

ARETE

POSITION PAPER

The Autonomy Challenge in Wolff and Raz: A critique in defence of *a priori* philosophical anarchism

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ANALYSIS

The notion of political authority is strongly disputed, and very few have brought into consideration the problems surrounding it better than R.P. Wolff in his *In Defense of Anarchism*. This essay consists of a critique of Raz's *Normal Justification Thesis* (hereinafter NJT) as a response to the *autonomy challenge* presented in Wolff's *a priori* anarchism.

Wolff defines authority as “the right to command, and correlatively, the right to be obeyed” (1998:4), and autonomy as the state of a “man who possesses both free will and reason [and thus] has an obligation to take responsibility for his actions” (1998:13) being both incompatible:

“The defining mark of the state is authority, the right to rule. The primary obligation of man is autonomy, the refusal to be ruled (...) there can be no resolution of the conflict between the autonomy of the individual and the putative authority of the state.” (Wolff, 1998:18).

Raz, on the contrary, resolves the autonomy challenge by offering an instrumentalist approach of political authority. It is not that Raz does not value autonomy. In his own

words, “the ideal of personal autonomy is the vision of people controlling (...) their destiny” (Raz, 1986:369). However, in his attempt to meet Wolff’s challenge, he submits one’s autonomy to authority because one complies better with his duty by doing so. That is to act responsibly. Consequently, this implies the rejection of the duty of autonomy which is essential in Wolff’s argument. Wolff defends that it is immoral to not critically reflect on what one ought to do in each decision. On the contrary, Raz argues that it is precisely the insistence on reflecting on one’s actions each time what can be immoral. And he presents a way in which it is not immoral to follow commands from others and perceive them as authoritative; the NJT, according to which:

“[T]he normal way to establish that a person should be acknowledged to have authority over another person involves showing that the alleged subject is likely better to comply with reasons which apply to him (...) if he accepts the directives of the alleged authority as authoritatively binding and tries to follow them, rather than by trying to follow the reasons which apply to him directly.” (Raz, 1985:18-19).

Therefore, “the point of (...) authority, from the perspective of NJT, is to enable individuals to act in accordance with right reason” (Martin, 2010:67). As a result, NJT seems to solve the autonomy challenge by demanding that we surrender our judgement and compromise our autonomy, since giving them up is, in fact, the responsible thing to do –for it means that one will act better *morally*. However, it is not that clear that the autonomy challenge is responded by NJT. In fact, I find evidence that argues otherwise.

Raz’s thesis states that we ought to submit to the state’s authoritative directives without critical reflection in each instance. But this duty to obey does not extend to all, but only to those who would better perform their duties by treating the directives as authoritative. Therefore, there is a fair amount of practical reasoning lying on his argument, which creates a problem of perception or appreciation, exposing the contingency of this ‘surrender’ of the subject’s autonomy. In order to see them as authoritative, it is the subject who deliberates whether a directive’s content does already apply to him and whether by following it he would be more likely to comply better. This sort of reasoning is very similar to Wolff’s remarks about consulting some expert before

making certain decisions. That is for Wolff a morally responsible choice. However, whereas Wolff argues that once the expert is consulted one ought to make up his mind, Raz insists that one should follow the directive. But this would come after practical reason has (i) evaluated the directive as concerning an issue that applies to one –i.e., Raz’s dependence thesis– and (ii) considered that one will comply better by doing so. The exercise of practical reasoning is indeed different from that of Wolff. The evaluative process of the individual is not directed to the issue at hand but the source of the directive. And this is far from being a simple maneuver since (a) individual practical reason may deliver different outcomes across individuals and over time. At the same time, other questions arise that may hamper practical reason. It may be that (b) following the authority’s rules when one knows better in a particular situation or to simply ignore the facts of each case would be to entirely dismiss practical reason. Furthermore, (c) there are many directives that apply to us all, but there are others that do not. Therefore, this individual assessment would become problematic when dealing with things that apply only to some. Finally, Raz’s concept of authority argues that people act more responsibly –i.e., morally better than otherwise– by obeying authoritative directives and thus, (d) they must obey all the directives of such kind: both the correct and the incorrect. Once more, contingency in the assessment of a directive as authoritative is served on the basis that such evaluation emanates from practical reason –apart from the moral implications of following an authoritative directive in case one knows it to be wrong.

Raz’s response to the contingency criticism is that we ought to seek for transparent cases in which rule is to be superseded by our judgement and ignore the rest. But even this calls for individual reason to identify such cases. It seems that, after all, critical reflection cannot be avoided under NJT, which is in fact hindered by a-d, leading us closer to Wolff. Indeed, in Raz, A is not doing X because A has evaluated X itself. But A has definitely taken under consideration many other factors. Therefore, NJT leaves the autonomy question unanswered. In fact, it could be argued that Wolff’s dealing with the autonomy challenge is more promising, since Raz seems to favour responsibility over autonomy whereas Wolff keeps the two intact.

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