Authority in Thought and Action

Benjamin McMyler
Texas A&M University

I. Introduction

Do authority relations play a role in theoretical rationality that is robustly analogous to the role that they play in practical rationality?

II. Historical context

In the Port Royal *Logic*, Arnauld and Nicole distinguish knowledge derived from authority from knowledge derived from either reasoning or sensory experience:

> Everything we have just said up to now concerns knowledge that is exclusively human and based on rational evidence. But before ending it will be good to discuss another kind of knowledge that often is no less certain nor less evident in its own way, namely knowledge derived from authority.
>
> For there are two general paths that lead us to believe that something is true. The first is knowledge we have of it ourselves, from having recognized and examined the truth either by the senses or by reason. This can generally be called *reason*, because the senses themselves depend on a judgment by reason, or *science*, taking this name more generally than it is taken in the Schools, to mean all knowledge of an object derived from the object itself.
>
> The other path is the authority of persons worthy of credence who assure us that a certain thing exists, although by ourselves we know nothing about it. This is called faith or belief, following the saying of St. Augustine: *Quod scimus, debemus rationi, quod credimus, autoritati* [What we know we owe to reason, what we believe, to authority]. (1996: 260)

In the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Locke lists authority as one of the four "wrong measures of probability", one of the four grounds on which we commonly misuse our understanding in forming beliefs concerning contingent matters of fact on the basis of non-demonstrative reasoning:

> The fourth and last *wrong Measure of Probability* I shall take note of, and which keeps in Ignorance, or Errour, more People than all the other together, is . . . the *giving up our Assent to the common received Opinions*, either of our Friends, or Party; Neighborhood, or Country. How many Men have no other ground for their Tenets, than the supposed Honesty, or Learning, or Number of those of the same Profession? As if honest, or bookish Men could not err; or Truth were to be established by the Vote of the Multitude: yet this with most Men serves the Turn. The Tenet has had the attestation of reverend Antiquity, it comes to me with the Pass-port of former Ages, and therefore I

> am secure in the Reception I give it: other Men have been, and are of the same Opinion, (for that is all is said,) and therefore it is reasonable for me to embrace it. A Man may more justifiably throw up Cross and Pile for his Opinions, than take them up by such Measures. (1975: 718)

Locke's denial that there is any such thing as genuine theoretical authority is structurally parallel to the philosophical anarchist's denial that there is any such thing as genuine, legitimate, or *de jure* practical authority.

Philosophical anarchists hold that there is no such thing as *a distinctively authoritative reason for action*, no such thing as a reason for action of the kind that authoritative practical directives (such as orders and commands) intuitively purport to provide. Authoritative practical directives purport to provide reasons for action that are predicated on the audience's "suspending private judgment" concerning what to do, but according to the philosophical anarchist, to act while suspending private judgment concerning what to do (to genuinely obey the directive) is to act for something other than a genuine practical reason.

Locke seems to think that there is no such thing as *a distinctively authoritative reason for belief*, no such thing as a reason for belief of the kind that authoritative theoretical directives (such as testimony) intuitively purport to provide. Authoritative theoretical directives purport to provide reasons for belief that are predicated on the audience's "suspending private judgment" concerning what is the case, but according to the theoretical anarchist, to believe while suspending private judgment concerning what is the case is to believe for something other than a genuine epistemic reason.

Most contemporary epistemologists seem to at least tacitly accept this Lockean position concerning theoretical authority. Most contemporary epistemologist are theoretical anarchists.

The structural parallel between the practical and theoretical guises of philosophical anarchism suggests that, absent reason for thinking that there is a relevant difference between the practical and theoretical cases, the two positions should either stand or fall together.

III. The epistemology of social influence

Social epistemologists have paid little attention to the various ways in which we attempt to influence the beliefs of others.

Political philosophers commonly recognize three important forms of social influence on action:

(1) rational persuasion
(2) authority
(3) coercion

These three forms of social influence on action are *overtly rational*—they openly purport to influence the actions of others by influencing their reasons for action. They are thus different from forms of non-rational manipulation. Other forms of overtly rational social influence include requests, offers, and warnings.

Many political philosophers have thought that in order to understand the nature of social influence by authority, we need to understand how it differs from both coercion and rational persuasion.

> "Since authority always demands obedience, it is commonly mistaken for some form of power or violence. Yet authority precludes the use of external means of coercion; where force is used, authority itself has failed. Authority, on the other hand, is incompatible with persuasion, which presupposes equality and works through a process of argumentation. Where arguments are used, authority is left in abeyance. Against the egalitarian order of persuasion stands the authoritarian order, which is always hierarchical. If authority is to be defined at all, then, it must be in contradistinction to both coercion by force and persuasion through arguments. (The authoritarian relation between the one who commands and the one who obeys rests neither on common reason nor on the power of the one who commands; what they have in common is the hierarchy itself, whose rightness and legitimacy both recognize and where both have their predetermined stable place.)" (Arendt 1954: 92-93)

If we want to understand the role of authority in both the theoretical and practical realm, then we need to pay careful attention to the differences between theoretical and practical rationality.

> A reason is a consideration that one takes to bear on a question.
> Practical reasons are considerations that one takes to bear on the question whether to Φ.
> Epistemic reasons are considerations that one takes to bear on the question whether p.
> Practical deliberation is deliberation that aims at settling the question whether to Φ.
> Theoretical deliberation is deliberation that aims at settling the question whether p.

IV. Rational persuasion

Rational persuasion involves presenting an audience with considerations that bear on the question whether p (arguing) or whether to Φ (advising) independently of the speaker's act of presenting these considerations to the audience. The audience must then settle "for itself" the relevant question.

If the audience accepts the speaker's argument or advice, then the speaker may be (managerially) responsible for putting the audience in a position where she is likely

to settle for herself the relevant questions, but the speaker isn't answerable for the rationality of the audience's belief or action.

Managerial responsibility (?): the kind of responsibility an agent bears for the effects of her actions aimed at managing other persons, objects, and events.

V. Authority

The act of telling is an exercise of authority that serves to direct the thought or action of an addressee by substituting the authority's theoretical or practical judgment for the addressee's.

> Telling A to Φ (ordering or commanding) aims to direct A's action (by way of A's forming the intention to Φ and executing this intention in acting).
> Telling A that p (testifying) aims to direct A's belief.

A general feature of rational agency: agents are answerable (can be asked for their reasons and are open to criticism) for whether their actions and (judgment-sensitive or commitment-constituted) attitudes live up to the rational standards governing these actions and attitudes. Not only can an agent's actions and attitudes be evaluated with respect to whether the actions and attitudes meet these standards, but since these actions and attitudes involve the agent's having settled a relevant question (e.g., whether p, whether to Φ) and thereby "reveal the agent's will" or "result from the agent's rational activity," the agent herself is open to criticism in light of this evaluation.

The exercise of legitimate authority impacts in a distinctive way on this general feature of rational agency:

> When A intends to Φ on the basis of S's command to Φ, (1) A counts as having settled the question whether to Φ but (2) A hasn't settled this question "for herself." Insofar as A counts as having settled the question whether to Φ, A is answerable for her having done so. She is open to criticism concerning the practical rationality of her action. But insofar as A hasn't settled this question "for herself," A is not solely answerable. S is also partially answerable for A's having so settled this question, and so S is also open to criticism concerning the practical rationality of A's action.
>
> When A believes that p on the basis of S's testimony that p, (1) A counts as having settled the question whether p but (2) A hasn't settled this question "for herself." Insofar as A counts as having settled the question whether p, A is answerable for her having done so. She is open to criticism concerning the theoretical rationality of her action. But insofar as A hasn't settled this question "for herself," A is not solely answerable. S is also partially answerable for A's having so settled this question, and so S is also open to criticism concerning the theoretical rationality of A's belief.

How should we characterize the sense in which S is open to criticism concerning the rationality of A's belief or action?

> Consider the phenomenon of justificatory buck-passing. Ordinarily, if an agent's belief that p is challenged (in a way that involves the presentation of evidence that tells against p), the audience ought to either find some way to meet the challenge or else give up her belief. Similarly, if an agent's intention to Φ is challenged (in a way that involves presenting considerations that count against Φ-ing being the thing to do), the audience ought to either find some way to meet the challenge or else give up her intention. However, in the case of belief and intention based on tellings, if A's belief or intention is challenged in this way, A appears to be rationally entitled (in certain situations) to maintain her belief or intention by deferring the challenge back to S. In this respect, S isn't simply (managerially) responsible for putting A in a position where A is likely to conclude that p or to conclude to Φ (to settle these questions "for herself"). Rather, S is partially answerable and thereby open to criticism for A's theoretical or practical conclusions themselves. S is partially answerable for whether A's belief or action lives up to the relevant rational standards.

Authorities don't simply purport to manage the ways in which others settle the relevant theoretical and practical questions. Rather, authorities purport to settle these questions *for* others.

> This explains why Godwin (1971: 124) thinks that the exercise of authority is actually more threatening to our humanity than the brute exercise of coercive force—deference to authority involves voluntary surrendering one's rational capacities to another.

This gives us an account of the nature of distinctively authoritative reasons: distinctively authoritative reasons (the reasons provided by a speaker's tellings) are reasons for belief or action that serve to parcel out answerability for the belief or action between the authority and the subject of the authority.

A (radical) consequence: the kind of activity that is fundamental to what it is to be an agent (the settling of questions) can be socially distributed. Here it looks like *agency itself* can be socially distributed.

VI. Coercion

Two ways in which action might be said to be coerced:

(1) direct practical coercion: a speaker influences an audience to Φ by threatening the audience with a consequence of not Φ-ing where the threatened consequence functions for the audience as a reason for Φ-ing.
(2) compelling coercion: a speaker influences an audience to Φ by threatening the audience with a consequence of not Φ-ing where the

threatened consequence functions to overwhelm the audience's practical deliberation, compelling the audience to Φ.

Three ways in which belief might be said to be coerced:

(1) direct doxastic coercion: a speaker influences an audience to believe that p by threatening the audience with a consequence of not believing that p where the threatened consequence functions for the audience as an epistemic reason for believing that p. (This is impossible.)
(2) indirect doxastic coercion: a speaker influences an audience to believe that p by directly coercing the audience into performing actions aimed at bringing about the belief that p. (This is possible and sometimes epistemically acceptable. However, it is ultimately just a form of practical coercion.)
(3) compelling doxastic coercion: a speaker influences an audience to believe that p by threatening the audience with a consequence of not believing that p where the threatened consequence functions to overwhelm the audience's theoretical deliberation, compelling the audience to believe that p. (This is possible but always epistemically problematic.)

In employing any of these forms of coercion, I am managerially responsible for putting an agent in a position to settle these questions in the way that I intend, but as in the case of persuasion, I am not answerable for the agent's conclusions themselves.

There is also a broader (Kantian, republican?) conception of coercion according to which "an act is coercive if it subjects one person to the choice of another" (Ripstein 2009: 54). Depending on how exactly we construe "subjects" and "choice," the exercise of both theoretical and practical authority might count as coercive in this respect.

VII. Raz's service conception of authority

Genuine authorities provide the service of mediating between agents and the reasons for belief or action that apply to these agents independently of the authorities' directives. Authorities provide this service by issuing directives (commands or testimony) that provide "protected" or "pre-emptive" reasons, reasons that are both first-order reasons for belief or action and second-order reasons that exclude the agent's belief or action being based on certain other first-order reasons.

In what way does a pre-emptive reason exclude an agent's action being based on certain other first-order reasons? Raz claims (rightly, I think) that genuine obedience or deference to authority doesn't require that the agent stop deliberating. So what, then, does it require? It requires that my deliberation can't take a particular form. But what form can't it take?

An example: An authority orders an agent to Φ. The agent thinks to herself, "The authority's judgment is mistaken. Φ-ing is not the thing to do in the situation. Nevertheless, I still ought to Φ. The authority told me to."

This looks like a case in which it is rational for the agent to obey the command even though she thinks that, in her own private judgment, Φ-ing is not the thing to do. So we might think that to suspend private judgment is not to suspend deliberation about what ought to be done but rather to exclude one's action from being based on such deliberation. (Raz sometimes construes pre-emption in this way.)

This explanation of pre-emption won't work for theoretical authority, however. There are no cases in which it is rational for an agent to believe that p on a speaker's authority even though she thinks that, in her own private judgment, p isn't true.

> "Belief on authority calls for internal assent, whereas the notion of acting in conformity to the commands of authority allows for the dissociation of thought and action." (Friedman 1990: 72)

If we want to provide an account of authoritative reasons that will apply to both theoretical and practical authority (as Raz seems to—see Raz 2009: 155), then we need an account of pre-emption that doesn't rely on disjoining theoretical and practical reasoning. The Razian account of the above practical case relies on separating the agent's theoretical reasoning concerning what ought to be done in the situation (reasoning that concludes in a belief about what ought to be done) from the agent's practical reasoning concerning what to do (reasoning that concludes in acting or in the formation of an intention). Unsurprisingly, no such separation is possible in the theoretical realm.

We need an account of what it is for theoretical and practical deliberation themselves to be pre-empted. Raz holds that this requires that the agent's belief or action is not based on certain other first-order reasons. But what does this claim amount to? Is it a causal claim, that the most salient part of the causal explanation of why the agent believes or acts as she does can't be the agent's responsiveness to these other first-order reasons?

My account of authoritative reasons provides a different (though not necessarily inconsistent) explanation in terms of answerability. The form that an agent's deliberation cannot take is that in which the agent settles the relevant question "for herself." The agent can deliberate all she wants about what to do or what is the case, but as long she ultimately acknowledges the speaker's authority in such a way as to cede partial responsibility for her belief or action to the authority, then she counts as genuinely deferring to or obeying the authority.

My account is also in a better position than Raz's to explain the philosophical anarchist's worry about authority. Raz claims that the anarchist refuses to accept that authoritative directives amount to second-order exclusionary reasons (1979: 26-27), but it isn't clear why the anarchist should be worried about this. After all,

the readings of ordinary instruments seem to provide first-order reasons that are also second-order exclusionary reasons (Raz seems to accept this. See also Zagzebski, manuscript), and the anarchist doesn't have any problem with the reasons provided by ordinary instruments. On my account the distinguishing feature of authoritative reasons is the way in which these reasons parcel out responsibility between speaker and audience, and it's easy to see why the anarchist would be worried about this. The anarchist holds that ceding responsibility for one's belief or action is inconsistent with autonomous rational agency.

VIII. Authority and the second person

The distinctive kind of reason for belief or action generated by authoritative theoretical or practical directives can only be acquired by addressees. In telling an audience that p or to Φ, only the addressee of the speaker's telling counts as having been told that p or to Φ. While mere overhearers can certainly acquire reasons for belief and action from overhearing the speaker's telling, they do not acquire the kind of reason for belief or action associated with being told, namely a reason for belief or action that parcels out answerability for the theoretical or practical rationality of the belief or action between the speaker and the addressee. So address is a necessary condition for the generation of distinctively authoritative reasons.

> Distinctively authoritative theoretical and practical reasons are, in this respect, "second-personal reasons," reasons that would not exist apart from being addressed from a speaker to an audience. (Note the Darwall denies that there are any genuinely or irreducibly second-personal reasons *for belief*.)

The generation of these distinctively authoritative reasons also requires a kind of mutually recognized relationship between speaker and audience. It requires (1) that the speaker assumes partial responsibility for the audience's belief or action through issuing a telling and (2) that the audience acknowledges the speaker's authority by accepting this assumption of responsibility on the part of the speaker.

> "[T]o use the concept of authority to explain the influence one man has over another always implies that there exists between those persons something more than that the one is 'influencing' the other. It implies that there exists some mutually recognized normative relationship giving the one the right to command or speak and the other the duty to obey. Authority thus involves a form of influence that can only be exercised from within a certain kind of normative arrangement accepted by both parties. Therefore to explain how one man can exercise authoritative influence over another always calls for an explanation of the existence (acceptance) of the arrangement within which the parties conceive themselves to be embraced." (Friedman 1990: 71)

However, the kind of theoretical or practical authority involved in telling an audience that p or to Φ seems to be different from the "second-personal authority" involved in issuing valid claims or demands (Darwall) and the "illocutionary authority" involved in constituting what one says as the illocutionary act that it is

(Moran). The latter forms of authority are insufficient (though likely necessary) for the former.