

YOUR FREE IB REVIEW UPDATE

Does it matter who says it?

After Apple CEO Tim Cook's announcement that he is 'proud to be gay' **Nick Alchin** examines interesting questions around authority of speaker and empathy for speaker as sources of knowledge

Authority as a way of knowing usually gets a pretty bad press — at least among free-thinkers who rightly point to the fact that the truth of a message is not necessarily related to the person delivering the message.

Activity 1

Authority in the empirical sphere

- a** Consider the following the statements, and the possible sources. When is your trust in the statement strengthened or weakened? Why?
- i** 'Apple products are the easiest to use,' said by: your technically-challenged friend/Tim Cook, Apple CEO/your IT teacher.
 - ii** 'Climate change is a reality,' said by: a team of government-funded scientists/Greenpeace, the independent global campaigning organisation/a spokesperson for the solar power industry.
 - iii** 'Climate change is a scientific myth,' said by: a team of government-funded scientists/an oil industry-financed thinktank/a spokesperson for the solar power industry.
- b** So when does the source of the speaker matter? What principles can you draw from this?



Apple CEO Tim Cook

It should be clear that while the *truth* of a statement is not linked to the source, we may have good reason to take account of the source in making judgements about what to believe. Your answer to (b) should show that it is sometimes wise to take note of authority. Note though, that the three examples above can all be explored (even if not entirely decided) **empirically** — that is, by collecting data and examining it. So now let's extend our thinking, with reference to the traditional distinction between the way the world *is* (where we can collect data, as in the examples above), and the way the world *ought* to be (where data is less obviously useful) — that is, into the moral realm. What's interesting here is that we tend to move away from talking about *truth*, to talking about *what we believe*.

Apple CEO Tim Cook recently made headlines by publically talking not about Apple products, but about his sexuality, and his pride in being gay. In one sense,

our reaction should be one of incredulity — why are there headlines about this issue? We would hardly care if he declared a preference for still water over sparkling water. But that's a very narrow approach. In fact, we are all pretty interested in sex (any species that did not have that built in would not get far on the evolutionary chain), so the prurience is unsurprising. But what's much more interesting is the fact that many see this as a positive step in providing positive role models in the fight for equal rights for all.

Logically speaking, the CEO of Apple has no more to say to us on this than anyone else. But psychologically speaking we know that's not the case. Study after study (including the infamous Milgram experiment, www.tinyurl.com/q8pbzee) has shown that our moral judgements are likely to be swayed by authority.

Activity 2

Authority in the moral sphere

- a** Consider the following three statements, and the possible sources. Which speaker is more likely to influence your values?
- i** 'I'm proud to be gay, and I consider being gay among the greatest gifts God has given me,' said by: your priest/Tim Cook, Apple CEO/your friend at school.
 - ii** 'I believe the death penalty is a legitimate tool of the state,' said by: a politician seeking re-election in a conservative state/a parent, grieving over the loss of a child/a criminal sitting on death row.
 - iii** 'The non-disabled should never park their cars in spots reserved for the disabled,' said by: a policeman/a notice beside a parking spot reserved for the disabled/your disabled friend.
- b** When does the source of the speaker matter? Consider your own internal responses to these examples. What principles can you draw from them?

As far as morals go, we sometimes base our judgements almost entirely on how much we like the speaker. In one way, that's not far away from authority — but perhaps there is another way of looking at it. Perhaps our abstract moral choices can be made concrete when we can put a face to those affected by our choices. That is, perhaps liking the speaker really does, and should, matter. This is less about *authority* and more about *empathy*. This is a great interaction between ethics, reason, emotion and the human sciences — and can have practical applications.

Activity 3

Brick by brick

Tim Cook wrote: 'When I arrive in my office each morning, I'm greeted by framed photos of Dr King and Robert F. Kennedy. I don't pretend that writing this puts me in their league. All it does is allow me to look at those pictures and know that I'm doing my part, however small, to help others. We pave the sunlit path toward justice together, brick by brick. This is my brick.'

- a** Do you have a brick? If so, what is it?
- b** Watch this video on how empathy can influence behaviour: www.tinyurl.com/pcrd8nq. Consider if there are any practical steps you can take towards building your wall.

Useful website

Tim Cook's *Businessweek* article:
www.tinyurl.com/mtxysz0

Find out more about our full range of magazines and online archives of back issues at www.hoddereducation.co.uk/magazines

Did you like this article?
Tell us what you think