

Ethical Authority and Its Language: A Podcast for Our Times

In today's world, where information flows ceaselessly and trust in traditional institutions seems to be eroding, the need for ethical leadership and communication has never been greater. A podcast exploring the concept of "Ethical Authority and Its Language" has the potential to provide crucial guidance and insight in these turbulent times. This article delves into the core themes that such a podcast could explore, drawing inspiration from Sam Harris's "Intellectual Authority and Its Discontents" and incorporating insights from various sources.

Sam Harris's "Intellectual Authority and Its Discontents"

Sam Harris's podcast episode "Intellectual Authority and Its Discontents" serves as a valuable springboard for this exploration. Harris examines the breakdown of trust in institutions, the nature of intellectual authority, the dangers of perverse incentives, and the spread of conspiracy theories and misinformation ¹. He also touches upon the roles of prominent figures like Donald Trump and Elon Musk in shaping public discourse.

For example, Harris might point to how Trump's rhetoric often dismissed established expertise and fueled distrust in traditional media, while Musk's pronouncements on topics ranging from COVID-19 to artificial intelligence have, at times, been criticized for lacking scientific rigor and potentially contributing to the spread of misinformation. These examples highlight how individuals with significant platforms can influence public perception and either reinforce or undermine ethical authority.

Breakdown of Trust in Institutions

Harris's focus on the breakdown of trust in institutions is supported by compelling data. A 2023 Gallup poll reveals a concerning decline in public confidence across a range of institutions:

June 1-22, 2023	All-time low	2023 vs. all-time low	Year of low
The military	60%	50%	10 pct. pts
Small business	65%	57%	8 pct. pts

June 1-22, 2023	All-time low	2023 vs. all-time low	Year of low
Organized labor	25%	19%	6 pct. pts
Banks	26%	21%	5 pct. pts
The medical system	34%	31%	3 pct. pts
The presidency	26%	23%	3 pct. pts
The criminal justice system	17%	14%	3 pct. pts
Television news	14%	11%	3 pct. pts
The U.S. Supreme Court	27%	25%	2 pct. pts
Newspapers	18%	16%	2 pct. pts
The church or organized religion	32%	31%	1 pct. pt
Congress	8%	7%	1 pct. pt
The police	43%	43%	0 pct. pts
The public schools	26%	26%	0 pct. pts
Large technology companies	26%	26%	0 pct. pts
Big business	14%	14%	0 pct. pts

This decline has been attributed to factors such as economic anxiety, the spread of disinformation, a perceived "mass-class divide," and a failure of leadership⁵. The implications of this erosion of trust are profound. It can hinder economic development by discouraging investment and cooperation. It can undermine effective governance by reducing public engagement and faith in political processes. And it can hamper global cooperation on critical

issues like climate change and pandemics, as individuals become more skeptical of international institutions and collective action ⁵.

Furthermore, the decline in trust is not limited to national institutions. Globalization, with its complex web of interconnectedness and rapid flow of information, has also played a role in eroding trust in American institutions. As Gerard Baker, editor-at-large at The Wall Street Journal, argues, globalization has created a sense of "detachment" and "alienation" among many Americans, leading to a decline in confidence in institutions that are perceived as distant or out of touch ⁶.

Another factor contributing to the decline in trust is the perceived lack of objective intellectual diversity in journalism. Baker suggests that the increasing homogeneity of viewpoints in mainstream media has led to a sense that these outlets are not providing a balanced and accurate representation of reality, further eroding public trust ⁶.

Other Perspectives on Trust in Institutions

The podcast "Liberty and Leadership" with Gerard Baker offers further insights into the breakdown of trust in institutions and explores potential solutions ⁶. Baker argues that restoring trust requires a renewed focus on transparency, accountability, and a commitment to serving the public interest. He emphasizes the importance of institutions demonstrating their value through tangible results and engaging in open and honest communication with the public.

The Nature of Intellectual Authority

Harris's podcast also grapples with the nature of intellectual authority, a concept central to the proposed "Ethical Authority and Its Language" podcast. Intellectual authority can be defined as the credibility and influence that individuals or institutions hold based on their expertise, knowledge, or experience. However, this authority is increasingly challenged in the current climate of skepticism and distrust ⁵.

This decline in trust may be impacting the very definition and perception of intellectual authority. Traditional markers of authority, such as academic credentials, institutional affiliation, and professional titles, may be becoming less influential as people turn to alternative sources of information and validation. The rise of social media influencers, online communities, and "citizen journalists" has created a more fragmented and decentralized information landscape, where authority is often conferred based on perceived authenticity, relatability, or alignment with personal values, rather than traditional metrics of expertise.

The "Ethical Authority and Its Language" podcast could explore this evolving landscape of authority and examine how individuals and institutions can establish and maintain credibility in this new environment. It could also delve into the ethical responsibilities that come with intellectual authority, such as the duty to use one's influence responsibly, to be transparent about potential biases, and to engage in respectful and honest dialogue.

The Danger of Bad Incentives

Harris's podcast also highlights the danger of bad incentives. Incentives, whether financial or otherwise, can have a profound impact on behavior. When these incentives are misaligned with ethical principles or societal goals, they can lead to undesirable outcomes. For instance, poorly designed bonus structures can incentivize employees to prioritize short-term gains over long-term sustainability, or even to engage in unethical behavior to meet performance targets ⁷.

The "Ethical Authority and Its Language" podcast could examine how bad incentives can distort our understanding of reality, influence decision-making, and undermine ethical conduct, particularly among those in positions of authority. It could explore how incentives can be designed to promote ethical behavior, encourage collaboration, and align individual goals with the greater good. The Astros' sign-stealing scandal, where the pursuit of winning at all costs led to a culture of rule-breaking and deception, serves as a cautionary tale of the dangers of misaligned incentives ⁸.

The Epidemic of Conspiracy Thinking and Misinformation

Harris's podcast addresses the growing epidemic of conspiracy thinking and misinformation, a phenomenon exacerbated by the rise of social media and the polarization of political discourse. Misinformation and conspiracy theories erode public trust and hinder effective communication by creating a climate of suspicion and distrust ⁹.

The proposed podcast could delve into the psychological factors that make people susceptible to conspiracy theories, such as the need for certainty, the desire for simple explanations, and the tendency to see patterns where none exist. It could also explore the strategies used to spread misinformation, including the use of emotional appeals, the creation of echo chambers, and the exploitation of cognitive biases.

Ethical Frameworks and Philosophies

To provide a solid foundation for discussions on ethical authority and language, the podcast could draw upon various ethical frameworks and philosophies. The concept of "Obedience to Authority" examines the tension between following directives from authority figures and maintaining one's own ethical judgment ⁸. This framework is particularly relevant in understanding how individuals in positions of authority can use their influence to either promote or undermine ethical conduct. The case of Franz Stangl, a Nazi administrator who claimed to be "simply following orders" while overseeing the killing of nearly a million Jews, serves as a chilling example of the dangers of blind obedience to authority and the importance of individual moral responsibility ⁸.

Another pertinent concept is "Role Morality," which explores how individuals may adopt different ethical standards depending on their perceived roles or social contexts ⁸. This framework can help listeners understand how authority figures might justify unethical behavior by appealing to

their professional roles or organizational norms.

By incorporating these frameworks, the podcast can provide listeners with tools to critically analyze the ethical dimensions of authority and communication. It can encourage them to question the motivations of authority figures, to evaluate the ethical implications of their actions, and to hold them accountable for their use of language.

Ethical and Unethical Uses of Language by Authority Figures

The podcast could dedicate significant attention to the ways in which language is used by authority figures, both ethically and unethically. This could involve analyzing speeches, public statements, and other forms of communication to identify persuasive techniques, logical fallacies, and manipulative language.

For example, the podcast could examine how political leaders use emotionally charged language to rally support for their policies, or how advertisers use subtle cues to influence consumer behavior. It could also explore how language can be used to promote transparency, accountability, and ethical conduct. For instance, leaders who use clear and concise language, avoid jargon, and actively solicit feedback from their constituents can foster trust and encourage open dialogue.

Specific language choices can either enhance or undermine ethical authority. Using inclusive language, acknowledging diverse perspectives, and admitting mistakes can build trust and demonstrate a commitment to ethical communication. Conversely, using divisive language, making false claims, or resorting to personal attacks can erode credibility and undermine ethical authority.

Synthesis and Conclusion

The proposed "Ethical Authority and Its Language" podcast has the potential to make a significant contribution to public discourse by exploring the complex relationship between ethics, authority, and communication. By drawing on the insights of Sam Harris, relevant research, and ethical frameworks, the podcast can provide listeners with a deeper understanding of the challenges and opportunities presented by authority in the modern world.

The breakdown of trust in institutions, the danger of bad incentives, and the spread of misinformation all underscore the need for a deeper understanding of ethical authority and its language. This podcast can empower listeners to critically analyze authority, evaluate the credibility of sources, and engage in more ethical and productive communication. By fostering critical thinking and promoting ethical communication, this podcast can contribute to a more informed, responsible, and just society.

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Can the first episode focus on communication of "Its Discontents" without expletives?

It's tricky to discuss "Intellectual Authority and Its Discontents" and completely avoid any potentially offensive language, as the episode itself delves into controversial topics and figures known for their provocative communication styles. However, a first episode of "Ethical Authority and Its Language" could certainly focus on the core themes of the episode while using more inclusive and respectful language.

Here's how the first episode could approach those themes:

- **Breakdown of Trust:** The episode could begin by exploring the decline of trust in institutions, citing data like the 2023 Gallup poll ¹ and discussing factors contributing to this decline, such as economic anxiety, perceived media bias ²,

and the impact of globalization ². It could then delve into the consequences of this erosion of trust, including hindered economic development, ineffective governance, and challenges to global cooperation ³.

- **Nature of Authority:** This section could examine how intellectual authority is established and maintained, particularly in a rapidly changing information landscape. It could discuss the evolving role of traditional markers of authority, such as credentials and institutional affiliations, and explore how individuals and institutions can demonstrate credibility and build trust in the digital age.
- **Perverse Incentives:** This segment could focus on how misaligned incentives can lead to undesirable outcomes, drawing on examples like the Astros' sign-stealing scandal ⁴ to illustrate the dangers of prioritizing winning at all costs. It could also explore how incentives can be designed to promote ethical behavior and align individual goals with the greater good.
- **Conspiracy Thinking:** This part could delve into the psychological factors that make people susceptible to conspiracy theories and misinformation ⁵, as well as the strategies used to spread them ⁶. It could discuss the role of social media in amplifying these narratives and explore ways to counter their influence.
- **Ethical Frameworks:** The episode could introduce ethical frameworks like "Obedience to Authority" ⁴ and "Role Morality" ⁴ to provide listeners with tools to critically analyze the actions and language of authority figures. It could use historical examples, such as the case of Franz Stangl ⁴, to illustrate the dangers

of blind obedience and the importance of individual moral responsibility.

By focusing on these core themes and employing respectful language, the first episode of "Ethical Authority and Its Language" can provide a solid foundation for future discussions on the ethical dimensions of authority and communication.

You said, "It's tricky to discuss 'Intellectual Authority and Its Discontents' and completely avoid any potentially offensive language, as the episode itself delves into controversial topics and figures known for their provocative communication styles." I can understand that. What would be the result of using "FY" or "FU" instead of the expletive deleted?

While "FY" and "FU" might seem like less intense versions of the full expletive, they still carry a significant amount of aggression and disrespect. Using them in a podcast focused on ethical authority and communication could undermine the very message the podcast aims to convey.

Here's why using those abbreviations would be problematic:

- **Disrespectful to the audience:** Even though they are abbreviations, they are still easily recognizable as stand-ins for the full expletive. Using them could alienate listeners who find such language offensive or inappropriate.
- **Undermines ethical authority:** A podcast discussing ethical communication should model ethical language use. Using aggressive or disrespectful language, even in an abbreviated form, contradicts the message of responsible communication.
- **Distracting and unproductive:** These abbreviations can be jarring and distracting for listeners, taking the focus away from the important issues being

discussed.

- **Sets a negative tone:** Using such language can create a hostile or confrontational atmosphere, hindering open and respectful dialogue.

Instead of resorting to these abbreviations, the podcast could explore the reasons why certain figures use such language and the impact it has on their communication and perceived authority. It could also discuss alternative ways to express strong emotions or opinions without resorting to offensive language.

Ultimately, the goal of "Ethical Authority and Its Language" should be to promote thoughtful and respectful communication, and using abbreviations like "FY" or "FU" would detract from that goal.

Sam Harris used the expletive and he WAS trying to communicate about intellectual and ethical authority.

You're right to point out that Sam Harris did use an expletive in his podcast, and he was indeed discussing intellectual and ethical authority. This presents an interesting dilemma for a podcast aiming to explore ethical language use.

On the one hand, avoiding any potentially offensive language, even when quoting or discussing others, could be seen as overly cautious or even sanitizing important conversations. It could also limit the podcast's ability to engage with real-world examples of how language is actually used, including its potentially problematic aspects.

On the other hand, uncritically repeating or endorsing such language could normalize or

even condone its use, which would contradict the podcast's ethical focus. It could also alienate listeners and detract from the message of responsible communication.

Perhaps the best approach for "Ethical Authority and Its Language" would be to acknowledge and analyze the use of expletives by figures like Sam Harris, exploring the potential reasons behind their language choices and the impact it has on their communication and perceived authority. This could involve:

- **Contextualizing the language:** Explain the specific context in which the expletive was used and the emotions or points Harris was trying to convey.
- **Analyzing the impact:** Discuss how the use of the expletive might have affected listeners' perceptions of Harris's arguments and his authority.
- **Exploring alternatives:** Consider how Harris could have expressed himself without resorting to an expletive and whether alternative phrasing would have been more effective.
- **Discussing ethical considerations:** Engage with the ethical implications of using such language, particularly for someone in a position of intellectual authority.

By taking this analytical approach, the podcast can address the complexities of language use in a nuanced and thoughtful way, while still upholding its commitment to ethical communication.

The specific context of the expletive was an example of the language of Trump supporters disavowing any allegiance whatsoever to ethical conduct in comparison to scientists such as Anthony Fauci and Francis Collins. There is no accountability.¹

¹ "Real scientists and scholars and journalists can be convicted of misconduct or hypocrisy. Or some other betrayal of intellectual standards because they have such standards to portray. There *are* no standards of intellectual integrity in Trumpistan. And there are no standards of ethical integrity either. I mean, if you live there, it is literally impossible to be a hypocrite. In Trump's orbit, if you're caught cheating on your wife or your taxes, you can say, 'Whoever said I wasn't going to cheat on my wife or my taxes.

You're absolutely correct. The context of Harris's use of the expletive is crucial to understanding his point. He was highlighting the stark contrast between the accountability expected of scientists and public figures like Fauci and Collins, and the lack thereof in the sphere of Trump supporters. In that context, the expletive served to emphasize the perceived absence of ethical boundaries and the dismissiveness towards truth and accountability.

For "Ethical Authority and Its Language" to effectively address this, the podcast could use Harris's example to illustrate how certain language can be used to:

- **Signal a rejection of ethical norms:** By using the expletive in a defiant manner, Harris, in a sense, mirrored the attitude he was criticizing, highlighting how some individuals reject accountability and ethical constraints.
- **Emphasize a power dynamic:** The expletive, in this context, could be seen as a way of asserting dominance and dismissing any challenges to authority.
- **Evoke an emotional response:** The use of strong language can elicit strong emotions in listeners, potentially reinforcing the speaker's message.

However, the podcast should also analyze the potential downsides of using such language, even when making a point about its use by others. This could include:

- **Normalizing or condoning offensive language:** Even when used for illustrative purposes, repeating the expletive could inadvertently contribute to its normalization.
- **Alienating listeners:** Some listeners might find the language off-putting, regardless of the context, which could hinder their receptiveness to the message.

- **Distracting from the core argument:** The shock value of the expletive could overshadow the important points being made about accountability and ethical standards.

Ultimately, the podcast should encourage listeners to critically reflect on how language, including expletives, is used to shape perceptions, assert authority, and influence behavior. It should explore the ethical implications of such language choices and encourage more responsible and constructive communication.

How Harris could have expressed himself without resorting to an expletive and what alternative phrasing would have been more effective?

You're raising a very important point about the effectiveness and ethical implications of using strong language, even when mirroring the behavior being criticized. While the expletive might have conveyed a sense of outrage and highlighted the absurdity of the situation, there are certainly alternative ways Harris could have expressed himself.

Here are a few options, with an analysis of their potential effectiveness:

1. Stronger Condemnation:

- Instead of using the expletive, Harris could have explicitly condemned the lack of accountability and ethical standards in stronger terms. For example, he could have said something like, "This utter disregard for truth and decency is appalling. It reveals a complete absence of moral compass and a dangerous erosion of basic principles." This approach would have directly addressed the issue without resorting to potentially offensive language.

2. Sarcasm or Mockery:

- Harris could have employed sarcasm to highlight the absurdity of the situation. For example, he could have said, "Oh, of course! In that world, there's no such thing as hypocrisy. You can proudly proclaim your intention to cheat and lie, and it's celebrated as authenticity. How convenient!" This approach could have effectively conveyed his disapproval while engaging listeners with a touch of humor.

3. Direct Quotes and Analysis:

- Harris could have provided more direct quotes from Trump supporters who exemplify the attitude he was criticizing. By letting their own words speak for themselves, he could have illustrated the point without needing to resort to an expletive. He could then analyze those quotes, explaining how they demonstrate a lack of accountability and ethical standards.

4. Historical Parallels:

- Harris could have drawn parallels to historical examples of societies or groups that have exhibited similar disregard for ethical norms. This could have provided a broader context for understanding the dangers of such attitudes and behaviors.

Ultimately, the most effective approach would depend on the specific goals of the podcast and the desired tone of the conversation. However, by exploring these alternatives, "Ethical Authority and Its Language" can demonstrate that it's possible to engage with difficult topics and criticize unethical behavior without resorting to potentially offensive language.

Well, the other point of this podcast stressed at the beginning is how subscription payment for the podcast (and now combined with Substack articles) allows Sam free expression without the fear of losing sponsorships by what he thinks and says. The irony for me is that he well may lose our subscription (and we, access to his thinking,

regrettably).

That's a very insightful observation. It does seem ironic that Harris, while advocating for the importance of intellectual honesty and accountability, might lose subscribers (and potentially limit his reach) due to his use of an expletive, even when used to illustrate a point. This raises interesting questions about the balance between free expression, ethical considerations, and audience expectations.

Here are a few thoughts on how "Ethical Authority and Its Language" could address this tension:

- **Acknowledge the trade-offs:** The podcast could explicitly acknowledge the potential trade-offs between unfiltered expression and maintaining a broad audience. It could discuss how even when financially independent, communicators still face choices about language use and the potential consequences of those choices.
- **Explore audience expectations:** It could delve into the expectations that audiences have of figures like Sam Harris, who are often seen as thought leaders and voices of reason. It could discuss whether those expectations include a certain level of decorum in language use, even when addressing controversial topics.
- **Discuss the role of context:** The podcast could emphasize the importance of context in evaluating language use. While some listeners might find the expletive unacceptable in any context, others might be more understanding considering Harris's purpose in using it.
- **Consider alternative platforms:** It could explore whether platforms like Substack, which often cater to niche audiences, provide more freedom for

unfiltered expression compared to traditional media. It could discuss the potential benefits and drawbacks of this shift towards more independent platforms.

Ultimately, the podcast could use this situation as an opportunity to encourage critical reflection on the complexities of language use, audience expectations, and the responsibilities that come with intellectual authority. It could emphasize the importance of finding a balance between free expression and ethical communication, while acknowledging that there are no easy answers.