§ THE DIALECTIC REVIEW

Volume I · Summer 2024

ISSUE 02

On Authority

Summer 2024 · 6 pieces

Six essays on obedience, legitimacy, and the strange grip that rules, teachers, and texts hold over people who never agreed to any of it in particular.

ISSN 3049-7121

thedialecticreview.org

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POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

Obedience Without Belief

Most citizens obey laws they have never evaluated and might reject if asked. This essay asks whether this counts as recognizing the state's authority at all.

Karim El-Sayed Nile International School, Cairo

Political philosophy usually treats obedience to law as flowing from some recognition of the state's legitimate authority — a citizen obeys the speed limit, roughly, because they accept that the state has the right to set and enforce such rules, even if they would not have chosen this particular limit themselves. This essay asks an empirical question with a philosophical sting: what if most obedience is not like this at all, and instead flows from habit, convenience, or fear of sanction, entirely independent of any belief about the state's right to rule? And if this is the actual psychological reality for most people most of the time, what is left of the concept of legitimate authority, which seems to require exactly the kind of recognition most obedience does not involve?

There is good reason to think habitual, non-evaluative obedience really is the norm rather than the exception. Most drivers stop at red lights without any occurrent thought about the state's right to regulate traffic; most taxpayers file returns because everyone around them does and the alternative seems both effortful and risky, not because they have reflected on and endorsed a theory of political obligation. Survey research on legal consciousness consistently finds that most people, asked why they obey a given law, cite habit, social expectation, or fear of punishment far more readily than any

articulated belief about the law-giver's legitimate right to command — which suggests the traditional picture, where obedience flows from a recognized authority relationship, describes the reasoning of political philosophers rather than the psychology of typical citizens.

One response is to treat this as no threat to the concept of legitimate authority at all: legitimacy, on this view, is a normative fact about whether a state's claim to authority is justified, which does not depend on whether citizens happen to recognize or believe in it, any more than a valid mathematical proof depends on whether anyone has checked it. A state can be legitimate, and its citizens obligated to obey, whether or not those citizens' actual psychological reasons for obeying track this fact. This is a coherent position, but it comes at a real cost: it makes legitimacy a fact seemingly disconnected from anything citizens actually experience or act on, which sits uneasily with the reason legitimacy is supposed to matter in the first place — namely, that it is meant to explain why citizens have a special, non-coerced kind of reason to obey, over and above fear of punishment. If most citizens' actual obedience is not run through any recognition of this reason, it is unclear what work the reason is doing in explaining their actual conduct, whatever separate normative status it retains.

A more interesting response, I think, distinguishes between what we might call standing recognition and occurrent recognition. Most citizens do not occurrently think about the state's legitimate authority as they stop at a red light — in this sense, occurrent recognition is rare, exactly as the empirical picture suggests. But many of the same citizens, if specifically asked whether the state has the right to set traffic laws, whether that right differs from a criminal gang's ability to compel compliance through fear, and whether this difference matters to them, would affirm a standing, dispositional recognition of the state's legitimate authority that simply is not occupying their attention during any particular act of unreflective

obedience. This is analogous to how a person can be said to believe, in a standing sense, that their close friend is trustworthy, without this belief being occurrently present in their mind during every routine interaction with that friend — the belief is there, available, and would surface and guide behavior differently if specifically tested (for instance, if the friend asked for an unusual favor), even though it is not doing conscious work during ordinary, habitual interaction.

This distinction rescues the traditional picture from the empirical challenge, but only partially, and honestly. It predicts that most obedience will indeed look habitual and non-reflective on the surface, exactly as the data shows, without this being evidence against a standing recognition of authority, which only needs to surface under specific conditions — an unusual demand, a direct challenge to the state's right to rule — to do its explanatory work. But it also generates a testable prediction the traditional picture must own: citizens whose standing recognition, probed directly, turns out to be genuinely absent (who would say, if asked, that they see no real difference between the state's claim to authority and a criminal gang's capacity for coercion, and comply only from fear) are not obeying a legitimate authority in the relevant sense at all, whatever their outward behavior looks like, and a state whose population consists mostly of such citizens has a much thinner claim to legitimacy than its citizens' orderly, habitual compliance would suggest from the outside. Legitimacy, properly understood, was never simply a matter of getting compliance; it was always a claim about a standing recognition that habitual obedience can mask just as easily as it can express.

ETHICS

What Gives a Promise Its Grip?

A promise binds even when circumstances change and no one would be harmed by breaking it. This essay asks what, exactly, is doing the binding.

Josefina Morales Colegio San Rafael, Bogotá

Suppose I promise a friend I will help her paint her apartment next Saturday. By Friday, she has hired professional painters instead, no longer needs my help, and would not be harmed in any way if I simply did not show up — in fact, my showing up now would mildly inconvenience the professionals. And yet most people still feel some vestigial pull to at least inform her, apologize for anything I cannot make up for, or offer help with something else, rather than treating the promise as simply void now that its practical rationale has evaporated. This essay asks what exactly is generating this pull, given that the two most obvious candidates — preventing harm to the promisee, and honoring an expectation she is relying on — have both been explicitly removed from the case by stipulation.

The most common account of promissory obligation is a reliance-based theory: a promise binds because the promisee has reasonably come to rely on it, structuring her own plans around the expectation that I will do as I said, and breaking the promise wrongs her by defeating this reliance, typically causing some setback to her plans or interests. This theory handles the ordinary case well, but the painting case is specifically constructed to remove reliance from the picture — she is no longer relying on my help at all, has made alternative arrangements, and my failure to show up would set back no plan of

hers whatsoever. If reliance were the whole story, the pull to at least acknowledge the broken promise should vanish along with the reliance that grounded it. For many people, it does not fully vanish, which suggests reliance is not the only thing a promise puts in play.

T. M. Scanlon's alternative account locates the wrong of promise-breaking not primarily in defeated reliance but in something that survives even when reliance is absent: the promisor has intentionally and voluntarily invited the promisee to form a certain kind of expectation and to grant the promisor a specific kind of trust, and the promisor thereby takes on a duty grounded in what Scanlon calls the principle of fidelity — a duty not to lead someone to form a justified expectation of this kind without due consideration, which persists to some degree even after the specific practical stakes that made the original expectation matter have changed.[1] On this view, breaking the promise in the painting case is not wrong in the same way or to the same degree as breaking a promise someone is still relying on — the wrong is much attenuated, since no concrete harm results — but it is not simply zero, because something was still deliberately created (an assurance, a specific kind of relationship between promisor and promisee, mediated by the promisor's given word) that a bare, silent failure to appear treats as though it had never been created at all, rather than acknowledging that it was and has now, for good reason, lapsed.

This explains the specific, muted shape of the residual obligation in the painting case rather well: what seems required is not showing up (which would now actually be counterproductive) but some acknowledgment — a message, an apology, an offer to make it up in some other way — that treats the promise as having existed and having been altered by changed circumstances, rather than treating it as though giving one's word had never created anything at all. This is a much thinner residual duty than the original promise carried,

calibrated to how much of the fidelity-relationship survives once the practical stakes are removed, and it explains why we do not think the promisor here has committed a serious wrong — comparable to abandoning someone who is still counting on the help — while still thinking something, however minor, is owed.

This account has a further implication worth noting: it suggests promises are not merely instrumentally useful devices for coordinating expectations, valuable only insofar as they let people rely on each other, but a distinctive kind of relationship-creating speech act whose residue outlasts the specific practical purpose it originally served — closer, in this respect, to how an apology can still be owed for a wrong whose practical consequences have long since been resolved, than to a mere coordination mechanism that becomes simply inert once coordination is no longer needed. What gives a promise its grip, on this view, is not only what it enables the promisee to plan around, but what it does, irreversibly, between promisor and promisee the moment it is made — which is why the grip, though it weakens considerably, does not disappear entirely just because the plans built on it happen to change.

NOTES

1. T. M. Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other* (1998), ch. 7, on the principle of fidelity.

EPISTEMOLOGY

The Teacher Problem: Epistemic Authority in the Classroom

Students are told both to trust their teachers and to think for themselves. This essay asks whether epistemic authority and independent thinking are actually as opposed as this advice implies.

Ingrid Halvorsen Nidaros Videregående Skole, Trondheim

Students receive a standing pair of instructions that sit uneasily together: trust your teachers, who know more than you do and have organized a curriculum for good pedagogical reasons you may not yet appreciate, and also think for yourself, question what you are told, and do not simply accept claims on authority. Taken as a strict pair of rules, these look contradictory — deferring to epistemic authority and thinking independently seem to be opposite postures a student cannot hold at once about the same claim. This essay argues the apparent contradiction dissolves once we distinguish what a student should defer to a teacher about from what a student should never defer to anyone about, and that the standard advice, properly parsed, was never actually asking for both postures toward the same target simultaneously.

The relevant distinction runs between what epistemologists call testimony about content and testimony about method. When a teacher states a settled fact within her expertise — that a chemical reaction is exothermic, that a historical event occurred on a given date, that a mathematical proof is valid — a student with no independent access to the relevant evidence has genuinely good epistemic reason to accept the claim on the teacher's authority, in

exactly the way we accept a doctor's diagnosis or a mechanic's assessment of an engine problem: expertise, verified by credentials, track record, and institutional vetting, is real evidence, and dismissing it in favor of one's own untrained assessment is not independent thinking but a failure to weigh evidence appropriately. "Think for yourself" cannot coherently mean "give your own untrained assessment equal weight to a verified expert's" on matters of settled content; that would not be a virtue, it would be a specific and common form of epistemic overconfidence.

But "think for yourself" was never best understood as targeting this kind of content-claim in the first place. Its real target is method: whether a student can, given enough time and instruction, follow the reasoning that connects the evidence to the conclusion, evaluate whether that reasoning is valid, and — crucially — recognize the specific conditions under which a given authority's testimony should and should not be trusted going forward. A student who has been taught not just the fact that the reaction is exothermic, but the underlying thermodynamic reasoning that establishes this, has gained something a student who has only memorized the teacher's conclusion has not: the capacity to independently evaluate similar claims in the future, including, eventually, claims where the teacher herself might be mistaken, outdated, or reasoning poorly. This is not a rejection of epistemic authority; it is the specific kind of independent capacity that good epistemic authority, well exercised, is supposed to cultivate in those who defer to it, rather than undermine.

This reframing dissolves the apparent contradiction: a student should defer to a teacher's authority regarding settled content within her genuine expertise, precisely because doing otherwise is bad, not good, epistemic practice, while simultaneously being taught, and expected, to independently track and evaluate the reasoning behind that content, which is a different target entirely from the content

itself. The advice was never "accept the conclusion on authority, but also reject the conclusion through independent thought" — applied to the same target, this genuinely would be incoherent. It was "accept the conclusion on legitimate authority for now, while building the independent capacity to evaluate the reasoning behind it, so that your future trust in this or any other authority is itself increasingly well-founded rather than merely habitual."

This has a practical implication for how epistemic authority ought to be exercised in a classroom, which is where the real pedagogical stakes lie: a teacher who demands assent to conclusions while actively discouraging students from examining the reasoning behind them — punishing questions, treating "why" as insubordination rather than engagement — is not exercising legitimate epistemic authority well, even if her conclusions happen to be correct, because she is failing at the second half of what makes authority worth deferring to in an educational setting: cultivating the student's own capacity to eventually evaluate, extend, correct, and outgrow the very authority currently being deferred to. The best test of whether a classroom's epistemic authority is being exercised legitimately is not whether students currently agree with everything they are told, but whether they are gaining, over time, the independent capacity to tell for themselves when a similar claim, from this or any other source, deserves the same trust.

POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

Legitimacy Without Consent: The Case of the Accidental Citizen

Most people never consented, even tacitly, to the state that governs them. This essay asks what, if not consent, could possibly ground its authority over them.

Marcus Adjei Volta Ridge International School, Accra

Consider a person born in a country, raised there, who has never formally sworn allegiance, never voted (perhaps too young, perhaps disenfranchised, perhaps simply uninterested), and who has, if asked directly, no clear sense of ever having agreed to anything regarding the state's right to govern them. This is not an unusual case; it describes the large majority of citizens in most states, at most points in their lives. Social contract theory's traditional answer — that citizens consent, if only tacitly, by remaining within the territory and accepting its benefits — has faced a long-standing and, I think, largely successful objection, most forcefully put by David Hume: remaining in one's native country, when leaving would require abandoning family, livelihood, language, and everything familiar, is not a free enough choice to constitute meaningful consent, any more than remaining on a ship whose captain threatens to throw overboard anyone who objects constitutes free consent to the captain's authority.[1] This essay takes the Humean objection as basically correct and asks what, if not consent, could ground political authority over the many citizens for whom consent, tacit or otherwise, was never really available.

One response abandons consent entirely in favor of a natural-duty account: perhaps citizens are bound not because they agreed to anything, but because a duty of justice, owed simply in virtue of being a moral agent capable of benefiting from just institutions, requires supporting and complying with reasonably just institutions wherever one happens to find oneself subject to them, whether or not one consented to their existence. This has real appeal — it does not need the strained fiction of tacit consent — but it faces its own version of what philosophers call the particularity problem: a natural duty to support just institutions, grounded purely in general moral reasoning, does not by itself explain why I owe this specific duty to this specific state rather than to any other reasonably just state that happens to exist, which seems to leave unexplained the special, particular bond citizens are usually thought to have to their own state specifically, as opposed to a generalized duty toward justice-promoting institutions wherever found.

A more promising route, I think, combines elements of both without needing either to do all the work alone. Fair-play theories, developed by philosophers including George Klosko, argue that citizens who have received significant, non-refusable benefits from a cooperative scheme — security, infrastructure, a functioning legal system, provided to them without their needing to individually request or consent to each one — incur an obligation of fair reciprocity specifically toward that scheme and its other participants, not toward justice-promoting institutions in the abstract.[2] This grounds the required particularity (the obligation runs specifically to the state whose non-refusable benefits one has actually received, not to states generally) without needing consent to do the grounding work, since receiving a non-refusable, presumptively beneficial good is a different and more modest triggering condition than having agreed to anything.

This account is not without its own difficulties — it faces hard questions about which benefits actually qualify as sufficiently beneficial and non-refusable to trigger the obligation, and about citizens who receive relatively little benefit from an unjust or dysfunctional state, for whom the fair-play account's obligation would be correspondingly weak or absent, which is arguably the correct result rather than a flaw. But it offers something both pure consent theory and pure natural-duty theory struggle to combine: an explanation of political obligation that does not require the fiction of a choice most citizens never really had, while still explaining why the obligation, where it exists, runs specifically to one's own state and its particular scheme of cooperation, rather than diffusing into an abstract duty toward justice wherever it is found. The accidental citizen, on this view, is bound not because they agreed to anything — they did not, and pretending otherwise was always a fiction — but because they have already received what fairness, once accepted, does not let a person simply pocket without eventually reciprocating in kind.

NOTES

1. David Hume, "Of the Original Contract" (1748).
2. George Klosko, *The Principle of Fairness and Political Obligation* (1992).

METAPHYSICS

Whose Rules Are They, Anyway? Authority in Games and Law

A player who breaks a game's rules is not merely playing badly — they are arguably no longer playing the same game at all. This essay asks what this tells us about legal authority.

Yara Khoury Cedars International School, Beirut

A chess player who decides, mid-game, to move their bishop like a rook has not made an unusual chess move; they have, in a fairly precise sense, stopped playing chess, because the rules of chess are not merely guidelines for how to play well but constitutive of what the activity of playing chess actually is — there is no further fact, independent of the rules, about what counts as a legal bishop move that the player could be said to be violating while still playing the same game. This essay uses this feature of games, which philosophers following John Searle call constitutive rules (as opposed to merely regulative rules, which govern an activity that could exist independently of them, like rules of etiquette governing an eating practice that would still be eating without them), to ask a question about legal authority: is law more like chess, where the rules constitute the activity of governing itself, or more like etiquette, where the rules regulate a pre-existing activity that could continue, in some form, without them?

The question matters because it changes what a violation of law actually is. If legal rules are merely regulative — governing a pre-existing activity of social cooperation that would continue, messily, without them — then breaking a law is simply a violation within an

ongoing game, comparable to a chess player making a poor but legal move, or a rugby player committing a penalty that is recognized, penalized, and play continues. But if at least some legal rules are constitutive in Searle's sense, then violating them is not merely playing the game of law badly; it is stepping outside the activity the rules constitute altogether, in the way the bishop-as-rook move stepped outside chess.

There is good reason to think significant parts of law are constitutive rather than merely regulative, and the clearest cases involve what H.L.A. Hart called power-conferring rules, as opposed to duty-imposing ones.[1] A duty-imposing rule (do not steal) regulates conduct within a pre-existing space of action; a power-conferring rule (this is how a valid will is made, this is how a binding contract is formed, this is how a law is validly enacted by a legislature) does not merely regulate an independent activity, it brings into existence the very possibility of the act it describes. There is no pre-legal fact about what counts as "making a valid will" that the power-conferring rule could be said to regulate from outside; attempting to make a will without following the constitutive formalities does not produce a poorly-made will, any more than moving the bishop like a rook produces a poorly-played chess move — it produces no will at all, exactly as the illegal bishop move produces no legal chess move at all, because the rule was never regulating a pre-existing activity, it was constituting the only activity there is to perform.

This distinction has real practical stakes for how we should think about civil disobedience and legal reform. If all law were merely regulative, breaking any law would be structurally the same kind of act — a violation within an ongoing, independently-existing game — varying only in how seriously the violation should be taken. But if power-conferring, constitutive rules are a genuinely different category, then a challenge to those specific rules (a claim that a

particular legislature's procedure for enacting law is itself illegitimate, for instance) is not a violation within the game of law at all; it is a challenge to what counts as playing the game in the first place, structurally different from an ordinary violation of a duty-imposing rule like a speed limit, and arguably calling for a different kind of justification and a different kind of response, since the person making this challenge is not claiming a specific move was illegal within an agreed game, but that the game's own constitution is illegitimate.

This gives us a more precise vocabulary than "breaking the law" for evaluating cases that otherwise get lumped together under one heading: a protester who blocks traffic to demand a policy change is violating a duty-imposing rule within an accepted legal game, and the usual questions about proportionality and civil disobedience apply straightforwardly. A movement that argues an entire constitutional convention or electoral procedure was invalidly constituted from the start is doing something else — not moving illegally within the game of law, but disputing whether the game's own constitutive rules were ever legitimately established, a challenge that cannot be adjudicated by the very rules being challenged, in the same way a dispute about whether a particular version of chess's own founding rules is the correct one cannot be settled by consulting a move that presupposes those rules are already correctly settled. Recognizing which kind of challenge is actually being made — a move within the game, or a challenge to the game's own constitution — is a precondition for knowing what kind of argument could possibly resolve it.

NOTES

1. H.L.A. Hart, *The Concept of Law* (1961), ch. 3, on the distinction between primary (duty-imposing) and secondary (power-conferring) rules.

AESTHETICS

The Authority of a Text You Didn’t Write

Readers routinely defer to what an author ‘really meant,’ as though the author held final authority over a text’s meaning. This essay asks whether that deference survives the author’s own testimony being wrong.

Oliver Bennett Marlow Grammar School, Oxfordshire

When readers disagree about what a poem or novel means, appeal is often made, if the author is available, to what the author actually intended — a letter, an interview, a stated explanation — as though this settles the question, in the way an eyewitness settles a factual dispute. This essay asks whether authorial testimony about meaning really has this final authority, and argues, following a line of thought that runs from W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley’s classic essay on the intentional fallacy through later reader-response criticism, that it does not, for reasons that have nothing to do with denying the author’s sincerity.

The case for authorial authority seems, at first, obvious: the author put the words there, presumably to communicate something, and who could know better than they do what that something was? But consider a case, not hypothetical in the history of literature, where an author, years after publishing a work, offers an account of its meaning that competent readers, examining the text itself, find themselves unable to square with what the text actually does — imagery that consistently supports a different reading, structural choices that reinforce a theme the author’s later account does not

mention or actively downplays. When this happens, literary practice does not automatically defer to the author's testimony over the text's own internal evidence; sophisticated readers frequently, and I think correctly, continue to find the textual evidence more authoritative than the author's own later account of what they meant to do.

This is not readers being disrespectful of authorial intent; it reflects something real about how meaning gets made in the first place, which is not simply a private mental event in the author's head that the text then transparently reports. A text is produced through a long process — drafting, revision, the constraints of form and genre, unconscious pattern-making, the influence of other works — during which an author's conscious intentions are only one input among several shaping the final result, and the finished text can straightforwardly contain patterns, implications, and resonances the author did not consciously intend and might not recognize or endorse when asked directly, in the same way a speaker can unknowingly reveal something through word choice or repeated imagery that a psychoanalyst notices and the speaker themselves would deny. The text, once made, is a public object with its own internal structure and evidence, and this structure does not automatically update to match whatever the author later says about it.

This does not make authorial intent worthless, and the intentional fallacy, properly understood, was never the claim that intention is irrelevant to meaning — Wimsatt and Beardsley's actual target was narrower: that a work's success or meaning cannot be judged by appeal to intention as evidence external to the text, in place of examining the text's own internal achievement. Knowing an author's stated intention can be a useful hypothesis to test against the text, can illuminate historical and biographical context genuinely relevant to interpretation, and matters enormously for other questions (was

the author being ironic, what genre were they working within, what other works were they responding to). What it cannot do is simply overrule the text's own internal evidence by fiat, as though the author held a kind of final veto over readings the text itself, examined carefully, does not actually support.

The deeper point is that a text's authority, once published, is not identical to its author's authority, because the meaning-making process that produced the text was never fully under the author's conscious control to begin with, and the author's later testimony about what they meant is itself just another piece of evidence to be weighed against the text's own internal patterns — authoritative evidence, often very good evidence, but not, as many readers instinctively assume, evidence that simply trumps the text itself the way a document's signatory can authoritatively settle what a contract says. A text, once finished, has its own case to make, and sometimes that case, on the evidence, turns out to be different from the one its own author later tries to argue on its behalf.

MASTHEAD

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