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EDITOR *John Hospers*

MANAGING EDITOR *Sherwood J. B. Sugden*

POLITICAL AUTHORITY¹

"Power . . . is something very different from authority. The distinguishing mark of the latter is that it is exercised only over those who voluntarily accept it: if the rulers have authority over only a part of their subjects, they may receive from that part a strength sufficient to subject the others to their power."

—Bertrand de Jouvenel
Sovereignty, p. 32

"I propose . . . to call one's own labor and the equivalent exchange of one's own labor for the labor of others, the 'economic means' for the satisfaction of needs, while the unrequited appropriation of the labor of others will be called the 'political means'."

—Franz Oppenheimer
The State, p. 25

The use of coercion is the sign of a *lack* of authority.

This has been said many times before, by thinkers writing from a variety of backgrounds. The example chosen as the first motto for this essay, taken from Bertrand de Jouvenel's *Sovereignty*, is part of one of the best articulated versions of the thesis, and it depends upon a distinction between authority and power.

Politics, on the other hand, seems to involve recourse to at least the threat of coercion. This, too, has been said over and over again. The citation from Oppenheimer states the view rather starkly, but quotations could have been taken from a wide variety of writers and a wide variety of political traditions. Politics involves (or perhaps *is*) a struggle (or an orderly quest, if you like) for power.

These views are not, of course, held by all political thinkers. They do not stand without argument. But the arguments have been advanced, and they are relatively persuasive. They yield a problem, however.

Given this understanding of politics, and this understanding of authority, what in the world are we to make of the notion of political authority? Don't these explications of the notions in question render the idea of political authority incoherent? How can the idea of "authority," which is supposed to be distinguished from power, ever consistently be modified by the adjective "political," which is said to involve power in a fundamental way? This is not easy to understand, especially when it may at first seem that the most vivid examples of authority are to be found precisely in the political realm.

It seems to me that much is revealed by examining this problem very carefully. I submit that the understanding of authority exemplified by the quotation from de Jouvenel, and the understanding of politics represented by the quotation from Oppenheimer, are far too helpful to dismiss. The notion of "political authority," on the other hand, is too much a part of the common idiom to throw out immediately as ill-informed. A close examination should at least explain how such a notion could have evolved, if the terms in question have the meanings attributed to them by people like de Jouvenel and Oppenheimer.

It may seem that the problem is to be resolved by indicating ambiguities in the terms used. Indeed, there is at least enough vagueness to make one uncertain about whether, for example, more than one "sense" of the term 'authority' may be at issue. But simply to call attention to this, and then to close the matter, would fail to address what seems to me to be more important: the common element that makes understandable the use of the same term in different ways on different occasions.

Pressing a bit deeper, it may seem that the puzzle is to be resolved by suitably stipulating definitions of "political" and "authority" which will keep these terms, anyway, out of each other's way. This may be done, of course, but surely the puzzle at hand is not altogether linguistic; it is reasonable to be suspicious of definitional solutions to substantive problems.

I will begin this essay with a notion of authority like de Jouvenel's, and grant that such authority is not only legitimate, but perhaps even necessary in human affairs. I will then trace the devaluation of this idea through varying degrees of institutionalization, culminating in its political cooptation.² I shall argue, finally, that what goes by the name of political authority is the very antithesis of the legitimate and necessary element that we began with.

In sum, I shall argue that "political authority" is a usurper; it substitutes for and blocks the exercise of genuine authority, properly understood.

What is most interesting, perhaps, is that this is no accident. "Political authority" has arisen in society for a variety of specific reasons, but all of them seem to come down to this general rationale: "natural" authority is rare and precious; it has priceless trappings, valued both by those who wish to have authority and those who wish authority to be present in their communities. Such "natural" authority, however, is most often a spontaneous phenomenon. It is difficult, if not impossible, to create or control it.

It *is* possible, however, to design artifacts that simulate genuine authority in many ways; the state, I shall contend, is one such simulation. It is hoped by the designers³ that such simulations may come to be taken for true authority, so that the desirable accompaniments of authority may be won for

themselves or for their communities. Indeed, this often happens. It happens most readily when the designers themselves have genuine authority in the eyes of the community.

Finally, I shall note that one of the trappings of "political authority" that is typically deemed desirable—one of the ends, therefore, of authority-simulations like the state—is the straightforward suppression of competing claims to authority.

"Natural" Authority

To place a term in scare quotes is either to lay the groundwork for a critique, or to apologize for imprecision. In the case of "natural" authority, as I understand it here, it is the second interpretation that should be made. I shall leave the critique of this expression to others, and I confess that I will be pleased when a better expression is made available.

The excuse for using the term "natural" at all is that in this way we may distinguish between nature and artifice. One must be careful not to pack one's conclusion into one's definitions, or into one's opening remarks, so let me clarify what I have in mind by briefly mentioning two lists of things that I hope to be able to distinguish. Here's the first list:

1. What the Bible, or what the words of the Bible, have in the eyes of devout Protestants.
2. What an expert, or what the advice of an expert, has for those who regard the person as an expert.
3. What most any President of the United States, or what the judgment of most any President of the United States, has for those who genuinely admire and trust him.

These are examples of what I think of as "natural" authority.

Keep the following in mind as well, though; for there are lots of examples like them to be found in what should have been discussions of "natural" authority:

- 1'. What the Bible or the words of the Bible have vis à vis people who became Christians in order to avoid being persecuted as heathens.
- 2'. What an "expert" or the advice of an "expert" has vis à vis those who must do what he says or damage their career plans, even though they regard the "expert" as a fool.
- 3'. What most any President or the judgment of most any President of the United States has vis à vis those who neither admire nor trust him.

Whether there is *any* kind of authority involved in these last three examples may be questioned. Indeed, I encourage such questions. But I want to be conservative at the outset, at least: I want to leave open, for now, the pos-

sibility that Ronald Reagan has some kind of authority even with respect to those of us who find many or all of his judgments foolish, uninformed, dangerous, or whatever.

Perhaps the point is best put, for the moment, in this way: if Reagan has any authority for this group at all (we leave this question open, for now), it is of a kind interestingly different from the kind of authority captured in 1–3, above. It is by virtue of his office that he has this sort of authority; by virtue of whatever human design has gone into the creation of the political system within which he is given the powers, etc., that he has. Such "authority" (these, now, are the critics's scare quotes) is the product of art, of human design. Call it "artificial" authority while we all keep our eyes and ears open for a more felicitous expression. 1'–3' are examples of "artificial" authority (or perhaps it should be "artificial" "authority").

Now, there is nothing particularly wrong with making things, so I do not mean to imply that because certain kinds of authority are "artificial," they are therefore bad. I shall suggest that they are bad for different reasons.

Note, too, that Ronald Reagan and his predecessors in office are mentioned as examples of both kinds of authority, albeit with respect to different groups of people. This distinction does not, therefore, rule out of court as possible bearers of authority any of the countless presidents, kings, premiers and others who have *claimed* authority over massive groups of people. It just says we must be careful to notice differences among the relations that such leaders may have had to different sub-groups among those masses.

Having made the distinction between "natural" authority and "artificial" authority, however, I want now to defend the view that "natural" authority is a valuable—perhaps even a necessary—element in human society. Indeed, it is because I think it crucial to limit my support of the idea of authority to this kind of authority that I have taken such pains to make the distinction. Others have made grave mistakes, I think, by failing to be as careful.

Wherever people seek information from other people, they seek authority. When people look for someone from whom they hope to gain advice, they look for authority. In many respects, formulating the matter in this way—in terms of something *sought*—leaves the least room for later difficulty.

"Natural" authority, as understood here, is something that is frequently an elusive phenomenon. It is a characteristic that people may possess, but it is one that is easy to lose. It is easy to lose because it depends, in part, upon how others regard the would-be bearer of authority.

Nevertheless, those who seek authority in others understand themselves to be looking for something that may be discovered in a person. They do not

think of themselves as going around from person to person, seeking some likely candidate upon whom they may *bestow* authority. Thus the regard of others is not all that makes a "natural" authority.

"Natural" authority is, thus, an interestingly complex phenomenon. It involves these features, at least:

- (1) "Natural" authority entails the propriety of counsel or advice or even command in some area of knowledge or activity. Where it is command that is appropriate, this is because the action in question "belongs," in some sense, to the bearer of authority. The action is "his" or "hers" to take.
- (2) "Natural" authority entails being held in the regard of those with respect to whom it is exercised as being an appropriate counselor, advisor, or commander, in some area of knowledge or activity, in the sense discussed in (1).

It may be tempting to think of (2) as by itself a sufficient condition of "natural" authority, since people's disposition to accept advice, counsel or command from someone seems enough to make that person a "natural" authority with respect to those people. There is some value to this approach. Nevertheless, it is misleading, and should be avoided. When people seek authority in others, or regard others as having authority, it is (1) which explains what they seek or perceive, not (2). People do not go around seeking counsel from just any person regarded by at least some others as an appropriate counselor. Rather, they seek people who have authority—that is, people whom it is wise to consult—in the area in question. Frequently, of course, they use the characteristic mentioned in (2) as a sign that the bearer of that characteristic may have the more important trait mentioned in (1), and this is the key to avoiding confusion. (1) is the defining characteristic of "natural" authority, while (2) is a sometimes valuable indicator of the presence of (1) in a person. It is valuable—but not, of course, infallible—both to those who seek counsel and advice and to those who, like us, seek examples in the real world of this elusive phenomenon, "natural" authority.

The fact is, however, that this last difference in point of view—between being a seeker of counsel and being an analyst or investigator of "natural" authority—can somewhat confuse the issue of just what such authority amounts to. We are analysts at the present moment, so it does not seem to matter what we regard as the propriety (or lack of it) of seeking counsel from Reagan, Hitler, or whomever. All that appears to matter is that some people (many people, if our examples are to be significant) see these figures as embodying such propriety. Thus the natural temptation to use (2) as the definition. As suggested above, however, this temptation must be firmly resisted. To think that "natural" authority is no more than *being regarded* as a good

counselor is to render incoherent the fact that people so regard certain of their fellows. It would be a redundancy of sorts: "the people in that group regard so-and-so as being one who is held in regard as being an appropriate counselor. . . ." Such a formulation shows the need for something like (1).

But can (1) be a sufficient condition by itself? If someone *were* the appropriate person to ask for counsel or advice, but no one recognized this, would he have authority? Here it is tempting to argue for two senses of the word that would allow two answers to this question; perhaps this is even a perfectly acceptable move to make. But such a move would miss, I think, what is most interesting about the issue: the fact that the same word moves across these two senses, that "authority" reflects both of these occasionally noncoextensive things.

As a definition, let us adopt (1). Let us not even mention, in the definition, the necessity that the propriety of counsel or advice be recognized by anyone.

Let us allow, however, that a necessary condition for *saying* that someone is an authority—and here we enter into epistemology as opposed to pure definition—may be that those with respect to whom the authority is held recognize this propriety.⁴ Let us retain (1) as an additional necessary epistemological condition, too.

Finally, let us admit that frequently we will have *only* the recognition to go by in attempting to identify real life authorities, and thus that we may feel justified (in our roles as analysts, anyway) in concluding from the presence of (2) alone that someone is an authority. In most such cases, however, we will be wisest to speak of people as *regarding* someone as an authority, rather than of that person's *being* an authority strictly by virtue of such regard.

Having clarified somewhat the idea of "natural" authority, it should be plain that it is a valuable phenomenon. Where information is sought, where skills are needed—indeed, where leadership or the ability to coordinate diverse individual efforts is desired—in all these cases we observe a quest for "natural" authority. It is this kind of authority that S. I. Benn must have in mind when he says that ". . . 'authority', 'competence', and 'recognition' are . . . all very closely related concepts" ("Authority," *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, p. 216). R. S. Peters, in a similar vein, observes that "It is only when a system of authority breaks down or a given individual loses his authority that there must be recourse to power if conformity is to be ensured" ("Authority," *The Aristotelian Society*, supp. vol. xxxii, p. 220). And, finally, it is this kind of authority that de Jouvenel is thinking of in the passage quoted at the beginning of this essay.

How could there be any antagonism to authority, if all that was meant was this ability to meet a felt need on the part of people going about their day-to-day business? Such authority seems clearly to be valuable—even

precious—in both individual and social contexts, and it will meet with no hostility from me. “Natural” authority is valuable; it may even be necessary.

What is crucial about this acknowledgment, however, is that “natural” authority so construed is necessarily a voluntary matter.⁴ People *discover* such authority in others, or think that they do, and act in accord with their belief in it. Should they stop believing that a particular individual was an appropriate counselor, etc., their behavior would change accordingly. If they still felt the need for authority, they would look elsewhere. Thus the elusive character of “natural” authority. A nice model for it is the way people feel about doctors, about advisors, about leadership within informal groups.

The fact that these latter feelings serve as good models for the presence of “natural” authority may lead naturally to the suggestion that *political* authority might be nothing more than a special case of “natural” authority. Indeed, were politics conceived to be nothing more than the realm of human interaction, perhaps such an explication would be apt.

Most defenders of political authority seem to have something like this in mind. They see the harmlessness—and the value—of “natural” authority, and conclude too quickly that political authority is thereby made acceptable. But such a move is legitimate only if the political situation preserves the important characteristics of the informal groups or relationships within which “natural” authority is modeled.

There are reasons, however, to reserve the expression “politics” for certain behaviors of and within those special institutionalized groups that include city-states, nations, and the like. And because such groups do not preserve the strictly voluntary character that is essential to the existence of “natural” authority, it is not possible that political authority is nothing more than one of its instances. Political authority finds its expression only within a context in which reliance upon “natural” authority has been abandoned. More on this later, however.

Institutionalized Authority

We are faced here with an obvious question: what accounts for the abandonment of “natural” authority in favor of the arrangement in which political authority emerges to take its place? John Locke’s question was similar: what accounts for the fact that people leave an apparently benign “State of Nature” in favor of “putting themselves under Government”? The correct answer to Locke’s question, of course, is that, by and large, people do *not* do this. Others do it for them.⁶

Our question, however, is not so simply answered. Even if the establishment of government—and thus of political authority—is not a matter of the strictly voluntary decision of the governed, we must still account for the fact of such establishment. And this we may do in a variety of ways.

A rather attractive view is that claims to political authority are mere pretenses, intended to cover otherwise naked seizures of power. If we keep in mind the fact that we are inquiring about the origins of *political* authority here, and not of “natural” authority, the origins of which are to be found in the felt need for counsel, leadership, etc., then it is tempting to say that politics may have emerged as an attempt on the part of some to parlay the “natural” authority they had possessed with respect to their cohorts and followers into something more grand: namely, power over those who were *not* among their cohorts and followers. We can imagine some Genghis Kahn who, noting the advantages to himself of being regarded as a worthy leader by his horsemen, hoped to increase those advantages—material and other—through an increase in his constituency. What he would obtain through conquest, of course, can hardly be placed in the same class as what he had before. He gains power, if he succeeds, not authority. It would be naive, however, to imagine that he would publicly acknowledge this fact. It is much more likely that he would bill himself as an authority with respect to those he has conquered. He might even manage to believe this to be true himself.

As attractive as such an account may be, it is undoubtedly too much a simplification. It takes no account of a more subtle process of institutionalization that surely stands independent of conquest as an explanation of the genesis of political authority. I have no doubt that some political societies have arisen in just the way indicated—even that Genghis Khan types have played roles to various degrees in the establishment of all political arrangements. But there is more to the story than just this.

Institutionalization of natural human relationships is rather a common phenomenon. The line between institutionalization and politicization is sometimes hard to draw, but it does seem desirable to draw a distinction. Take, for example, the relation between people and “holy men.” There are examples of such relations being quite informal, and thus comparable to “natural” authority, as in the case of the relation between the Zen novice and his master, or perhaps better, between a Hindu seeker after truth and his guru. There are other examples of institutionalized relationships, as between contemporary Roman Catholics and the hierarchy of the Church. Finally, there are examples of politicized relationships, as between medieval Christians and the Church-State hierarchy.

What is to be noted here is the transformation of “natural” relationships into “institutionalized” relationships. Where such institutionalization occurs, it is no longer personal characteristics that directly determine who it is that one will treat in a certain way. Once institutionalized, the relation in question becomes a function of an institutional framework.

Why does this come about? It seems fair to say that institutionalization inevitably reflects a desire to capture—perhaps, in a sense, to mechanize—the

natural human relationships that are mimicked, the better and the more consistently to secure the advantages of these relationships. This, after all, is the crux of Locke's justification of civil government.

But *whose* desire is thereby reflected? What is dispensed with, after all, is the elusive voluntary recognition of personal characteristics that was the essence of the "natural" situation. The answer is relatively clear: institutionalization is encouraged by those who perceive such institutionalization as advantageous. Among such institutionalizers will be the Genghis Khans who hope to derive personal advantages from *holding* power, but there will also be present among them the John Lockes who believe that advantages can be won for society by avoiding the inconsistency and unpredictability of the "natural" situation.

Once institutionalized, however, there arises the beginning of a characteristic kind of problem in human relationships: we seek people with certain skills, but find ourselves choosing people who have degrees or licenses (whether or not they really have the skills in question, or are more skilled than those who lack the degrees or licenses); we seek holy men and women, but find ourselves confronted with priests; we seek companions to love and live with, but find ourselves with spouses; and we seek leadership or authority, but find ourselves saddled with Ronald Reagan.

The key to institutionalization is that it pretends to have found a recipe or technique for generating the characteristic features that were sought in the "natural" situation. Yet this is seldom, if ever, a claim that is regularly warranted. Many licensed or degreed persons *are* competent; many priests are holy in the desired sense; many spouses do love one another; and (I suppose I must grant this as well) some political office holders are worthy leaders. But this is *not* adequately captured in the institutional framework, since genuine success in these things is measured along the dimensions set out by the "natural" situations: a good philosopher is good because he or she does philosophy well, not because of any degree earned in the subject. And so it is with the other cases.

I do not wish to be too critical of institutions here, since this is not the place for a full argument against them. Perhaps they sometimes do some good, so that the advantages may be claimed to outweigh the disadvantages. I want only to identify institutionalization of authority, in particular, as a step away from "natural" authority, and a step toward political authority.

This step tends to confuse the search for authority that I have characterized as a natural feature of human affairs, but it does not make it impossible. For institutions that are not yet politicized are at least in some sense avoidable. It may be hard to imagine someone avoiding an institution that has become a fundamental feature of society, especially if the person in question is unaware of alternatives. But it is not impossible. For in-

stitutionalization, as such, stops short of being coercive. It is in the political realm, as Oppenheimer has observed, that coercion gets added to whatever force institutions may have had previously.

Political Authority

Just as institutions are designed or encouraged (and of course they do not just gain ascendancy by *chance* . . . people adopt them, encourage their growth, revise them, etc.) because some people perceive "natural" relationships to have been inadequate, politicization occurs where some people see mere institutionalization to have been inadequate. Political authority, in particular, is institutionalized authority that is enforced by law, or by other threat of coercion.

Wherein lies the perceived inadequacy of institutionalized authority? The answer to this is clear from the coercive character of the move to politics: mere institutions are perceived as inadequate precisely because people are still free to avoid them, however difficult this may be. People are free to ignore the institutional authority, and they may choose to appeal to "natural" authorities whom they have found themselves, or even to appeal to no authority at all. It is this option that the politicization of authority seeks to cut off.

It is *specifically* those people who would otherwise not acknowledge the authority of the institutional holders of power, or of the institutions themselves, who are thus targeted. They are the problem. Political authority may thus be distinguished from nonpoliticized institutional authority in terms of this class of persons. To claim political authority is to claim authority over some persons—real or potential—who do not or would not have acknowledged that authority on their own.

But in recognizing that this is what characterizes political authority, we must recognize also that we have finally closed what must appear to be a rather curious circle. For we began with a concept of "natural" authority that we defined in terms of propriety of counsel, or advice, or (in situations where some action "belongs," in some sense, to the bearer of authority) command. But this factor is not at all a part of what makes a political authority. Indeed, we are inclined to complain, about many of our political authorities, that they are far from being appropriate advisors, counselors, or commanders.

What is worse, political authority seems straightforwardly to contradict what we called our additional "epistemological" condition for saying that someone is a "natural" authority—namely, that such a person be regarded as an appropriate counselor, etc., by those with respect to whom the authority is held. Political authority is distinct from nonpoliticized institutional authority *precisely* in its claims and commands regarding persons who would *not* have acknowledged it without the enforcement of law.

Political authority, we may now say, co-opts the name of authority with an eye toward the several advantages that such a move may be perceived to have. It is the very antithesis of "natural" authority, in that it aims at blocking the option of finding one's own authority (or none at all), an option that is fundamental to "natural" authority.

Indeed, it may be that, for clarity's sake, it is best to renounce the use of the expression "political authority" after all; for what it seems to come down to is a substitution—for better or, more likely, for worse—of power for authority. And as de Jouvenel and others have observed, power is something very different from authority.

Concluding Remarks

Political authority is at best a pale imitation of the "natural" relationship it tries to mimic. For this reason, it is bound to be unsatisfactory, no matter what independent advantages it may be perceived by some to offer.

But, curiously, it can succeed to some extent in that it is not impossible that genuinely worthy people may come to hold office, and in that many people may come to regard an office-holder as a "natural" authority simply because of their faith in the institutional process. This, surely, is what the defenders of political authority hope for it.

The constant shortcoming of political authority, of course, is its claim over those who do *not* see it as authoritative. And, unfortunately, this is just what distinguishes it from nonpoliticized institutional authority.

This problem simply must be faced by any serious student of political theory. It is responsible for the failure of the many attempts to "justify" the state.

A challenge is in order here: those who wish to serve the interests of humanity should at least allow themselves to question the dedication of some to demonstrating the legitimacy of the state. Why is this so crucial? Is it not at least possible that the state is a net foe of human well-being? Has not conquest been the historical rule in the formation states, and has not suppression been the rule in their maintenance?

There is a fairly common sort of question that is asked by anarchist-baiters, in response to anarchic critiques of the state. It goes: "But how can x be accomplished if the state is done away with?", for a variety of different values of x . For *some* of these x 's, the question is a good one—even a hard one.⁸

What we need, though, is help in answering these questions, not mere gloating over our lack of quick answers. For the complaints against the state are severe ones; it is hard to believe that any serious thinker could take them lightly.

Is it not a worthy project, in which all might become involved, to see whether the problems might be solved without contriving anything so unsatisfactory and so dangerous as a "political authority"?

John T. Sanders

Rochester Institute of Technology

NOTES

1. Thanks are due to Martin Noval, David Suits, and Victoria Varga for stimulating discussion and helpful criticism.

2. Some parallels may be drawn between the general lines of this treatment and a distinction made by Austin Duncan-Jones. In "Authority" (*The Aristotelian Society*, supp. vol. XXXII (1958): 241–60), he discusses three sorts of criterion for assigning authority, which he labels 'quasi-logical', 'quasi-legal', and 'legal'. These bear a resemblance to what I have called 'natural', 'institutionalized', and 'politicized' authority in what follows.

3. A consequence of this analysis is that states, and political arrangements in general, are always the products of human artifice. They are constructed, however, on the model of "natural" authority relationships. It is the existence of these natural relationships which has led many to think of the state, and politics, as themselves natural rather than artificial.

4. Peter Winch has called attention to the importance of distinguishing between the *definition* of authority and the various *signs* of authority. That is what is at stake here, although Winch's point is made in a different context. See Winch, "Authority," *The Aristotelean Society*, supp. vol. XXXII (1958): 225–40, esp. p. 240.

5. It is important to follow de Jouvenel in warning against a strong interpretation of the word 'voluntary' in this context. Deliberation and reason are not necessarily involved in the deference paid to "natural" authority; it is frequently quite spontaneous. The word 'voluntary' should indicate only that the deference is uncoerced. See *Sovereignty: An Inquiry into the Political Good* (1957; trans. University of Chicago Press, 1972), p. 72.

6. Were such a move fully voluntary, it might be argued that people would not have left the "State of Nature" at all in making it (since the "State of Nature" is the *locus* of such voluntary decisions of individuals). But this depends upon interpreting the expression "voluntary" in a strong sense, and upon quarreling with Locke about whether even express consent may plausibly be interpreted as binding someone perpetually. I should like to argue that such slave contracts are *not* binding, but I shall not do so here. See, though, David B. Suits, "The Political Theory of Lysander Spooner" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Waterloo, 1977), pp. 63–69, for a careful discussion of the uses of "express consent" and "tacit consent" in Locke's *Second Treatise of Government*.

7. An interesting argument to this effect is to be found in de Jouvenel, *Sovereignty*, pp. 26–36 and pp. 72–73.

8. In *The Ethical Argument Against Government* (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1980), I address some of the hardest of these questions.