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IS PIETER PEKELHARING AN AUTHORITY?

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## Preface

In this little contribution, I return to a question that I encountered in one of my very first classes in philosophy, conducted by Pieter Pekelharing in 1986. Pieter was working on the history of scepticism at the time. Questioning authority in any form seemed to be the hallmark of scepticism. The question I want to discuss is the following: is Pieter an authority in philosophy?

Some professors insist on their authority and urge their students to immerse themselves in a way of thinking or a particular philosopher before questioning these – if it even comes to that. Pieter never has been like that. As long as I have known him, he is open to discussion almost to a fault. He has always been eager to answer any question by a student and is never too big to say ‘I don’t know – what do you think?’ Throughout his career, Pieter has displayed a kind of intellectual modesty that on the one hand seems to be the very antithesis of the kind of authority that is the subject of this contribution, while, on the other hand, it seems to paradoxically reinforce his authority in philosophy and has made me pay close attention to what he has to say.

I will conclude that Pieter does not have any such authority. Not because he lacks knowledge and insights; not because by now I know at least as much about philosophy as he does (I don’t), but simply, because epistemic authority does not exist.

## Introduction

Here are some facts: Neptune is the farthest planet in our solar system. Neptune is so far away that it took the space probe Voyager 2 twelve years to reach it. Neptune has a sea-blue colour due to the methane gas in its atmosphere. Neptune’s atmosphere is made up of hydrogen, helium and methane.

I firmly believe that these things are true. In fact, I am willing to go so far as to say that I am *sure* about these things. You may very well ask at this point ‘But Bruno, how do you know this?’ My answer is: ‘I looked it up on the Internet. I checked the website of NASA and there I found these facts’ (NASA 2013).

You don’t have to be a philosopher to see how problematic this answer is. First of all, it is clear that I did not fly to Neptune in person to check all these statements. Nor did I perform experiments or observations from which I inferred these facts. Instead, I took NASA’s word for it. The problems now multiply. How do I know NASA is a reliable source? After all, I did not study astronomy nor did I observe Neptune, so how can I be so sure that NASA knows? I relied on the authority of NASA. How does NASA come to be such an authority on Neptune? How do I know they have such authority? What does it really mean for NASA to be an authority on Neptune?

At the same time, it seems that I am quite justified in believing all those things about Neptune. If there are any authorities on such matters, surely, NASA is one of them. And NASA is not the only organisation with the authority to tell me what to believe. In our everyday lives we are surrounded by people, organizations, and institutions that have this kind of

epistemic authority. As children we accept what our parents tell us. As students we accept what our teachers tell us. As citizens we accept (at least most of the times) what mass media tell us is the case. Even in the philosophy classroom – the very place where students are encouraged to think for themselves, be critical, and investigate claims – one accepts the authority of the professor.

## Practical authority

To appreciate the problematic nature of this kind of epistemic authority, let us look at other forms of authority. Probably the best understood form of authority is political authority. This is the authority the State exercises over its citizens. Political authority, at least typically, is most concerned with what citizens ought to do – not with what citizens ought to believe. Political authority is a form of *practical* authority.

In political and legal philosophy, it is generally agreed that such authority needs to be distinguished from naked power (Raz 2006). Political authority is such that it can obligate subjects (Darwall 2010). In exercising their authority, political authorities give reasons to their subjects to perform actions or to abstain from them.<sup>1</sup> Power, on the other hand, is not concerned with reasons at all. Rather, it operates through threats and offers.<sup>2</sup>

How does the exercise of practical authority give reasons to those subjected to it? Let's take the simplest form of such exercise: the command of an authority to its subject. How could a command give a reason? Consider the reasons why one would conform to someone's commands. One could conform out of habit, or because of fear for the sanctions that might follow non-conformity. In all these cases, the reason for conformity is not the fact that the authority commands it, but something else. In those cases, the commands lack authority. Alternatively, sometimes the reason could be that the authority commands it. Then you have reason to do as the authority commanded, for no other reason than that the authority commanded it. Let's call reasons of this latter kind, *reasons for obedience*. Power differs then from authority in that the former only gives reasons

for conformity, but authority, real authority, gives reasons for obedience.

At this point the philosophical anarchists<sup>3</sup> triumphantly claim that there cannot be such a thing as political authority, for there are no reasons for obedience. To submit to an authority, in the eyes of these anarchists, amounts to forsaking one's own judgment and surrendering one's autonomy and this can never be justified. As William Godwin wrote in 1793:

'To a government therefore, that talked to us of deference to political authority, and honour to be rendered to our superiors, our answer should be: "It is yours, to shackle the body, and restrain our external actions; that is a restraint we understand. Announce your penalties; and we will make our election of submission or suffering. But do not seek to enslave our minds. Exhibit your force in its plainest form, for that is your province; but do not seek to inveigle or mislead us. Obedience and external submission is all you are entitled to claim; you can have no right to extort our deference, and command us not to see, and disapprove of, your errors"'. (Godwin 1971, 128).

We can express the anarchist's doubt about the existence of reasons for obedience in the form of a dilemma (Verbeek 2007). Suppose that somebody who claims to be an authority commands you to do something. Then there are two possibilities: either it is reasonable to do that thing or it is unreasonable. If it is unreasonable, then the commands of the purported authority are *irrational* and there are no reasons to obey him. Or this thing is reasonable, but then the commands of the alleged authority do not make it rational. In fact, in that case the commands of the authority are *irrelevant* for the reasons to do that thing. In short, the commands of a presumed authority are irrational or irrelevant, but they can never give reasons for obedience. All claims to political authority, then, are never justified.

The anarchist's dilemma shows us another thing about authority. Since the reasons for obeying an authority cannot be reasons other than that the authority commanded it, the reason-giving force of authoritative commands cannot lie in what is commanded, but only in that it is commanded. This means that reasons for obedience, if they exist, are not in

the content of what is commanded: they are *content-independent* (Raz 1986). The way then to answer the philosophical anarchist is by showing how the mere fact that a command was issued can make a reasonable difference that is not reducible to other reasons for the thing commanded.

Joseph Raz has argued that the normal justification for any practical authority is by demonstrating that in submitting to such authority one is more likely to comply with the relevant reasons than by trusting one's own judgment. For example, if a physician knows better what is good for your health than you do, it is reasonable to disregard your own judgment and instead rely on the physician's judgment (Raz 1986, 2006). Therefore, if a real authority commands you to do something, it must be that by issuing her command you have a content-independent reason for doing as you are told as well as a reason to disregard your own judgment about the merits of that action. Authoritative commands give those subjected to it *exclusionary reasons*: reasons to exclude other reasons you might have.

Three more remarks about practical authority before we return to epistemic authority are in order. First, practical authority (real practical authority as opposed to claimed practical authority) is always *limited*. My physician does not have the authority to order me to jump off a cliff. If she were to command that, it is clear that by submitting to her commands I am not more likely to comply with the reasons about what is good for me than by following my own judgment. Second, practical authority comes with discretion. If my physician prescribes Sumatriptan for my migraine I have reason to obey her instructions, but if she prescribes Rizatriptan I also have reason to obey her instructions.<sup>4</sup> My physician's authority comes with *discretion*: within the range of what falls under her authority, I have reason to obey (Verbeek 2012). Finally, the prescriptions of my physician need not be the best she could have given me. Suppose that she prescribes Rizatriptan but in fact Sumatriptan would be slightly better for me, I am still justified in accepting her prescription. An authority may be fallible, but that does not compromise her authority.<sup>5</sup>

This, then, is the standard conception of practical authority: authoritative commands give those subjected to it content-independent and exclusion-

ary reasons for obedience.<sup>6</sup> Such authority is always limited and comes with discretion. I propose we use this as a model for understanding epistemic authority.

## Epistemic authority

Let us return to the question of epistemic authority and the example of NASA telling me that Neptune's atmosphere is made up of hydrogen, helium and methane. I have reason to believe this fact about the composition of Neptune's atmosphere. This reason is given by the NASA website. Does NASA's website exercise authority over me?

From the discussion of practical authority we can infer that authority has four characteristics: content-independence, exclusivity, limits, and discretion. The question then is whether NASA's influence on my beliefs about Neptune has these characteristics as well. If so, we are dealing with genuine authority.

First, the content-independency criterion: are the reasons that I have for my beliefs about Neptune just NASA's assertions? It certainly seems that way. I have no beliefs whatsoever about Neptune's atmosphere, except what I just learned from NASA's website and the reason I feel justified in believing these things is that it comes from NASA. Therefore, the reasons for my Neptune beliefs are content independent. Secondly, are there limits on NASA's authority? Obviously, there are: should the NASA website tell me that my wife has got blue eyes (she does not) I have no reason to believe them. My wife's eye colour clearly is not in the scope of their authority. Third, does NASA have discretion? Again it seems that they do. Had the website of NASA claimed that the blue colour of Neptune's atmosphere is due to a large amount of oxygen, I would be justified in believing this as well. So not only has NASA discretion, this discretion extends to sincere and justified beliefs that might happen to be false.

## Epistemic exclusion

This leaves us then with the idea of exclusion: do NASA's assertions about Neptune's atmosphere exclude my judgement about the matter? It cannot rule it out completely. I use judgement, first, to check whether NASA does not step out of its limits and I use judgement to determine whether NASA is reliable and trustworthy – whether I have reason to accept that they know better than me as to what is the case on Neptune. However, this is not yet a reason to decide that NASA does not have epistemic authority. For NASA to have such authority, it needs to be the case that their assertions about Neptune's atmosphere would make me *disregard* whatever I already happened to believe about Neptune's atmosphere. Could that ever be reasonable? Of course, it is always rational and reasonable to weigh evidence, including testimonial evidence, when making up one's mind what to believe. I could weigh the fact that NASA asserts that Neptune's atmosphere consists of methane against my belief that it contains oxygen and it is very likely that NASA's assertions outweigh any reasons I might have for believing it contains oxygen. But for NASA to have authority, it must be the case that I don't weigh their assertions against other evidence and beliefs I have; NASA's assertion should make me *ignore* these other beliefs and evidence. This, I submit, would be characteristic of the neophyte dogmatic believer. One is never justified in ignoring evidence or existing beliefs without weighing these against new evidence – whether this is from one's own observation or the assertions of witnesses and experts like NASA. In short, one is never justified in totally ignoring other beliefs and evidence, let alone when this is prompted by the assertions of another.

## The very idea of epistemic authority

Where does this leave the idea of epistemic authority? If we think of epistemic authority along the lines of authority in general and take it to be analogous to practical authority, we will have to conclude that there is no such authority.<sup>7</sup> What holds for NASA and my beliefs about Neptune, holds for any other testimony by experts or witnesses. They may be reli-

able ways of improving one's knowledge and beliefs, but they are not authoritative.

Therefore, while I think highly of Pieter Pekelharing and his philosophical insights and I am sure I can learn a lot from his work; while I am certain that in discussion with Pieter many of my ideas (including ideas about authority!) will be outweighed and dropped, it can never be because Pieter is an epistemic authority in philosophy, or indeed, other areas of life.

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<sup>1</sup> There is considerable difference between having a reason to do something and being obligated to do that. In what follows, I gloss over this difference, as it is obvious that if you are obligated to do something you also have a reason to do this thing. But see (Darwall 2009, 2010, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> There are quite a few philosophers who believe that the state has authority precisely because it has power. While they do not identify authority with power, they believe there is an intimate relation between the two (Christiano 2012).

<sup>3</sup> Philosophical anarchists are those who accept that there may be very good reasons for conformity, but deny that the state (even a democratic and legitimate one) can have authority.

<sup>4</sup> Sumatriptan and Rizatriptan are two oft-prescribed medicines against migraine.

<sup>5</sup> This is not generally accepted. See, for example, (Chang 2009).

<sup>6</sup> This is the so-called 'service conception' of practical authority as developed by Joseph Raz (Raz 1978, 1986, 2006). This is not to say that this doctrine is without any critics. See (Moore 1989, Hurd 1991, Darwall 2009, Star and Delmas 2011).

<sup>7</sup> Notice that this is a big 'if'. If we give up on the idea of exclusion, epistemic authority becomes possible. However, given the widespread prevalence of testimonial beliefs, it will seem that there is 'too much' epistemic authority. Also, we would have no way to distinguish the reasons for believing something one receives through an authority from the reasons one receives from, say, a measuring device.

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