

Peter Jamius writes about the nature of rules and their relevance in society today.

- 1 In the state of nature envisaged by Thomas Hobbes, it is easy to imagine how the superior skill or strength (overly so at times) of certain individuals would make them obvious candidates for leadership that others might be pleased to – or wise not to – accept. This remains true in all human groups: natural leaders emerge and familiar aspects of social dynamics prompt others to submit to their authority, which could mean either accepting willingly or begrudgingly those rules leaders determine for them. 5
- 2 The law is the ultimate civil embodiment of such rules that society believes is essential for all citizens to follow in order to achieve peace, harmony and well-being. Civil society is premised on the rule of law; laws have to be made when required, and therefore a person, a leader, or a body has to be invested with the power to devise them, and there has to be an expectation that they will be observed. This in turn requires enforcement, which in turn requires the existence of suitably empowered agencies such as a police force and courts. But apart from this vital political level where rules formally enshrined as laws guide or punish members, we also have rules in daily life which are multi-faceted and permeate every aspect of our lives. Name any one area of public or personal life and certainly, immediately and without qualification, the rules that define it will be known and obvious. Thus, whether we like them or not, whether we choose to obey them or not, rules in whatever form, are inescapable. 10
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- 3 Very often, rules exist to ensure order, equality and fairness. Take as an example the experience of most people in an education system. Internationally, the culture of education in schools, colleges and universities differs but what each has in common are rules that the participants must follow. Consequently, punishment ensues when those rules are not followed. At the basic level, there are timetables to be followed, perhaps uniforms to be worn, politeness to those in authority and deadlines to be met. Students infringing these rules will be punished, but these misdemeanours are considered to be rather minor matters. At a more serious level, there are very strict rules that are linked to deep issues of ethics and morality – cheating in examinations to get ahead unfairly, stealing intellectual property, defacing school buildings and furniture, and physical assault in the classroom or playground. Offend the sanctions that pertain to these matters and in any right thinking educational system, the punishment for breaking these rules should be swift, should be severe and should be irreversible. Such a response ensures fairness, even justice, for those that accept and follow the rules by providing an environment that gives equality of opportunity if not equality of outcome. 25
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- 4 However, rules are not always uniformly applied in an unbending manner. They can be subjective and variable. The hum and buzz of healthy family life is captured by the rules each family decides to set for itself: the roles of fathers and mothers; the duties of children; the limits that parents set for children in numerous matters such as time to study, time to watch television or surf the net, time to spend with friends, time to assist with the household tasks. Usually, it is probably the case that although these rules are not written, they are understood nevertheless. And usually, especially in the case of children in the family, there are some consequences of not following the rules. But the consequences are more than likely idiosyncratic and flexible and part of the individual family dynamics. Unfortunately, such characteristics of rules in domains like family life have the potential to cause problems. Too often these days there are published stories of abuse within families. In newspapers and online media, there is a litany of stories that highlight in families, the use of violence and abuse – physical, emotional and sexual. These are matters 40
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where the rules are inflexible and which society rightly declares as intolerable and criminal, and justice in court is sought for the victims.

- 5 Sadly, in recent years, society has increasingly witnessed spectacular ways in which people set out in a calculated manner to break rules. The chaos that ensues with this breakdown is catastrophic and seen in many institutions. Surprisingly, one area where this breakdown is so widespread is sport, where the adherence to formal rules is of the essence. In sport, rules embody the fundamental assumption that one person's or one team's natural endowments and efforts are pitted against those of others, to determine who is swiftest, strongest or best in some respect. However, the prevalence of cheating in sport, at both the highest and most ordinary levels, has revealed deliberate, highly organised ways in which rules have been flouted, often making sport a domain of suspicion. There is scarcely a sport anywhere in the world that seems to be immune from cheating in one form or another – from taking performance-enhancing drugs to opportunistic rule breaking on the playing field. One cannot forget Marion Jones, the one-time darling of the Sydney Olympics falling from grace, or the 2008 Singapore Grand Prix conspiracy to ensure victory for Fernando Alonso. As a consequence, the focus of sporting authorities who are charged with designing and implementing rules, that allow the aforementioned assumption to be fulfilled, has now become excessively regulatory and policing in nature. Regulatory bodies today have to rigorously test professional sportsmen for performance drugs, have to monitor their whereabouts, have to install video cameras at major events – what a great pity this is! And not only a pity for sport, for in the blatant dishonesty among athletes may be seen different attitudes and approaches to reasonable rules that may infect other areas of life. 55 60 65 70
- 6 On a more personal level, however, there are individual beliefs about rules, without which any attempt to bring order, safety and security to society and life would be futile. However, what can bring order, safety and security to society can be highly debatable. Some people can be diametrically opposed on moral and ethical issues, each group asserting that they are right. Take issues like euthanasia, abortion or the use of torture. Both sides would contend that their arguments are for the greater good of all. In all these issues, there are personal ethical and moral principles by which people determine their personal stance. Such principles may be observed in individuals who have stood up for what they believe in, at great sacrifice to themselves, individuals who could be rightly called secular and religious saints. For the majority of us who are not called to make such sacrifices, these principles may be learnt from religious sources or taught in the family and dictate for us a code of conduct. Tragically, although what is right and wrong may be obvious, personal ethics and morals are not always seen as compulsory for an individual to follow. They can be ignored, and if the fabric of society is not held together by people who choose to follow their conscience, then societies simply cannot function for the good of their members. Consider the impact of a lack of personal morality and its debilitating social effects: corruption, piracy, ethnic cleansing, terrorism... 75 80 85 90
- 7 Rules may not always be liked but they are vital and omnipresent. If you are still not convinced, consider anarchy, a political philosophy that claims that states would be best run if there were no rules whatsoever. It may be fictional, but a statement by a character in Alan Bennett's play 'Getting On' probably best reflects the value and indispensability of rules: 'We started off trying to set up a small anarchist community, but people wouldn't obey the rules.' 95

Adapted from A. C. Grayling's "Thinking of Answers"