must involve *both* in order to, operate effectively for the end it was intended to serve.

The authority of a rule, or of any person upon whom a rule confers authority; consists in its voluntary acceptance by those who will be subject to decisions rendered according to the rule. They accept the rule voluntarily because they recognize its operation to be for their good.

In matters which are strictly private, every man can decide what is for his own good; but in matters which affect the individual's well-being *because* they affect the welfare of the community, or the common good, the individual cannot wisely insist upon his own decision. If he is wise enough to recognize that some principle

of government, some rule of procedure, must be adopted to reach decisions for the common good, then he will acknowledge the authority of the decisions thus reached.

A rule, and everything which follows from it, has authority, in short, if it elicits an individual's obedience because his own reason tells him that the rule obligates him for the good of the community and ultimately for his own good. Wherever we find a man obeying a command even though no force existed which could compel him to obey, we perceive the operation of naked authority. The man who willingly submits to naked authority does so because he finds himself bound in conscience to obey, and for no other reason.

But naked authority and obligation in conscience cannot be depended on in all cases.

In any community we are always likely to find some men who will tend to disobey whenever their private judgment differs from the decision reached by a public rule. Even a man who recognizes the authority of the rule in most cases may be tempted to flout it on some particular occasion. Hence, authority must be clothed with power or force sufficient to compel obedience on the part of whoever does not obey through moral obligation.

The mere threat of coercive force may often suffice, but unless the sanction be forcefully applied when the threat fails, the threat will soon become empty. For coercive sanctions to be effective, the force on the side of authority must predominate by a large margin over the force that any individual or group of individuals can muster.

The authority with which any principle of government is invested is the authority of the community over its members. If individuals did not recognize the dependence of their own well-being on the existence of the community, neither the community nor the institutions of government indispensable to it would exercise any authority over them.

The authorized force which government applies should also be the force of the community, however it is recruited and wielded. But here there is always likely to be an opposition of forces, since public force need only be exerted against those who use private force when they seek to resist authority. We must, therefore, distinguish between *authorized* (public) and *unauthorized* (private) force, according as the force defends or opposes the community's rules of procedure.

Unless a monopoly of authorized force exists on the side of government, and unless the officers of government, exercising the only authorized force in the community, also exert a substantial predominance of real power, government will fail in its work. The peace of the community will be tom by factions in civil strife. The community may be destroyed. This group of men may no longer be able to live together peacefully.

## 7

Effective government must combine authority with force. Naked authority will not keep the peace because men are men, not angels. When Alexander Hamilton wisely said that “if men were angels, no Government would be necessary,” he had in mind the need for coercive force to support the authority of rules “It is essential to the idea of a law,” he wrote, “that it be attended with a sanction; or, in other words, a penalty or punishment for disobedience.”

But why will not naked force do the work of government? Why must government have authority as well as power? If one man or a few have enough power to compel all the rest to obey their commands, will not the community be maintained and the peace be kept?

History gives us the answer. The tyrant maintains the community only for the sake of exploiting it. Tyranny always consists in the exercise of power for the private gain of the man possessing it, rather than in the interests of the community.

Whoever feels the oppression of the tyrant, whoever recognizes the injustice of the exploitation he suffers, will obey only under the threat of force. The tyrant’s commands will have no authority, and his unauthorized use of force can have only one result, in the long run or less. When the people are finally driven to prefer the risk of death to further oppression, they will employ the only expedient available to them—the use of naked force against naked force.

Tyranny breeds civil strife, just as powerless justice permits it. From the point of view of peace, it makes no difference whether men must resort to violence in order to obtain justice or are able to employ violence in order to do injustice. Neither force without authority nor authority without force can protect the community from civil strife. Neither can perpetuate peace.

We have seen what must be done about disagreements on public policies or about actions for the collective good.

Another and equally important trouble zone includes all those disputes between individuals concerning the rights or privileges to which they think themselves entitled and which, in their opinion, others have violated; or concerning the injuries which they allege other men have done them and which these other men deny having committed.

A third sphere of controversy includes differences of opinion between private citizens and officials of the government concerning charges of misconduct brought by either against the other.

These three areas of practical dispute are fundamentally alike. They involve issues which cannot be settled in the way scientific controversies are usually resolved—by appeals to reason and evidence.

A scientific controversy can always wait until enough evidence accumulates or until the reasons become clear enough to warrant a unanimous verdict from all those competent to judge. It does not matter if such judgment must be suspended for a century or two. But serious practical issues have an urgency which requires decisions to be more speedily reached.

Moreover, the very nature of practical problems, concerning contingent matters, makes it doubtful that waiting, even if we could, would help. Evidence and reasons can never solve such problems with demonstrative certainty. The parties to the dispute are always likely to feel justified in persisting in their opposite opinions about what is right or wrong, just or unjust.

Since evidence and reason cannot be relied upon to settle such disputes, only two other remedies remain. One is resort to *private* force. The other consists in the operation of government, and includes the threat of *public* force.

Of these, the first, if it is the only expedient available, will tend to disrupt the community. Only the second can keep men living and working together peacefully (despite the fact that the very business of living and working together necessarily involves them in all sorts of disagreements and disputes.

Quarreling cannot be prevented from occurring; but, having occurred, it can be prevented from turning into disruptive violence. To do this, three things are indispensable. (1) No *private* person can be permitted to determine which particular laws he will accept as binding on himself. (2) No individual can be trusted to act as judge in his own case when he becomes involved in dispute with another. (3) No party to a dispute can be relied on to comply with a decision which affects him adversely; nor can the other party be allowed to use his own private force to compel performance.

## 9

Government must, therefore, provide three institutions for the peaceful settlement of quarrels between members of a community.

1. There must be laws of two sorts:
  - a. General rules which determine the procedure to be followed in the adjudication of disputes; and
  - b. General rules which determine the standards of right and wrong according to which specific instances of conduct can be judged faultless or blameworthy.

It makes no difference whether these general rules express the long prevalent customs of the community or whether they are expressly formulated and enacted by one or more persons who are given legislative authority by the community.

2. There must be *courts* which are designed to render an impartial verdict on the disputed issues and which, according to the laws of the realm, give judgment, commanding certain penalties to be imposed or certain compensations to be made.
3. There must be *sheriffs* or *police* with authorized force and sufficient power to execute the judgment against the party adversely affected by the court's decision.

These are minimum, not maximum, requirements.

In addition to these three elements, there is obvious need for police power competent to bring offenders to trial or to compel disputants, under certain circumstances, to submit their differences to a court. One might also add the deterrent and preventive efficacy of an adequately constituted and efficiently operated police power. But the main point for us to consider here is that *nothing less* than

these three governmental institutions can discharge the task of keeping peace.

Unless there are laws—though these be rudimentary and incomplete—courts cannot even begin to operate. Once they begin to operate, a body of laws will grow through the accretion of judicial decisions.

Unless courts are adequately supported by police power, their judgments remain impotent, as impotent as any form of naked authority. And if courts devoid of a powerful executive arm cannot effectively prevent quarrels from turning into violence how much less effective will be any set of rules, customary or enacted, which elicits no obligation except from those whom it binds in conscience.

Herein lies the whole difference between moral precepts and civil laws. The former bind only in conscience. The latter also impose a moral obligation in so far as just men recognize the rules to be just, but they do not stop there. In addition, they wield the big stick of coercive sanctions against any member of the community who does not acknowledge the authority of the community's customs or its enacted legislation.

Finally, if laws and courts lacking, police power represent the impotence of naked authority, police power which operates independently of laws and courts is a violent imposition of unauthorized force—an instrument of tyranny.

## 10

The institutions of government can be regarded, in large part, as machinery for keeping quarrels on the level of conversation, and for sustaining conversation until disputes are resolved. When resolutions are reached, the machinery of government monopolizes the force required to translate words into action.

The use of language, as well as brawn, differentiates man from all the other animals. Men can settle things by words as well as by fists and stones or guns. Cicero wisely observed that

There are two ways of settling disputed questions; one by discussion, the other by force. The first being characteristic of man, the second of brutes, we should have recourse to the latter only if the former fails.


There can be no peace among the predatory beasts of the jungle. There can only be a temporary truce when the brutes are well fed or exhausted, or their prey is in hiding.

There can be no war or strife among the members of a single beehive or ant mound, for they are instinctively determined to perform the acts which sustain their community.

But between men there can be either peace or war. They cannot live in interaction without quarreling, but they have two ways, not one, of settling their differences. Since they are both *rational* and *animal*, they can make peace or war—the one by discussion, the other by force.

Yet this is not the whole truth, for we must add that men can have peace only through the institutions of government. Without government, the conversation too frequently fails. Without government, discussion cannot be assured that its conclusions will prevail.

War can be made by force alone. When they make war, men can act like brutes, and worse than brutes because reason makes them craftier. But peace cannot be made unless force implements discussion. When they make peace, men behave reasonably, but never without a reasonable respect for *brute force*.

Human government, composite of law and force, reflects man's composite nature—his rational animality. Precisely because it corresponds to human nature, government and nothing but government makes the human community and keeps its peace. 

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