

## Supporting Wolff's Anarchism

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### Overview

In this paper I will examine Wolff's defense of philosophical anarchism given in his paper 'The Conflict between Authority and Autonomy'. I will first present Wolff's central argument and then proceed to consider a possible objection that might undermine his argument. I will conclude by responding to this objection, clarifying and strengthening Wolff's claim that legitimate authority cannot exist.

### Wolff's Argument

Wolff begins with a concept of *authority*. Wolff defines legitimate authority as authority that has the *right* to command. He is clear to differentiate this from power, where we comply only due to threat of force, and distinguishes it from persuasive argument where we are *convinced* that we ought to comply with a command. I understand this to mean that true legitimate authority implies that there can be cases where I am obligated to do what the authority tells me to do for *no other reason* than that the authority tells me to do it.

Next, Wolff describes the concept of *autonomy*. The essence of autonomy is that an individual is responsible for their actions. If I possess free will and am rational, I have an obligation to take responsibility for how I act. As Wolff puts it, “The autonomous man, insofar as he is autonomous, is not subject to the will of another. He may do what another tells him, but not *because* he has been told to do it. He is therefore, in the political sense of the word, *free*” (pg. 27). According to Wolff, I have a moral duty to be autonomous. I may take advice and consider possible punishment for my actions, but ultimately the moral implications of my actions fall on my own conscious as a consequence of my free choice.

Wolff finishes by claiming that the concept of legitimate authority is not compatible with the concept of an obligation to autonomy. Blindly complying with a command from authority necessarily means we do not take responsibility for that action. He concludes that if we are to accept a duty to autonomy (as he thinks we should), then there cannot be legitimate authority. Wolff concludes that philosophical anarchism is the only reasonable political philosophy.

Summarizing the argument,

(P1) Legitimate authority requires us to obey independent of other reasons

(P2) Obligation to autonomy requires us to take responsibility for our actions

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(C1) Legitimate authority and an obligation to autonomy are not compatible

Further,

(P3) Legitimate authority and an obligation to autonomy are not compatible

(P4) We have a moral obligation to autonomy

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(C2) Legitimate authority does not exist

### **Objection to Wolff**

I believe that (P1), (P2) and (P4) are difficult to defeat (or at least that it would be bold to try). The critic will likely question (C1)/(P3), denying the validity of Wolff's argument. I will outline what I feel is the strongest argument made against Wolff. Arguments for political legitimacy made by Dworkin and Raz are flavors of this kind. It goes something like this:

Consider personal moral obligations separate from political ones. These may include things such as

- (i) An obligation to social order
- (ii) An associative obligation to a community or institution (e.g. based on respect or an understanding)
- (iii) An obligation to act in the most rational way possible

Dworkin proposes something like (ii) and Raz something like (iii). What is the best possible way to fulfill these obligations? One possible answer is a *general* adherence to the law. It is not controversial to claim that surrendering to an authority can be the best way to achieve social order (e.g. coordination issues) or that surrendering to an authority that has superior knowledge can be the best way to achieve the most rational actions. I am simply *making an autonomous decision* to follow the law independent of all other reasons.

This model still fits the definition Wolff gives for authority. Take the example discussed in class where I stop at a stop sign in the desert. I have *no* moral reason to stop and *no* fear of punishment. However, because of my general obligation to social order, I have decided to follow traffic laws. Although I would normally feel *zero* obligation to stop at this stop sign specifically, my obligation to social order has in turn given me this obligation. I am following the rule requiring me to stop at the stop sign *only* because it is law, which according to Wolff is the mark of a legitimate authority. This

does not conflict with my duty to autonomy because *I made an autonomous decision* to submit to the law *in general*.

It would appear that Wolff's argument is at risk as this argument implies that personal autonomy and legitimate authority *are* compatible and therefore legitimate authority *can* exist.

## Response

Wolff's conclusion that there cannot be legitimate authority can be salvaged by clarifying his definition of authority.

Wolff's definition of legitimate authority is the following: an authority is legitimate if we have an obligation to obey the law *simply because it is the law*. I propose a stronger definition that more accurately captures the intended meaning of legitimate authority: an authority is legitimate if we have an **external** obligation to obey the law *simply because it is the law*. By this, I mean that the obligation to obey that law originates from a source that is *not* the individual being subjected to it. Why is this important? If the obligation to obey the law is not *external* but **internal**, stemming from personal moral obligation, then the obligation to the law is independent of the authority itself. This case is anarchy, as the obligation to the law is completely dependent on the person obeying it.

The argument outlined in the previous section is a case of *internal* obligation to the law and therefore is not true legitimate authority. In the example where I stop at the stop sign in the desert, the obligation to stop is not un-

caused. This obligation originates from *my* moral reasons (my obligation to social order) and is subject to change, independent of the authority.

In order to show that legitimate authority exists, Wolff's critic must now demonstrate that the obligation to obey the law is an *external* one, contrary to what I have argued. However, this does not seem possible, as it is undeniable that an *external* obligation directly conflicts with autonomy. If I have an obligation that does not in any way originate from myself, I can in no way say that I am taking responsibility for the action required to fulfill the obligation. The conclusion is that legitimate authority, understood in the new and more correct sense, cannot exist.

### **Objecting to the Definition of Legitimate Authority**

Wolff's critic might grant that the argument is valid, but deny its soundness, insisting that the definition of legitimate authority is too strong and is not accurate.

I have no problem instead calling the type of authority I am talking about *absolute external authority* (AEA). I will then let the term *legitimate authority* be interpreted in some weaker sense that does not require the authority to impose obligation externally (if it pleases Wolff's critic). It is still a worthwhile endeavor to show that AEA cannot exist. I won't develop the idea here, but the belief that AEA exists is pervasive and it is important to realize that this is false.

Anything weaker than AEA *is* consistent with philosophical anarchism.

If I do not have the obligation forced upon me, but instead am bound by an obligation that is fluid, non-binding and influenced by my own internal reasons, how is that not anarchy? Political obligation that is not completely independent of the individual bound to it is a state of anarchy.

At this point I think it is a good idea to abandon names like ‘anarchy’ and ‘legitimate authority’ along with all the baggage that they carry. Perhaps it is better to try to define an *optimal* authority. This term accurately captures our interest in an authority that is to some degree just but does not imply any *right* to command. For example, maybe an optimal authority is one that achieves *maximal local authority*: an authority where the largest number of individuals possible have some obligation to obey the law and an act against the law is seen as a moral disagreement and not a moral wrong.

## **Conclusion**

I have shown how Wolff’s definition of authority leaves the argument susceptible to claims that legitimate authority and autonomy are not in fact contradictory. I then demonstrated how strengthening Wolff’s definition of legitimate authority to include the notion of external obligation reaffirms the conflicting nature of autonomy and legitimate authority.

## **References**

- [1] R.P. Wolff. *The Conflict between Authority and Autonomy*.

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