

Responding to Robert Wolff's *In Defense of Anarchism*

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Abstract

While I partly agree with earlier responses to Wolff's anarchist proposal, I find them inadequate or counter-productive in one way or another. Partly in contrast and partly to supplement, I object to Wolff's argument that individual autonomy is incompatible with state authority by arguing that this incompatibility is negated if individual autonomy is represented by internal moral and practical convictions for obeying state command. I fault Wolff's avoidance of contractualism and his presentation of state as alien, and show that his definition of authority is actually a definition of power. I object to Wolff's assumption that men are purely rational animals, and that rationality is the only component of human decisions, which is foundational to his proposal that men can exist without state or social organization. I argue that Wolff's *de jure* attack on state ricochets into individual autonomy: if there is no state in the ideal sense, it is because there is no individual autonomy in the ideal sense.

Keywords: *anarchism, state authority, individual autonomy, freedom, responsibility*

Wolff's *In Defense of Anarchism*

In his famous book, *In defense of anarchism* (1970), Robert Paul Wolff seeks to show that political authority contradicts individual autonomy. He begins by clarifying the respective concepts (authority and autonomy). He defines authority as "the right to command, and correlatively, the right to be obeyed" (Wolff, 1970, p. 3). He distinguishes this from power, which he sees as the ability to compel compliance, either through the use or the threat of force. According to him, we would hand over our items to a thief, not because he has authority, but because the fate which he threatens might be more than the loss of money that we are made to suffer (1970, p. 3).

Importantly, Wolff (1970) wants us to take seriously the distinction between claiming authority and having authority: “To claim authority is to claim the right to be obeyed. To have authority is then -- what? It may mean to have that right, or it may mean to have one's claim acknowledged and accepted by those at whom it is directed” (p. 4).

Wolff also takes care to distinguish between the descriptive and normative senses of the concept of authority. Descriptively, there may be lots of practical reasons why we should obey a political authority (like law and order, peace and security, etc.) but these do not settle the normative question of whether the political contraption has legitimate authority, that is, whether it has the normative right to command, and can (normatively) claim the right to be obeyed. Wolff raises his stakes by making this clarification: “Obedience is not a matter of doing what someone tells you to do. It is a matter of doing what he tells you to do because he tells you to do it” (1970, p. 6). So why, Wolff asks, do men obey authority? Wolff suggests three reasons. The first is tradition: “The fact that something has always been done in a certain way strikes most men as a perfectly adequate reason for doing it that way again” (1970, p. 5). The second is that people, by virtue of their extraordinary characteristics or charisma, gather followers and acquire the ability to command and be obeyed. The third source of perceived authority is today’s bureaucratic positions (the image of a man or woman in uniform is one such instance). But for Wolff:

That men accede to claims of supreme authority is plain. That men ought to accede to claims of supreme authority is not so obvious. Our first question must therefore be, under what conditions and for what reasons does one man have supreme authority over another? The same question can be restated, under what conditions can a state (understood normatively) exist? (1970, p. 8).

This leads Wolff to distinguish between *de facto* and *de jure* authority. *De facto* means that something actually exists (it is a fact); *de jure* means that it is right or lawful, existence or no existence. Since there are men who acknowledge claims to authority, there are *de facto* states, but can we prove a *de jure* state? Wolff (1970) reminds us that: “All normative concepts are non empirical, for they refer to what ought to be rather than to what is. Hence, we cannot justify the use of the concept of (normative) supreme authority by presenting instances” (p. 6).

Wolff also takes care to distinguish between authority and persuasive argument:

When I am commanded to do something, I may choose to comply even though I am not being threatened, because I am brought to believe that it is something which I ought to do. If that is the case, then I am not, strictly speaking, obeying a command, but rather acknowledging the

force of an argument or the tightness of a prescription. The person who issues the “command” functions merely as the occasion for my becoming aware of my duty, and his role might in other instances be filled by an admonishing friend, or even by my own conscience (1970, p. 4-5).

This leads Wolff to tackle the concept of individual autonomy, in which we see Kant’s influence. Wolff begins with the fundamental assumption in moral philosophy that men and women are responsible for their actions. Taking responsibility for actions results from (1) freedom to take decisions, and (2) ability to reason out decision to take from alternatives. For example, mad men and women are deprived of free will while children are deprived of mature reason (Wolff, 1970, p. 8). Taking responsibility for decisions and actions does not come from mere ability to choose, but also from increasing one’s capacity to choose, which lays upon one the burdens of gaining knowledge, reflecting on motives, predicting outcomes, criticizing principles, and so on. But the shortage or lack of these does not preclude taking responsibility for one’s actions. Thus, an individual is alone the judge of his/her own moral constraints, he/she is self-legislating, he/she may listen to advice from others, but makes it his/her own by determining whether it is good advice. In short, individuals are autonomous (1970, p. 9). Here is the heart of Wolff’s anarchism:

As Kant argued, moral autonomy is a combination of freedom and responsibility; it is a submission to laws which one has made for oneself. The autonomous being, insofar as he/she is autonomous, is not subject to the will of another. They may do what another tells them, but not because they have been told to do it. They are therefore, in the political sense of the word, free (1970, p. 14).

Wolff notes that in as much as autonomy is to take responsibility for one’s actions (and decisions), subjects frequently forfeit their autonomy at will, by deciding to obey the commands of another without the attempt to determine for themselves whether that command is good or wise. But this should not be confused with the false assertion that an individual can give up responsibility for their actions, for even after they have subjected themselves to the will of another, they remain responsible for what they do (1970, pp. 9-10).

Wolff also notes that taking responsibility for one’s actions means taking the final decisions about what one should do. Thus for the “autonomous man”, there is no such thing, strictly speaking, as a command (1970, p. 10). Now, it will be more productive to quote in verbatim Wolff’s major thesis:

The defining mark of the state is authority, the right to rule. The primary obligation of man is autonomy, the refusal to be ruled. It would seem, then, that there can be no resolution of the conflict between the autonomy of the individual and the putative authority of the state. Insofar as a man fulfils his obligation to make himself the author of his decisions, he will resist the state's claim to have authority over him. That is to say, he will deny that he has a duty to obey the laws of the state simply because they are the laws. In that sense, it would seem that anarchism is the only political doctrine consistent with the virtue of autonomy (1970, p. 18).

Wolff concludes this thesis by noting that if all human beings have a continuing obligation to achieve the highest degree of autonomy possible, then there would appear to be no state whose subjects have a moral obligation to obey its commands. Hence for him, political authority is a logical contradiction, the concept of a *de jure* legitimate state seems to be vacuous, and philosophical anarchism would seem to be the only reasonable political belief for an “enlightened man” (1970, p. 12).

Responses to Wolff's *In Defense of Anarchism*

Wolff's *In defense of anarchism* has provoked responses. The most sustained of these is Jeffrey Reiman's book *In defense of political philosophy*. Reiman begins by telling us the background that motivated Wolff's position by explaining that there is a difference between the politics of a nation (day-to-day decisions and actions of politicians) and its political imagination (that sense of the connection between the real and the ideal, possible and utopian, which is felt before it is reasoned out [Reiman 1972: xiii]). The American popular political imagination (political ideals) was under attack from rising inequality. Those for whom affluence is the realization of a personal dream sensed little tension between the real and the ideal in American institutions, but those for whom poverty was a fact of life felt a painful distance between these two positions (American popular political imagination and reality). The youthful President John Kennedy, who represented the last attempt to heal this breach, was assassinated, and those who succeeded him made it clear that the business of politics is power (1972: xiv). The change in political imagination was great, from the identification of the real and the ideal to their radical separation, and Wolff's defense of anarchism, emerging from this background of growing political skepticism, became its most well received philosophical expression.

However, Reiman distinguishes between moral and political authority, and argues that what Wolff denies is moral authority. Reiman agrees that moral authority can

be denied, and argues that, indeed, the notion of moral authority is redundant and meaningless, since it implies creating by fiat other people's moral duties, regardless of their decisions to their moral duties (1972, p. xx). The notion of moral authority is like conceiving of a "wild-card morality" demanding that one should have a moral obligation to do something, while the nature of that something can be filled in later (1972, p. 2), it implies a duty to do something not because of what it is but because of where it comes from (God, King, Law, or Father), it entails a moral obligation to something with indifference to the moral nature of that action (1972, p. 3). But Reiman asks if we see a work of art as beautiful simply because its artist said so, or if we see an argument as correct simply because the proponent of the argument said it is correct (1972, pp. 3-4). He does not think so, and he argues that just as the truth of a conclusion comes from the nature of an argument and the beauty of a painting comes from an art work itself, so the moral obligatoriness of an action comes from the nature of the action itself. And since moral obligatoriness enjoins us to do what is right rather than what people say, Reiman takes this to mean that moral autonomy is an essential component of moral obligation (1972, p. 2). Only a morally autonomous individual could entertain moral reasons and be persuaded by them as to his moral obligation...Moral autonomy is a component of acting out of moral obligation itself (1972, p. 7).

So, argues Reiman, it is not only that the notion of moral authority is a contradiction (1972, p. 4), moral authority and moral autonomy are strictly incompatible (1972, p. xxi). Here, Reiman seems to be on the same page with Wolff, but Reiman then proceeds to state his case against Wolff. Reiman argues that what the state has is not moral authority, and that Wolff is conflating the political with the moral realm (1972, p. xxii), indeed, that Wolff wants to swallow political philosophy into moral philosophy (1972, p. xxvi). Reiman argues that what the state has is political (rather than moral) authority, and that the commands of a state are legally, not morally, binding (1972, p. xxv). He explains this by saying that a state can be legitimate without its commands or laws necessarily constituting the moral duty of its citizens, and that an individual can be under a legitimate legal obligation even when he is under a moral obligation to break the law (p. xxv)¹. In fact for Reiman, moral authority entails making the final decisions about what one should do, but political authority entails having the liberty to act upon the decisions one has made. To seal this argument, Reiman argues that coercion is the key to the meaning of the state (1972, pp. xxiv; pp. 20-21). To reconcile this with the issue of morality, Reiman argues that the legitimacy of a state can only be judged from the moral result of coercion, the moral test of the legitimacy of the state lies in the moral consequences of the existence of political authority (1972, p. xxx), and this moral test can

¹Reiman uses "legal" and "political" interchangeably (1972, p. 21).

be augmented by asking and answering: what will be the moral consequences of alternative political systems, or the absence of a political system (1972, p. 18). Reiman thus tells us that, had Wolff seen that moral authority is meaningless, he might have seen that seeking legitimate political authority defined in terms of moral authority is equally meaningless (1972, p. 5).

On the whole, I consider Reiman's response to be bold, even if a bit reactionary. Let me point out some reservations that I have about Reiman's refutation attempts. In distinguishing moral from political authority, and in defining political authority as deriving its essence from the use of force (1972, p. 20), Reiman does nothing to assuage the very kinds of skepticism that he sees as fueling proposals like Wolff's. Reiman says this:

Indeed, coercion is the key to the meaning of the state...Moral autonomy entails making the final decisions about what one should do. Political autonomy entails having the liberty to act upon the decisions one has made. A defense of political autonomy can be a defense against coercion, against the authority of the state, but a defense of moral autonomy cannot – because one is not more morally autonomous when one is less coerced. I am not less able to make the final decision about what I should do when I can do nothing (1972, p. xxiv).

Of every other possible argument that can be made in defence of the existence of the legitimacy of the state, this is the kind of argument that Reiman thinks fit to make to assuage the growing political skepticism that he so clearly identified in Wolff's societal background. In fact, Reiman seems to go too far when he adopts this argument from Thomas McPherson: politics is not a branch of ethics, just as ethics is not a branch of politics, the plain man recognizes differences between the political game and the moral game (Reiman, 1972, p. 17). This is not necessary to refute Wolff. After denying that a political system should have binding moral effects on its citizens, Reiman argues that a political system should be judged according to its moral effects. Both arguments (politics is not ethics, but political systems should be judged with moral consequences) are unhealthily juxtaposed, and the contradiction emerges in this passage from Reiman: "The political system represented by a state is the system of the conditions distinguishing acceptable from unacceptable behavior, and thus the conditions under which the state will exercise physical force as a last resort to prevent or punish or discourage unacceptable behavior". But how different is "acceptable behavior" from moral acts? Given that what counts as moral is decided by human beings, will the same themes not underlie their determination of what is "acceptable"? This seems like playing into Wolff's hands.

In responding to the charge of *de jure* illegitimacy against the state leveled by Wolff, Reiman argues that it is impossible for a legal and political system to yield

principles that will always have moral results (1972, p. 26). When you introduce words like “always” (as just cited), “not inevitable” (Reiman, 1972, p. 44) or “perhaps not even usual” (Reiman, 1972, p. 44), you are discussing in *de facto* rather than *de jure* terms. But Wolff is not interested in this *de facto* rendition of political authority. Wolff addresses *de jure* political authority. So when Wolff says that political authority is illegitimate *de jure*, Reiman replies by asking whether *de facto* political authority is illegitimate. Reiman does not meet Wolff on Wolff’s platform, which is because Reiman frequently conflated the state *de jure* (the state should exist) with *de facto* states (states actually exist). The *de facto* appeal can be seen in Reiman’s employment of terms like “most states...” and “must do with ‘second best’” (1972, p. 27) in his book.

Although Reiman generally thinks that the political and the moral can overlap (1972, p. 43), he thinks that the political derives its meaning from *not being* moral. Read him: “to ask...that for a political system to be legitimate it must yield commands which are the same moral commands that all its citizens would autonomously give themselves *is to ask that a political system stop being political in order to be legitimate* [emphasis in the original] (1972, pp. 28-29). A little later, he says: “Political systems start from the assumption that some forms of behavior must be prevented, even if they are conscientiously chosen. *This is the logic of political systems* [emphasis in the original] (1972, p. 29). But this is precisely why Wolff sees political systems as illegitimate. In criticizing Wolff, Reiman’s argument has the general effect of presenting the state as a primarily coercive instrument. Although no one denies that this is one of the functions of a state, this is precisely the kind of refutation that strengthens the perspective projected by selfish political leaders (cited by Reiman himself) that the business of politics is power.

Revealingly, Reiman further submits: “It is by failing to see that real human moral autonomy, as opposed to the concept of moral autonomy, depends on political autonomy because it depends on power...that Wolff gives us an anarchism without a political program” (1972, p. 75) ; “As soon as the relationships between autonomy to power and of power to society are granted, then the conceptual anti-thesis of autonomy and authority is revealed as a mere abstraction” (1972, p. 75) ; “In reality, moral autonomy depends on political autonomy ; It depends on the availability of power” (1972, p. 76) ; “Power is the subterranean tunnel which links autonomy with authority” (1972, p. 75). Thus, Reiman does little to calm the very conceptions and fears that ground Wolff’s denial of political authority. On the whole, we can credit Reiman with a beautiful distinction between moral authority and moral obligation, even though this distinction had an effect of clarifying (if not strengthening) Wolff’s position and concerns.

Another attempt to refute Wolff’s conception of political authority is Rex Martin’s “Defense of Philosophical Anarchism” (1974, pp. 140-149). Martin devotes his essay to contradictions in Wolff’s denial of *de jure* political authority by trying to show that most of Wolff’s arguments show that Wolff is denying authority on *de facto* rather

than *de jure* grounds. According to Martin, “let us take it that what Wolff’s philosophical anarchist is claiming is not that it is logically impossible for a government to have a rightful authority but rather that it is factually impossible, for reasons physical or, perhaps, psychological” (1974, p. 143). Secondly, Martin argues that Wolff misunderstood political obligation to be political authority, and that his arguments against political authority easily translate into arguments against political obligation (1974, p. 145), and that these arguments are made on the presumption that there is an analytical connection between political authority and political obligation, a connection that has been presumed by prominent philosophers, including Socrates, and to a lesser degree, Kant, Hobbes, and Locke (1974, p. 144). Martin then distinguishes between intrinsic and extrinsic obligation: an obligation is intrinsic when it is a feature of the theory of the political system itself, such as the obligation that good citizenship in a rights-producing state involves strict commitment to abide by the laws that define those rights (1974, p. 144). An obligation is extrinsic if it requires an extra-systematic feature to ground it, like being obligated to laws because they are divinely commanded, or simply because they are laws, or because one has taken an oath to obey laws. Martin argues that extrinsic grounds of obligation never create strict obligations to obey laws *qua* laws (1974, p. 144), and argues that Wolff’s rendition of obligation is based on extrinsic grounding (1974, p. 145). Martin concedes that if the anarchist’s case is made on extrinsic grounds, it is an impeccable one. If, however, it is made on intrinsic grounds, the anarchist’s case is still strong, but inconclusive: he can show that most theoretical systems of politics will not support obligation in the strong (extrinsic?) sense that the anarchist is interested in, but he cannot show that every system that has been advanced historically is unable intrinsically to support obligation (1974, p. 147). Martin argues that Wolff’s case against extrinsic obligation is conclusive, but begs the question, and as such is simplistic.

Returning to the concept of authority, Martin denies that there is any analytical connection between political authority and political obligation (1974, p. 147). As an example, he argues that the statement “This government has authority but the citizen does not have to obey each and all of its laws” is not self-contradicting (1974, p. 147). Martin recalls that authority means having a rightful license to issue rules with a presumption of compliance or the possession of possible title(s) to back these rules with threats and even the use of force. He argues then that it is possible to disobey a law without using coercive force or without claiming that the law is invalid, just as it is possible for a citizen to be strictly bound to laws of a government that does not have rightful authority (1974, p. 148). Martin relies on these analogies to show that the analytical connection between authority and obligation is false. But I am not convinced of Martin’s denial of analytical connection between authority and obligation, since Martin uses instances of disobedience as well as instances of wrongful or unjustified obedience to demonstrate his position. Thus, when Martin says that Wolff has made a successful case against obligation but not a successful

one against authority (1974, p. 148), Martin has not demonstrated it, and a more straightforward refutation of Wolff's conception of political authority is still needed.

Indeed, Martin's acceptance of the success of Wolff's denial of political obligation is symptomatic of a general consensus among political philosophers, including anti-anarchists. In his book *Three anarchical fallacies* (the second major response to Wolff after Reiman), William Edmundson (1998) considers the anarchist objection to political obligation to be so strong that rectifying it is not the answer to restoring the concept of legitimate political authority. Rather, Edmundson thinks that the only way to defend political authority is by modifying two major premises of the anarchists, which are contained as the first and second of the argument of philosophical anarchism thus:

- i. A state is legitimate only if it claims to impose and, in fact, does impose on its subjects a general, at least *prima facie*, duty to obey its laws.
- ii. There is no general, even *prima facie*, duty to obey the laws of a state, not even those of a just state.
- iii. Legitimate states are not only possible, but actual (Edmundson 1998, p. 8).

Edmundson considers this triadic argument to be inconsistent because the truth of any pair of the three [propositions] entails the falsity of the third (1998, p. 8). Philosophical anarchists will see the first two as correct and therefore deny the third, while many anti-anarchists will affirm propositions one and three by denying two. But to deny two is to propound a credible theory of political obligation, which Edmundson not only sees as impossible, but advocates for a separation of propositions two from one, that is, to divorce the issue of the legitimacy of political authority from the issue of the obligation of citizens to obey state laws. Edmundson executes this "divorce" by simply modifying the first and second premises to shift attention from the duty to obey laws to the duty to not interfere with their enforcement. Hence, Edmundson's modified argument reads:

- i. A state is legitimate if it claims to impose on its subjects a general, at least *prima facie*, duty to obey its laws and its subjects have a general *prima facie* duty not to interfere with their enforcement.
- ii. There may be no general, even *prima facie*, duty to obey the laws of a state, not even those of a just state; but there is a general *prima facie* duty not to interfere with the administration of the laws of a just state.
- iii. Legitimate states are not only possible, but actual.

Edmundson (1998) considers this modification an effective refutation of philosophical anarchism because, according to him, "the duty to obey the law and the duty not to interfere with the administration of the law are quite different" (p. 49). For

example, there may be no general obligation to obey traffic laws, but there is a general duty not to resist traffic police (Dagger, 2000, p. 398), it may be hard to see how one has a duty to obey the law, but it is not hard to see that we have a duty to stop for the traffic cop (Edmundson, 1998, p. 50). So Edmundson thinks that philosophical anarchism commits a fallacy when it argues from failure of political obligation that no state is legitimate. But, as Dagger rightly argues, the duty to not resist administrative prerogatives (or administrative officers) derives from, relies on, or collapses into, a general obligation to obey the law (Dagger, 2000, pp. 405-406). We stop for the policeman because he is an officer of the law (Dagger, 2000, p. 402). It is not the other way around: we do not obey the law because it derives from the policeman or lawman. But concerning Wolff's proposal, this distinction between law and administrative prerogative (or officers) does not matter. Dagger rightly observes that it can respond to *a posteriori* anarchisms, such as that shown by John Simmons (a state can be legitimate, but existing states are yet to prove this [2009:4]), but it is useless against the *a priori* philosophical anarchism of Wolff who holds that authority is antithetical to autonomy, and that for the autonomous man, there is no such thing, strictly speaking, as a command (Wolff 1970, p. 10; Dagger, 2000, p. 403).

The second of the three fallacies which Edmundson responds to is what he sees as the unwarranted presumption that law is coercive. He argues that we take this presumption for granted (Edmundson, 1998, p. 73) but it leads to anarchy because what we regard as coercive we regard as *prima facie* illegitimate, and what is not coercive is presumed to be in order (1998, p. 73). So, Edmundson responds to this "fallacy" by seeking to show that the law is not coercive, except in extraordinary circumstances. He deploys a two-pronged description of coercion that rests on the concepts of choice and wrongfulness. It goes like this:

A coerces B to R if and only if (1) A's proposal creates a choice situation for B such that B has no reasonable alternative but to R and (2) it is wrong for A to make such proposal to B.

Edmundson then argues that there is nothing wrongful in the requirements of the law, and even contends that those who hold a non-moralized concept of law rely covertly on moral notions (1998, p. 123). So when one says that the law is coercive, according to Edmundson, the person is saying that legal requirements are wrongful, but legal requirements are not wrongful, so we must reject the concept of the law as coercive.

It seems to me that this kind of response from Edmundson puts political philosophy into the further jeopardy of defending an understanding of the state that is becoming increasingly dependent upon the concept of coercion. Not only does he give up on defending the concept of political obligation, he also takes the kind of refuge that

Reiman takes in the concept of coercion, this time by seeking to strip coercion of any negative meaning. But as Dagger (2000: 401-2) notes, it seems odd for Edmundson to embark on the ambitious task of stripping a word like coercion of its traditional meaning, just because of anarchism. For instance, it runs contrary to Hardin's use of the same word in his recommendation of "mutual coercion, mutually agreed upon by the majority of the people affected" (Hardin, 1968, p. 1247; Dagger, 2000, p. 401) which implies that the word "coercion" is not necessarily a morally wrong concept as Edmundson seeks to show.

Edmundson, however, contributes to refuting philosophical anarchism when he responds to his third perceived fallacy: another presumption that divides morality into two spheres, the outer sphere in which wrongs can be addressed by law, and an inner sphere where law cannot apply. This inner sphere is commonly associated with privacy, and seems to underlie much of the debate about privacy (Edmundson, 1998, p. 127). Edmundson argues for a disappearance of this divide resulting in a kind of coincidence scenario in which what morality requires and what law requires become the same (1998, p. 128). His reason for this is that every moral requirement permits some form of social enforcement, even if the enforcement is as mild as a sharp word or a disapproving glance. Secondly, all moral requirements are social requirements, making the notion of a private moral requirement a bit nonsensical (1998, p. 400). Legal enforcement is a form of social enforcement (1998, p. 157). He notes that this proposal to collapse this divide will predictably lead to politically bloody debates about what is morally wrong (1998, p. 176), but he argues that this event must be braved since morality and prudence, not privacy, should be the standards.

I agree with Edmundson on this point, since this public versus private morality dichotomy seems to fuel proposals of anarchism. Morality ought to be seen for what it is: a socially engineered set of rules for living together in community, something without which it would be difficult for human beings to live smoothly together. Seen in this way, the whole concept of morality depends on human organization, and the entire issue of human organization in turn leads us back to contractual theories of governance.

I also find valuable an attempt to demolish Wolff's authority-autonomy antinomy by Patrick O'Neil in his article, "The Inadequacy of Paul Wolff's Authority-Autonomy Antimony" (O'Neil, 1970, p. 1-5). But I will prefer to feature this contribution a little later in this paper, where I argue that O'Neil's reference to internal moral considerations for obeying authority is admirable but incomplete, and should also be supplemented with what I call internal practical considerations for obeying authority.

Responding to Wolff's *In Defense of Anarchism*

Let me now proceed with responses that I feel are, in contrast to earlier responses to Wolff, quite rudimentary, simple and clear to Wolff's defense of anarchism. I will group my responses to Wolff into sections for clarity and logical sequence.

Reconsidering Wolff's Definition of Authority

We might need to reconsider Wolff's (1970) definition of (obedience to) authority as "not a matter of doing what someone tells you to do. It is a matter of doing what he tells you to do because he tells you to do it" (p. 6). This definition of authority is not distinguishable from the definition of power. What this sort of authority needs is blind obedience. And the only reason why obedience here does not need to be morally or practically justified is because it either comes with a threat of force or is directed at a moron. If it comes with a threat of force, it is content to rely on this threat alone. And it is this sort of definition (doing what someone tells you exclusively because he/she says so and excluding any moral or practical personal considerations) that leads him/her to conclude that authority and individual autonomy are incompatible. If Wolff's concept of authority is that I do something for no other reason than that an authority tells me to do it, then such authority is receding in contemporary social life. As democratization and its associated behaviors develop, obedience to authority is becoming more and more conditional (as heralded by John Locke in his *Two treatises of government* with his notion of conditional sovereignty). Thus, authority is faced with the increasing imperative to align more and more with natural law, morality, practical considerations, and "wishes of the masses," in order to continue to exist.

In consequence, we may be faced with two different conceptions of authority: if authority has to do with (1) obeying a command for no other reason than that it is issued by someone in authority, then this kind of authority is becoming less and less representative of the general state of affairs in society. As I said, this sort of authority is content either to rely solely on the threat of the use of force or to elicit the compliance of a fanatically non-reflective recipient. But people in authority face increasing compulsion to provide justifications for their commands to their subjects. These justifications are provided to make their subjects obey their commands not simply because they are commands (backed by threats of the use of force), but to furnish them with independently moral or/and practical reasons for deciding to go along with such commands. So if authority has to do with (2) obeying a command both because it is issued by authority and that it coincides with natural law, moral law, practical imperatives or something I otherwise believe in, then such a concept of authority is becoming more and more representative of what authority looks like in contemporary social life. Note that this includes authority that is backed by threat of the use of force, but the important distinction

is that this authority is not content with this threat, seeks to accompany it with “reasons,” and thus routinely relegates it (the threat) to the background.

Let me further consider these two conflicting conceptions of authority in relation to individual autonomy:

(1) Authority that does not need any meditation on the part of the recipient, and thus undermines individual autonomy, especially in repressive governance like the old authoritarian regimes, and

(2) Authority that accommodates intellectual considerations on the part of the recipient, and is thus created to enhance individual autonomy like that in participatory democracy.

The desire for (2) often leads to revolt against (1). The reasons for the command for obedience by (1) and (2) are very different. While the individual is obliged to obey (2) because she is a participating co-author of (2) for reasons of enhancing her freedom, life and property, the individual is only obliged to obey (1) by myth of divinity and royalty (regarding monarchies) or out of fear (dictatorships).

Now let us ask: which conception of authority is Wolff operating with? If he meant (1) then his anarchist theory is collapsible regarding democracy. If he meant (2), then his concept of authority vis-à-vis individual autonomy is misplaced. Either way, the anarchist proposal seems collapsible.

Nonetheless, I still object to describing the “repressive” conception of authority (1 above) as “authority.” Let me illuminate this with another distinction, this time between internal and external reasons for obeying a command from authority. Internal reasons for obeying such a command will include personal moral and practical considerations, while external reason will have to be nothing except the fear of consequences or use of force. My suggestion here is: authority must compel both internal and external reasons for obedience. Whatever compels obedience only externally is power, not authority.

Correcting Wolff’s Definition of the State

Let us consider Wolff’s definition of the state. According to him (Wolff, 1970), “The state is a group of persons who have and exercise supreme authority within a given territory. Strictly, we should say that a state is a group of persons who have supreme authority within a given territory or over a certain population” (p. 3). By this definition, Wolff considers the state as only a group of persons in power, it does not include the subjects. Thus he confuses “state” with “government.” But a state is composed of both a government and its subjects in a territory. In objection to Wolff, I would suggest that a state is a polity made of citizens and their rulers. Wolff’s definition applies rather to

dictatorial and unrepresentative political structures where the ruled are not regarded as a part of the equation. To consider democracy is to redefine a state as “a sovereign territorial organization of citizens who elect public servants to manage their affairs and help in their protection.” This kind of state does not issue “commands” that are alien to the moral consciences of the recipients and to be blindly obeyed (which is Wolff’s central concern regarding the loss of autonomy). This state is rather a polity of inclusive collective decisions that bear the authorship of its citizens, either directly in choosing its leaders, or indirectly in representation. These days, scholars talk of citizens acquiring more direct authorship of laws and policies, not just through election, but through public deliberation. If what Wolff chooses to call “command” is actually just a reminder to the citizen of a law, principle or policy that she co-authored, it means the contradiction between authority and individual autonomy is disproved.

The Alienist Conception of State

Wolff’s position thus reflects the anarchist conception of the state as something of an alien imposition. Clearly lacking from the anarchist view is the orientation that the state is within the society, and that it is individuals like you and me that constitute it. This alienist conception of the state feeds the premise that individual autonomy is discontinuous with state legitimacy. But if we adopt the contractualist conception of the state as an aggregation of the wills of individuals, then it becomes possible to see the state and its laws as existing, not to take away, but to enhance, individual autonomy.

The Question of Reason

Anarchists generally present “reason” and “state” as two options from which we must choose one. The anarchist projection is a society which will be free from authority and governed by cooperation based on rational freedom. Specifically, the anarchists argue that reason should replace state, figuratively speaking. This rendition makes one to believe that human life is governable by pure reason. But the following questions could interrogate this: Is reason fallible? Can reason not make mistakes? If (and when) reason makes mistakes, what happens? Is reason the sole controller of actions? What about feelings, emotions, prejudice and greed? Is a man’s reason so autonomous that it is completely self-reliant? Does it not need review and contributions from the reasons of others? It does not strike me that the answering of these questions will lead to a conception that we can be governed purely by reason. Ani (2014) has argued regarding deliberation and consensus that deliberation is not a purely rational activity. I might as well add that the business of life itself cannot be a purely rational activity. If this could conceivably be true, then there must be common community or at least inter-personal instruments for checking short-falls of reason.

Reason and Justice

What determines justice? We could all say: reason. Does this mean that we can do without authority? Anarchists will say: Yes. But this conclusion relies upon a judgment that is valid but not sound, such as:

Reason is the source of justice.

All men have reason.

Reason (not the state) should govern men's actions.

The argument above seems valid, but its unsoundness stems from the second premise. It is true that all men have reason, but to have reason is not the same as to utilize it or to use it properly. The second problem with the second premise is that all men may have reason, but it is not only reason that all men have. Men are not just purely rational beings, and hence, reason is not the only component in reaching decisions. The third problem is that reason can be used unjustly. Many people make very unjust decisions, which is the reason for crime rates as well as Hobbes' grim depiction of the state of nature or what a lawless society could look like.

The Ideal and Real Worlds

As we see in our analysis of reason, anarchic theory would not be a bad idea in an ideal conception of moral rationality. In the real world, however, the replacement of state with individual moral reason will possibly mean that whilst some people will be counted on to make proper individual moral choices, some others may be counted upon to make the worst kinds of personal moral choices, including those detrimental to others. It is not far-fetched to suppose that some would kill, maim and do all manner of vile deeds against their fellow humans. The early nineteenth century struggle by many states to curtail large organized crime networks, as well as current battles against human trafficking, are indicative of this. It is not clear that the propagators of these crimes are practicing something different from their moral choices. In fact, I dare to imagine that if real anarchy is unleashed, it is not unrealistic to imagine that the same proponents of anarchist theory will conceivably call for a more ordered society.

De Jure and De Facto

The success of Wolff's argument is derived from his distinction between *de facto* and *de jure* situations. As a matter of fact (which means *de facto*), states exist, but ideally (*de jure*), individual autonomy renders them unnecessary. However, the *de facto/de jure*

distinction is also the source of the weakness of this argument. Ideally (*de jure*), individual autonomy means that the individual is capable of taking decisions that leave nothing to be desired, in other words, perfect decisions. But this is an overblown rendition of individual autonomy. As a matter of fact (*de facto*), individual autonomy is influenced by lots of environmental factors and human desires, in short, it is to some extent determined. In other words, individual autonomy does not automatically translate to individual perfection. Thus, just as there can conceivably be no *de jure* state in the complete sense, there can conceivably also be no *de jure* individual autonomy in the complete sense. *De facto*, many subjects handle their autonomy in very appalling ways. In short, a few humans are hardly distinguishable from lesser animals in behavior, many of whom need to be discovered and kept away in jails for the safety of the rest of society.

The matter then is this: If humans always vindicate their autonomy and responsibility by decisions/actions of integrity and responsibility, then there would be no need for a state. But human beings do not always maintain decisions/actions of integrity and responsibility. Thus there is need for states. Wolff's defense of anarchism can be summarized as saying "If human beings were perfect, then there would be no need for states." But humans are not perfect, so we have states. Thus, if there is a gap between the theory and the practice of individual autonomy, then there must also be a gap between the theory and the practice of philosophical anarchism. Philosophical anarchism is itself rendered impracticable.

Demolishing the Authority-Autonomy Antinomy

As earlier stated, the authority-autonomy antinomy, which Wolff sets up, is demolished by a number of factors. The term authority-autonomy antinomy was actually coined by Patrick O'Neil in his review of Wolff's defense of anarchism. O'Neil (1970, p. 2-3) tries to demolish this "antinomy" by distinguishing between (1) acts that are held to be evil in themselves (*mala in se*) but not necessarily prohibited by authority, (2) acts that are forbidden by authority for some reason, but are not evil in themselves (*mala prohibita*), and (3) acts that are both evil in themselves and prohibited by authority (*mala in se et prohibita*). So O'Neil develops three types of morally wrong actions: (1) simply *mala in se*, (2) simply *mala prohibita*, and (3) *mala in se et prohibita*. Acts like murder, theft, perjury belong to both (1) and (3) since they are both evil and prohibited by authority. Disobedience to traffic codes and some other policies of technical and social order belong to (2) since stepping into the wrong lane is not evil in itself but prohibited for the sake of order. Not all acts of (1) need to be prohibited to become (3), like smaller forms of lying and cheating. O'Neil accuses Wolff of predicating his authority-autonomy antinomy on acts that are simply *mala prohibita*. If someone avoids an action simply because authority says so, and not because she sees any independent reason for avoiding

it, then Wolff's authority-autonomy antinomy can gain some traction. But if an individual avoids an action both because authority says so and because she has reached an independent conclusion to avoid it even if authority does not say so, then individual autonomy has coincided with, and not contradicted, authority. So for O'Neil, avoiding acts that are both intrinsically evil and prohibited by authority does not constitute losing our autonomy to authority, for we are also avoiding these acts out of personal moral evaluation of the nature of the acts, and would have still done same without authority. In fact, O'Neil argues that Wolff's authority-antinomy applies only to (2); in acts that avoid (1) and (3), authority and autonomy are compatible.

However, it still does not occur to O'Neil that even avoiding acts in (2) – *mala prohibita*– may involve individual autonomy, and thus, make it compatible with authority. If I decide to obey traffic codes, it may not just be out of a bland decision to obey authority. I may have deliberated internally and realized that there has to be some sort of order for the movement of vehicles, and what better order than for vehicles heading in the same direction to move on a certain side of the road, and others heading in an opposite direction to move on another side of the road? In fact, it is likely that in the absence of state or political organization, I might have found myself wishing that someone could come up with this idea and propose it to everyone. If this is what actually happens, then the command of authority is coinciding with my independent evaluation of the value of the content of the command – to enhance vehicular movement through some sort of traffic order. Therefore, my individual autonomy is not threatened or affected by this command. Avoiding acts that are not intrinsically evil (not to drive on certain sides of the road) do not involve any loss of autonomy if they are preceded with personal decision to act along that line for practical reasons. Thus, it is not only moral personal evaluations that can lead to autonomous acts as O'Neil envisages (acts 1 and 3). The authority-antinomy is still demolished in acts to avoid (2), examples of which I will treat with a further subsection of this article: O'Neil only cites internal moral reasons for complying with a command to demolish the authority-autonomy antinomy; I will proceed to cite examples of internal practical reasons for complying with a command (or any command) by the state to complete the demolition of the authority-autonomy antinomy.

Examples of Internal Practical Reasons for Obeying State Command

Apart from internal moral considerations for acceding to state commands, let me now take a more detailed glance at internal practical considerations. To begin with, let us even imagine that Wolff's anarchist objections are directed at repressive forms of government. His theory is collapsible anyways. This is because there are a lot of values that people derive from even repressive regimes, in other words there are a lot of reasons to find any political organization indispensable, such as law and order, provision of

amenities, regulation of the economy, protection from foreign aggression and so on. In other words, political organization exists to protect life, liberty, property, and other benefits to be derived from entrusting leadership or ruler-ship to a person or body of persons.

Let me begin with the value of life, and a typical example is the situation in the Middle East. It is no surprise that the generally authoritarian bent of political leadership in this region coincides with the authoritarianism in its culture and history. Such authoritarianism is often for good reason: it might not be a case of the isolated imposition of an authoritarian leadership, it might rather be the case of authoritarian leadership as a response to a society that is yet to dispense with much of its authoritarian values. In such a situation, the idea that liberalism can be installed by simply removing an authoritarian leadership (like Saddam Hussein, Bashir al Assad, etc.) may be dangerously mistaken. If law and order needs a little bit of an “iron hand” in such societies, then removing such authoritarian structures could be to license the enthronement of chaos (absence of law and order) by (much more authoritarian) radical and cantankerous groups.

The example of a repressive regime is an extreme one. States generally exist to protect life within their territories, and a decision to obey state command must involve this practical internal consideration. This consideration means that one should consider an alternative to not obeying state command, in short, an alternative to not having a state. In the absence of a state, for instance, each individual would have to take up the personal defense of both her life and property, in the way that is supposed to be done by the police and military services. In practical terms, this means personally investing in as much physical combat skills and technology as is required for this. This has serious implications in time, energy, and resources, and it is not clear what amount of time will be left for personal economic and other forms of development. Such a world of human beings would contain no serious specialisations in art, science, entertainment, and Wolff does not provide what he would see as alternative safeguards to personal development in the absence of political order. It is not even clear that personal ideas of protective (or offensive) combat would result in success, as individuals would be left largely to their personal and uninformed devices, and nobody would be conceivably willing to teach anyone else, out of fear that such a transfer of skills could be used against self. (In fact, it is possible to imagine that there would be no distribution of any form of knowledge, since there would exist no ethical rules [such as patent] to protect intellectual property.) Life and property left to individual protection might not be life and property at all, since a few individuals could succeed minimally in personal protection while the majority might not. The same argument goes for other practical internal considerations for responding to state command, such as protection from foreign aggression, regulation of relations among citizens, provision of health initiatives, and so on.

This does not imply a blind obedience to state command. It is precisely the contrary: it means that responding to state command ought to always be accompanied by practical considerations, which will include considerations about whether the state actually portends to fulfil its roles as a state (by the state, I mean both government and the governed, since command may also issue from principles that are co-authored by citizens and rulers). Such continuous practical considerations (ideally by all participants in a state or polity) are likely to stir state structure toward the goal of more ideal co-authorship of state commands by all involved, especially those at whom the commands are directed.

This brings us to the narrowness of Wolff's concern with responding to state commands: Wolff's whole syllogism rests on a conception of state as just eliciting commands and never giving anything in return. According to this conception, all the state exists to do is demand obedience to its commands, and it provides nothing in return for this. This will depend on the capacity to imagine that there can be an entity that was sent from heaven with express powers to perpetually take and to never give in return, or if we can imagine any relationship that operates a one-way demand traffic and completely lacks any give-and-take description. But such one-way relationships may not exist in actuality. It is possible, if not certain, that Wolff himself enjoyed educational amenities to become an academic. So let me consider an alternative perception of the state as an arrangement reached by a group of people to better organize themselves by entrusting the running of some of their broader affairs to a person or group. In return for the values they will be enjoying from the service of this person or group, part of what they will need to sacrifice is a little of their convenience, including the inconvenience of relinquishing a little fraction of their free will, for better regulation of affairs amongst them. A person who lives in an organized society cannot have as absolute a free will as he/she would have if they lived alone in a forest, wilderness, or island, and it does not strike me that any form of social organization can escape this little clause.

The Question of Freedom

The anarchist proposal is usually predicated on the notion that the state is juxtaposed against freedom. But we might want to rethink the relation of the state to freedom. What if we see the state as created to set rules to make the enjoyment of freedom more possible? What happens to freedom if there is no security? What is the benefit of freedom if it cannot be enjoyed? But freedom with no security seems to be no freedom. Beginning from social contract theorists, such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau, scholars have distinguished between natural and civic freedom, or natural and civil liberties in Michael Carpenter's (2014) description. Natural freedom is that possessed by every human being in the state of nature, in which he/she is free to do whatever they want. The disadvantage

is that this kind of freedom has no constraints, no law or order. An individual can take the next person's life, it is his/her freedom to do so, and he/she is constrained only by his/her ability to do so. And so, this freedom depends, for its enjoyment, on a person's capacity to defend him/her self. Civic freedom is that obtained from being a citizen, or a member of a common agreement or social contract to secure freedom through security by making freedom a community project. This is freedom accompanied by common security. To obtain this common security (and other benefits accruable from fabricating a general will), natural freedom (or part of it) has to be given up for civic freedom. In my view, what is termed natural freedom, on its own, is really no freedom. Admittedly, persons or bodies entrusted with common security and governance can take advantage of the civic freedom of the people by encroaching on people's liberties, becoming corrupt and doing things against the general will. But these are excesses particular to this kind of responsibility. Apart from the fact that these excesses can be checked by removing these persons through the vote, impeachments, protests, and other forms of expression of popular opinion, the excesses are not comparable to the total absence of law and order.

Checks and Balances Argument

The anarchist proposal rests crucially on the premise that whatever will infringe upon the autonomy of humans must be avoided and rejected. The problem is: what is the guarantee that humans can live and exercise their autonomy in a society where there exist no checks and balances? We might not speedily dismiss Thomas Hobbes' picture of man's capacity to be a wolf to man. The following passage clearly expresses this grim fact:

Again, men have no pleasure (but on the contrary a great deal of grief) in keeping company where there is no power to overawe them all. For every man looketh that his companion should value him at the same rate he sets for himself, and upon all signs of contempt or undervaluing naturally endeavours, as far as he dares (which amongst them that have no common power to keep them in quiet is far enough to make them destroy each other), to extort a greater value from his contemnners, by damage; and from others, by example (Hobbes 1660 (2010), par 5).

Hobbes adds:

So that in the nature of man, we find three principal causes of quarrel. First, competition; second, diffidence; third, glory.

The first maketh men to invade for gain; the second, for safety; and the third, for reputation. The first use violence, to make themselves masters of other men's persons, wives, children, and cattle; the second, to defend them; third, for trifles, as a word, a smile, a different opinion, and any other sign of undervalue, either direct in their persons or by reflection in their kindred, their friends, their nation, their profession, or their name.

Hereby it is manifest that during the time men lived without a common power to keep them all in awe, they are in that condition which is called war; and such a war as is of every man against every man (Hobbes, 1660, chap VIII, pars 6-8).

It might be argued that Hobbes paints a too-pessimistic picture of human nature, but the fact remains that Hobbes' version of human nature is vindicated by much of history. This is why checks and balances have become necessary everywhere: government is divided into arms that check one another, people ought to check government through elections, referendums, and demonstrations, leaders ought to check the dedication and work ethics of their subjects, subjects ought to check the sincerity of leaders, and the list goes on. So the question is: what would it be like to live without checks?

The Question of Community

Wolff's appeal to a world that is completely regulated by ungoverned reason reflects an assumption (maybe un-reflected) that is common to anarchists. For instance, individualist anarchists like Mark Stirner advocate the ultimate reign of the individual ego over God, society, and morality, and argue that the only limitation to the rights of individuals is their power to obtain what they desire (Stirner, 1995, p. 9). But Stirner contradicts himself by advocating "a union of egoists" (Stirner, 1995, p. 93). The question is: Can such a union of egoists exist without any trace of social organization? It seems to me like a comic concession to the inevitability of society and organization.

If the individual could live in isolation, then I would have no issues with Stirner. But living in society is a deconstruction of absolute individualism, a process that begins with being born into a pair of human hands. Compromises are inseparable from community and inter-personal life. So are dos and don'ts.

Regarding the community, it is worthwhile to ask: Can there be community without state? Yes. There used to be, and it performed much of the internal regulation of the state, but it lacked coordinated, systematized, and mutually recognized foreign relations and policies. Thus, inter-community aggression is an inseparable part of community-level political organization. The state is an initial attempt to regulate this state

of nature among communities, and the world council of states (presently, the United Nations) is an attempt to mitigate the state of nature on a universal scale. It is very arguable how successful this attempt can be, but it is even more questionable what the prospect would be of scrapping political organization down to the micro-community – or even the individual – level.

Conclusion: Any Middle Ground?

We might not entirely throw the anarchist proposal overboard, since we might consider regarding it as a dangerously misguided quest for liberty. This is where we can appeal to a libertarian position for a bit of a middle ground. For instance, Mill (1999, p. 9) discusses exercising the greatest possible liberty that is just short of undermining the liberty of others. This conception pushes government role increasingly away from interference and increasingly towards protection, away from the precarious nature of Hobbes' natural liberty to the security and responsibility of Rousseau's civic liberty, in the calculation that the best aspirations of the individual can be unleashed and still be protected. It is not a conception that dismisses the relevance of authority and political organization altogether. Such a position envisages a democracy that allows us to be as autonomous as rationally possible without encroaching on the parallel autonomies of others, or without seeing liberty as juxtaposed against the state. To conclude, an ideal, adoptable position is one that sees individual autonomy as enhanced by protection made possible by formal political organization.

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