Authority, social theories of

by

Eduardo Zambrano
Department of Finance and Business Economics
Mendoza College of Business
University of Notre Dame
South Bend, IN 46556

Zambrano.1@nd.edu

March 29th, 2000

Authority is best defined as a relation that exists between individuals. A relation of authority exists when one individual, prompted by his or her circumstances, does as indicated by another individual what he or she would not do in the absence of such indication. This I will refer to as *the authority relation*. The *legitimacy* of an authority relation is what keeps the relationship from breaking down, and is the answer to the question: why does the one who *follows* do as indicated by the one who *rules*?

The authority relation is perhaps as old as civilization itself. The very moment in which individuals began living in communities and tried to organize the tasks required for their survival gave birth to the need to coordinate the actions of many, to delegate among the members of the group, and to trust that this coordination and delegation process would occur. Any resolution of such demands, whether successful or not, involved the constant creation and destruction of authority relations. In this context, *a*

social theory of authority is a collection of principles aimed at understanding: (a) how the circumstances of living in a community affect the authority relations that exist among its members, and (b) how the evolution of the community itself is affected by this web of authority relations.

1. Origins

The intrinsic importance of the matter of understanding authority relations as they arise in society has led to a large list of authors who have written on the subject (an excellent survey of the early meaning of authority can be found in Arendt 1958). Plato, for example, wrote that only "those who can apprehend the eternal and unchanging [aspects of reality]" (Plato 1945, p. 190) ought to occupy positions of authority. There are two reasons why Plato wanted this tall order to be met. First, he thought that only those who are enlightened in this way could understand that which is ultimately *Good,* and for Plato the exercise of authority is only legitimate to the extent that one brings society closer to that Good. The second reason has to do with the survival of the seekers for wisdom themselves. Plato argued that whenever those uninterested about matters of truth and wisdom are the rulers in a community, the conditions for the attainment of wisdom disappear, as community life is organized in a way that leads the seekers of wisdom to become corrupted and interested in other matters.

Aristotle makes no reference to a Good order, the understanding of which qualifies one to rule in a community. He notices simply that we all have *natural* talents and dispositions towards the different tasks. One of them is that of ruling wisely and effectively. Those in possession of such disposition ought to be the ones who rule. The

act of ranking those in capacity to rule according to their abilities and scope leads to a hierarchical organization, with the orders flowing from the top.

Notice that these accounts of the authority relation are more postulates of how the relation ought to be rather than descriptions of what Plato and Aristotle witnessed happening in their times. Notice also that in both accounts the authority that an individual has over another is legitimized in a manner that is *external* to the individuals: there is either the sphere of the Good, or the Natural (or the sphere of God as in the case of the early Christian writers) to mediate between the ruler and the ruled. Indeed, in these accounts both ruler and ruled have minimal importance: it is the *solidity* of the external link between them what matters. As an explanation of how the authority relation operates this seems unsatisfactory because it does not provide a causal link through which the process of legitimization takes place. It is Machiavelli who first attempts to describe in a pragmatic manner how the external links stressed by the Greek play a role in shaping social organization.

Machiavelli begins with a simple observation: that it is not platonic or Christian virtue but the seizure of opportunity that which chiefly leads to a position of authority. An accurate reading of the times, Machiavelli would say, a carefully plotted plan, and the unapologetic use of force against the correctly identified enemy, are all that is necessary to position oneself as a ruler. And once in that position it is of capital importance, according to Machiavelli, to establish appropriate *foundations* for one's ruling. Machiavelli presents his ideas through the analysis of an example that continues to be of importance today: the establishment of the Roman republic. As Arendt artfully indicates,

Machiavelli "saw that the whole of Roman history and mentality depended upon the experience of foundation, and he believed it should be possible to repeat the Roman experience" (Arendt 1958, p. 108). What Machiavelli understood was that there is not one single (natural or metaphysical) foundational cosmogony against which all authority relations should be measured, but that these cosmogonies can be crafted to support the authority of a particular individual or group. Once in place, a foundational cosmogony that supports the ruler's actions can be tremendously useful for the ruler, for no individual in a community whose way of thinking is deeply rooted in it could be in a position to challenge the ruler's authority; *not even conceptually*. For anyone who sees this clearly it becomes no longer possible to understand the legitimacy of an authority relation as externally given. This is indeed what happened during the twentieth century as a deep crisis of authority bred in the midst of serious skepticism regarding the validity of the traditionally accepted cosmogonies.

Max Weber scrutinized the authority relation more as a scholar than as a political strategist. Weber distinguished between forms of authority according to the type of legitimacy underlying each form. According to Weber, "the validity of the claims to legitimacy may be based on: (1) Rational grounds -resting on a belief in the legality of enacted rules and the right of those elevated to authority under such rules (…) (2) Traditional grounds -resting on an established belief in the sanctity of immemorial traditions and the legitimacy of those exercising authority under them (…) or (3) Charismatic grounds -resting on devotion to the exceptional sanctity, heroism or

exemplary character of an individual person, and of the normative patterns or order revealed or ordained by [the person]" (Weber 1978 pp. 213-214).

The importance of Weber's analysis does not rely on his particular classification of forms of authority but on his emphasis on the study of the legitimacy underlying an authority relation "within the framework of the concrete actor and his actions" (Easton 1958, p. 174). This perspective is crucial because it is one from which one can begin to understand the motivations underlying a particular *design* of an authority relation: one is invited by Weber to study the authority relation by focusing on the motivations, desires and circumstances of those who rule. In a sense, Weber's work picks up the analysis of authority right at the point where Machiavelli left it.

2. Contemporary Uses

There is wide disagreement among contemporary scholars as to how the authority relation should be understood. Many even abstain from venturing operational definitions of authority such as the one presented at the beginning of this article (An example of this is Robert Peabody's article on authority in the *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* 1968). Disagreement stems from many sources. Consider the following examples: Arendt believes that the authority relation is an implausible one in a modern society, due to the absence of a unique and uncontradicted cosmogony upon which the legitimacy of a ruler may be founded on. William Connolly agrees with Arendt in that a modern understanding of authority is problematic, but argues that the web of conventions regarding how social customs are interpreted and implemented is the modern equivalent of the pre-modern cosmogony. Writers like Nancy Rosenblum, in turn, argue that women

and men understand relations of authority in very different ways. Rosenblum, following Carol Gilligan, argues that "for women, the typical moral ideal is cooperation and interdependence rather than fulfillment of a formal obligation." The implication is that "authority, rules, and procedures will be less imperative for [women] than empathy or the impulse to be responsible for maintaining concrete personal relations" (Rosenblum 1987, pp.116-117). Lucian Pye has said something of that sort regarding the differences between notions of authority that occur due to cultural differences between countries (Pye 1985). Stanley Milgram and others have studied extensively how deeply rooted the practice of obedience to authority figures is in the context of small groups (a survey of this literature can be found in Hare 1976). As the examples show, one is left not with one but with *multiple perspectives* for the analysis of the authority relation.

2. 1 The Multiple Perspectives View

Rather than viewing the multiplicity of perspectives as a nuisance Stephen Lukes organized them in such a way that they, collectively, conform an insightful view for the study of authority.

The multiple perspectives view cuts through an old problem in the analysis of authority: that of whether one can ask analytical questions about authority in a *relativized* manner, that is, independently of normative issues regarding the legitimacy of authority. For some, "the nonrelativized notion is primary and is presupposed by the relativized notion. On this view, to analyze authority is to analyze legitimate or justified authority" (Lukes 1987, p. 60). For others, the relativized analysis is possible; one thing is to discover and scrutinize instances of obedience and a different one to assess their validity

and desirability. From the standpoint of the multiple perspectives view, however, in identifying relations of authority one always operates at the *interpreted* level of the social interaction. Therefore, according to Lukes, "every way of identifying authority is relative to one or more perspectives, (…) there is no objective, in the sense of perspective neutral, way of doing so" (Lukes 1987, p. 60). The multiple perspectives view provides a unified foundation for both the analytical and the normative inquiries.

The multiple perspectives that arise in the present times with regard to the analysis of authority can be associated with the different degrees of solidity attributed to social composites such as culture, language, social groups, and the individual itself. The previous section presented the view that it was with respect to a solid cosmogony that the pre-modern authority relation could be understood. With this perspective gone, Weber's analysis relies on the solidity of the internal world of those who occupy the position of the ruler in the relation. But the perspective of the ruler is one of many that can be held. Lukes identified many other relevant perspectives: that of the one who obeys, that of an external observer, that which describes the community as either formally or informally constituted, that describing the collective wisdom of the community, and the *objective* perspective (if it can exist at all) "from which all other perspectives may be assessed" (Lukes 1987, p. 62). In a world devoid of a unique cosmogony, they may all not be the same.

According to Lukes, the multiple perspectives view shows the need of going beyond the classical Weberian analysis of the authority relation. A command, according to Weber is obeyed "either through empathy or through inspiration or through persuasion

by rational argument" (Weber, quoted by Lukes 1987, p. 63). But Weber never asks the question: what legitimizes the command in the eyes of the one who obeys? This failure to ask the question is unproblematic when the ruler's perspective happens to be shared by rulers and followers alike. While this is a tenable point of view on many occasions, this identification of the perspectives between rulers and followers is anything but solid, as the modern study of rebellion shows. Weber's analysis is therefore deemed incomplete due to his failure to see anything but the perspective of the "ruling class" as important in understanding authority relations.

Richard Friedman offers an approach that includes the perspectives of both the ruler and the follower. According to Friedman, for there it to be a relation of authority one needs to understand the common ground that exists between a ruler and a follower because it is this common ground that which enables the obedience. In Lukes' words: "Legitimation claimed and the according of legitimacy coincide in a shared recognition of entitlement" (Lukes 1987, p. 65). Lukes sees two problems with this point of view. First, one can think of cases where authority seems to go unrecognized by either the ruler or the follower. Richard Flathman provides a solution to this problem. He suggests that the authority relation belongs to a wider web of practices and beliefs that provide meaning to all relations in a community, even unwittingly (See Lukes 1987, pp. 66-67). The second problem, according to Lukes, is that Friedman gives no indication as to how to distinguish between the common grounds that enable obedience from the ones that do not. In other words, it still leaves unanswered the critical question regarding obedience: what legitimizes the command in the eyes of the one who obeys?

When is, then, authority legitimate? Joseph Raz advances the *dependence thesis*, namely that "all authoritative directives should be based, in the main, on reasons which already independently apply to the subjects of the directives and are relevant to their action in the circumstances covered by the directive" (Raz 1990, p 125). In other words, authority is legitimate when there are reasons, from the follower's perspective, that already compel the follower to obey. Obedience is then investigated from the point of view of the motivations, desires and circumstances of *both* the ruler and the follower.

2.2 The Game Theoretic View

The point of view brought forth by Raz is an advance both on Weber, as it includes the perspective of the follower as well as that of the leader, and on Friedman, as it displays all the elements necessary to investigate the question of legitimacy. To see this it is convenient to adopt the terminology and analysis of *game theory* (for an introduction to this mode of social analysis see Dixit and Skeath 1999). In a basic game theoretic formulation of an interaction between individuals one first begins by identifying the choices available to each, and then by delineating how the *situations* (that is, the motivations, desires and circumstances) of all those involved affect each individual's choice. The goal is to be able to understand the choices of all individuals in the interaction by focusing on what beliefs are reasonable for each individual to hold about what will unfold in the interaction given each individual's situation. The beliefs held by the individuals in an interaction are *in equilibrium* when they are not contradicted by the choices that they justify given each individual's situation. While controversial, the game theoretic mode of analysis is gaining recognition as a valid and powerful mode of social

analysis. See Bates et. al. (1998) and Binmore (1994, 1998) for examples of game theoretic applications to the fields of political science and political philosophy, respectively. For these authors, social composites such as language, culture and social groups are as solid as the equilibrium beliefs underlying the individual choices that, collectively, support the social composite in question.

The perspective given by beliefs that are in equilibrium is one with respect to which one can evaluate the plausibility and legitimacy of an authority relation: an individual can be in a position of authority with respect to another individual to the extent that there are equilibrium beliefs that support choices *that an analyst of the relation denotes as "ruling" for the ruler and "following" for the follower* (Zambrano 1999). Hobbes understood this well when he wrote: "The power of the mighty hath no foundation but in the opinion and belief of the people" (Hobbes, quoted by Binmore 1998, p. 457). Equilibrium beliefs: (a) are at the interpreted level of the social interaction (Lukes); (b) serve as the common ground that sustains an authority relation (Friedman); (c) are determined with respect to both the ruler and the follower's situation (Raz); and (d) are part of the web of practices and beliefs that provide meaning to all relations in a community (Flathman).

Now, the problem is: "how are we to ascertain what the reasons that apply to authority's subjects are and in what 'success' in acting on them or guiding us to them consists?" (Lukes 1987, p. 69) In other words, can we recover equilibrium beliefs that legitimize the authority relation by looking at the situation of the individuals involved? The answer seems to be: in general one could recover *many* such equilibria, not simply

one. How is one to decide on which leads to the right justification? According to Lukes, the answer seems to be: there is no right justification. Different justifications suggest themselves depending on the perspective that one uses to interpret the authority relation. *There is no single social theory of authority*; there are only multiple perspectives that are plausible and valid to the extent to which they are equilibrium beliefs that legitimize the authority relations in a community. In Michel Foucault's words: "Each society has its regime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true" (Foucault 1980, p. 131).

The game theoretic analysis of authority helps us understand the kinds of belief systems that could support the authority of one individual over another. But there where its strength lies, lies its weakness as well. As mentioned before, in this mode of analysis one evaluates the plausibility of a belief system by checking its consistency with the choices that it justifies given each individual's situation. There are two problems with this: first, the analysis is silent as to how beliefs configure themselves in equilibrium proportions. One is at the mercy of history, as it perhaps should be, to teach us about how different institutions of authority have emerged in different cultures. Part of the narrative of the evolution of authority can be thought as occurring *spontaneously* (Aristotle), but part of its narrative can only be understood with respect to a design *functional* to some (Machiavelli). Game theory provides only a language in which the story can be parsimoniously told and formally analyzed.

2.3 The Cognitive Science View

The second problem is more severe. Just as recent social science challenges the solidity of social composites such as truth, language, culture, social groups and authority (as seen in this article), recent research on cognitive science challenges the solidity *of the individual itself*. As Francisco Varela puts it: "What we call 'I' can be analyzed as arising out of our recursive linguistic abilities and their unique capacity for self-description and narration (…) the selfless 'I' is a bridge between the corporeal body which is common to all beings with nervous systems and the social dynamics in which humans live. My 'I' is neither private nor public alone, but partakes of both. And so do the kinds of narratives that go with it, such as values, habits and preferences" (Varela 1999, p. 62). This poses problems for a game theoretic understanding of authority since this mode of analysis is grounded on the solidity of the individual and his or her cognitive situation.

Notice, however, the similarities between both approaches: *the self*, just as the other social composites, arises at the interpreted level of a collection of behaviors centered on a single body and its social history. Varela himself points out this similarity: "whenever we find regularities such as laws or social roles and conceive of them as externally given, we have succumbed to the fallacy of attributing substantial identity to what [, like the self,] is really an emergent property of a complex, distributed process mediated by social interactions" (Varela 1999, p.62). For Varela, the self, and the authority of a self over another self are notions that give meaning to each other through their arising in the context of a collection of bodies and social histories in a way that preserves the identity of the selves and of the relations between them. In other words,

they are equilibrium beliefs of a larger game, with respect to which the actions of all can be legitimized; and those actions, in turn, reinforce the apparent solidity of the authority link, and of the individuals themselves.

References

Arendt H 1958 What Was Authority? In: Friedrich C (ed.) *NOMOS I: Authority*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge.

Aristotle 1992 *The Politics*. Penguin Classics, London.

Bates R, Greif A, Levi M, Rosenthal J, Weingast B 1998 *Analytic Narratives*. Princeton University Press, Princeton.

Binmore K 1994 *Game Theory and The Social Contract, volume 1: Playing Fair*. MIT Press, Cambridge.

Binmore K 1998 *Game Theory and The Social Contract, volume 2: Just Playing*. MIT Press, Cambridge.

Connolly W 1987 Modern Authority and Ambiguity. In: Pennock J and Chapman J (eds.) *NOMOS XXIX: Authority Revisited*. New York University Press, New York.

Dixit A, Skeath 1999 *Games of Strategy*. Norton, New York.

Easton D 1958 The Perception of Authority and Political Change. In: Friedrich C (ed.) *NOMOS I: Authority*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge.

Flathman R 1980 *The Practice of Political Authority*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

Foucault M 1980 *Power/Knowledge*. Pantheon Books, New York.

Friedman R 1990 On the Concept of Authority in Political Philosophy. In: Raz J (ed.) *Authority*. New York University Press, New York.

Gilligan C 1982 *In a Different Voice*. Harvard University Press: Cambridge.

Hare A 1976 *Handbook of Small Group Research*, 2nd ed. The Free Press, New York.

Lukes S 1987 Perspectives on Authority. In: Pennock J and Chapman J (eds.) *NOMOS XXIX: Authority Revisited*. New York University Press, New York.

Machiavelli N 1999 *The Prince*. Penguin Putnam, New York.

Peabody R 1968 Authority. In: Sills D (ed.) *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*. Macmillan, New York.

Plato 1945 *The Republic*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Pye L 1985 *Asian Power and Politics: The Cultural Dimensions of Authority*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge.

Raz J 1990 Authority and Justification. In: Raz J (ed.) *Authority*. New York University Press, New York.

Rosenblum N 1987 Studying Authority: Keeping Pluralism in Mind. In: Pennock J and Chapman J (eds.) *NOMOS XXIX: Authority Revisited*. New York University Press, New York.

Varela F 1999 *Ethical Know-How: Action, Wisdom and Cognition*. Stanford University Press, Stanford.

Weber M 1978 *Economy and Society*. University of California Press, Berkeley.

Zambrano E 1999 Formal Models of Authority: Introduction and Political Economy Applications. *Rationality and Society.* 11: 115-138.

Eduardo Zambrano
Department of Finance
and Business Economics
University of Notre Dame