

ESSAY XXVI

Authority and Obedience

Deference, Delegation, and the Responsibility to Judge

VOCABOR SILENTII

ABSTRACT

Authority appears to demand that an agent act on another's judgment, while responsibility appears to require that the agent judge for themselves. This essay examines whether the conflict depends on treating all deference as a surrender of agency. It distinguishes epistemic reliance, practical advice, coordination, delegation, and the claim to issue binding directives. Engaging Raz's service conception, Wolff's autonomy objection, and the problem of identifying expertise, it develops a layered account of responsible deference. An agent may have reason not to reconsider every subordinate decision while remaining responsible for the scope, conditions, and continuation of the arrangement under which decisions are made. The argument is tested through hypothetical cases of technical instruction, delegated judgment, organizational urgency, and conflicting roles. It rejects both complete moral insulation through obedience and the assumption that conscientious action requires independent reconstruction of every relevant reason. Its contribution is an account of the retained responsibility to recognize jurisdictional limits and relevant defeaters, together with an examination of the institutional conditions that make such recognition realistically possible.

Keywords: authority; obedience; deference; delegation; autonomy; expertise; practical reason; responsibility

Conceptual analysis and critical reconstruction. Cases introduced as illustrations are hypothetical, not empirical findings.

1. The instruction that interrupts judgment

Imagine an experienced stage manager directing a complicated theatrical performance. During a scene change, the manager instructs a technician to hold a moving platform. The technician cannot see the entire stage and does not know the immediate reason. Waiting to reconstruct the manager's information could defeat the purpose of coordination. Compliance can therefore be a responsible act even when the technician cannot independently establish why this particular instruction is correct.

Now suppose the same manager orders the technician to alter a record so that an earlier mistake will not be discovered. The instruction still comes from the same office, within the same organization, and during the same production. Those continuities do not establish that the second instruction has the same authority as the first. An arrangement that allocates decisions about scene changes does not automatically authorize falsifying records. The question concerns not the manager's general importance but the scope of the particular directive.

Both cases are hypothetical. They expose a problem rather than provide advice for an actual workplace dispute. A blanket instruction to obey would conceal the difference between coordination and unauthorized control. A blanket instruction never to act without an independent assessment of the immediate merits would conceal the role of delegated knowledge and shared timing. The philosophical task is to explain how an agent can defer without becoming merely an instrument of another's judgment.

The proposed answer is layered. A person may reasonably rely on a decision procedure and therefore refrain from reconsidering every decision within it. That reliance does not erase questions concerning the procedure's purpose, the decision-maker's competence, the directive's scope, or evidence that the arrangement is failing. Responsible obedience is therefore neither permanent self-suspension nor continuous independent adjudication. It involves a distribution of judgment whose boundaries remain intelligible and revisable.

2. Five relations described as authority

Epistemic reliance concerns what to believe. A person accepts a claim because another is better placed to know. Practical advice concerns what to do but ordinarily leaves the final decision with its recipient. Coordination concerns the selection of a common course where compatible action matters. Delegation transfers specified decisions to another under an arrangement. A directive claiming authority adds that its issuance supplies a reason for action beyond its immediate persuasive force. These relations overlap but should not be collapsed.

A knowledgeable person can lack authority to command. Someone can possess a coordinating role without being the most knowledgeable participant about every matter. A delegate can act within a mandate despite disagreement about the merits, or exceed it while accidentally choosing something beneficial. Consequently, agreement with a result does not establish jurisdiction, and disagreement with a result does not by itself defeat the authority through which it was reached.

Part Two distinguished compliance, obedience, and obligation: conduct can conform to an instruction for reasons of fear, convenience, or habit without recognizing an entitlement to command (Silentii 2026b, Essay XII). That distinction prevents observed conduct from settling the philosophical issue. An organization may obtain uniform behavior while its members reject the authority asserted. Conversely, a person may challenge a directive while recognizing substantial reasons to preserve the coordinating arrangement from which it emerged.

A further distinction concerns responsibility. Being responsible for an action does not necessarily mean having personally calculated all the facts relevant to it. It can mean having acted through an appropriate division of labor while attending to what one's role made available. Responsibility also differs from blame. An agent may owe an explanation or participate in repair despite having made a justified decision under uncertainty. The presence of a bad outcome does not establish that deference was negligent, just as a fortunate outcome does not establish that it was warranted.

3. The autonomy objection and the service response

Wolff frames a fundamental conflict between the individual's responsibility for judgment and the state's claim to obedience. His autonomy objection makes mere authorization an insufficient answer to the question of what one ought to do (Wolff 1970, part I). The present essay does not resolve his entire argument about political obligation. It adopts the narrower challenge: any account of authority must explain why attending to another's directive can be an exercise of agency rather than its abandonment.

Raz's service conception offers a contrasting route. Authority can be justified through its capacity to help subjects conform to reasons that already apply to them; its role is not simply to replace reasons with another person's will (Raz 2006). This approach explains why some deference can serve rather than negate practical judgment. It nevertheless requires attention to the conditions and limits of the particular authority, not an inference that useful institutions may command without boundary.

The disagreement can be clarified through the difference between deciding on the merits of an immediate action and deciding how such actions should be determined. An agent can judge that a shared performance requires a coordinator and then comply with particular timing decisions without reopening the underlying merits. The earlier judgment has practical consequences. Treating every directive as entirely new would make the decision to coordinate ineffective.

This does not settle the autonomy objection by definition. A critic can maintain that the individual still acts only on their own reasons for coordination, so the supposed authority has been reduced to advice or prior commitment. The reply is that an arrangement can create determinate roles and expectations not reducible to the agent's present preference. The philosophical question becomes whether those relations generate reasons with genuine practical weight, and how they are limited. It need not be answered by positing a mysterious power that makes any commanded act right.

4. Delegation changes reasons without erasing agency

A voluntary commitment can alter the practical situation. Suppose collaborators agree that one member will choose a sequence among several acceptable options. Before agreement, each has reason to support their preferred order. After the selection, everyone also has reason to preserve the coordinated undertaking and honor justified reliance. The selected option need not become intrinsically superior. The structure of reasons has changed because the participants have established a relation under which a decision can settle their conduct.

The binding force remains conditional. The agreement may specify a domain, a duration, or a set of acceptable alternatives. It may be defective through deception or lack of authority to make the promised undertaking. Third parties may have claims that the collaborators cannot cancel. A delegation cannot grant powers its source does not possess. These limitations show why consent matters without transforming it into comprehensive permission.

Delegation can also be justified without a fresh explicit contract at every moment. Familiar cooperative practices can establish role expectations through participation and prior understanding. But the lack of an explicit document makes interpretation more important, not less. A role's title cannot replace inquiry into what participants could reasonably understand and what the practice actually requires. The claim that everyone knows the rules is particularly weak when relevant conditions are inaccessible or continually altered.

Finally, delegating an immediate decision does not necessarily delegate evaluation of the arrangement itself. A participant can follow a present instruction while later challenging the pattern. Alternatively, a directive may be so clearly outside the assigned domain that the background reasons for deference no longer apply. These are different modes of retained judgment. The account therefore avoids both a requirement to reopen everything at once and a prohibition on ever reconsidering the authority one has accepted.

5. Expertise and the nonexpert's difficulty

Epistemic dependence creates a related problem. To identify a reliable expert, a nonexpert may seem to need the very knowledge for which the expert is consulted. Goldman's examination of which experts deserve trust directs attention to this problem of selection under an asymmetry of competence (Goldman 2001). The existence of the problem does not establish that every expert claim is equally credible or that independent reconstruction is the only rational alternative.

The agent can sometimes assess features of a knowledge-producing process without duplicating its results. What information was available? Does the claim fall within the speaker's relevant competence? Are reasons or methods open to appropriate scrutiny? Has contradictory evidence been addressed? These questions are proposed here as dimensions of responsible reliance, not as an infallible algorithm or a report that every discipline uses identical standards. Their application itself requires context and often further reliance on others.

That further reliance creates a network rather than necessarily a vicious circle. Independent checks can reduce dependence on one source, while shared assumptions can limit the value of apparent agreement. The goal is not a view from nowhere but a sufficiently accountable route to judgment. Complete self-reliance would be an impossible standard for many complex activities, yet dependence on others does not justify treating status, confidence, or fluency as conclusive evidence.

Epistemic authority also remains distinct from permission. A technical finding can establish that an option will probably achieve an objective without settling whether that objective should govern. An engineer's assessment of a structure and a community's disagreement about its intended use are not the same question. The collection's concept of earned jurisdiction applies precisely at this boundary: success in one register supplies reasons, but additional authority requires additional justification (Silentii 2026a, Essay II).

6. Retained judgment and relevant defeaters

A defeater is a consideration that undermines a previously available reason or the warrant for relying on it. In the present context, a directive may lose its presumptive force because the speaker lacks the relevant role, the instruction exceeds the mandate, crucial information has changed, or the act conflicts with an independent constraint. Identifying these possibilities does not mean that every suspicion is decisive. It means that justified deference must have conditions under which it can be revised.

The retained responsibility is proportionate to the person's knowledge and role. A technician may recognize that a record is being falsified without understanding the entire production budget. A novice may be unable to assess a complex technical conclusion while still recognizing that the supposed expert refuses to identify what question was examined. Different agents possess access to different kinds of defeat. Moral assessment should not pretend that every participant can detect every failure.

There is also a difference between a reason to inquire and a reason to refuse. An inconsistency may warrant clarification, corroboration, or escalation rather than immediate rejection of the arrangement. The appropriate response depends on urgency, reversibility, potential harm, and the quality of the concern. This layered response is important because the binary opposition between obedience and rebellion obscures much responsible conduct. Judgment often proceeds by asking what must be checked before deciding what should be done.

The burden does not rest solely on the subordinate. An institution that expects responsible judgment must make relevant information and channels of challenge available. It cannot systematically conceal conditions and then blame participants for failing to discover them. Conversely, a participant cannot invoke complexity as a complete excuse when their role provided clear knowledge and a feasible opportunity to act. Responsibility concerns the actual distribution of capacities, information, and control, not merely the hierarchy displayed on an organizational chart.

7. Urgency and the temporal structure of authority

Urgency can justify postponing some forms of discussion. The stage manager's instruction matters because the participants need to act at the same time. Yet postponed explanation differs from abolished explanation. A time-sensitive decision can be made under a provisional mandate whose reasons are later reviewed. The inability to deliberate fully in the moment does not show that the decision-maker must be exempt from all subsequent assessment.

Temporal separation can preserve both coordinated action and correction. Before an operation, participants can identify roles and warning conditions. During it, instructions can receive presumptive practical weight. Afterward, disputed decisions and new evidence can be examined. The model is an analytical arrangement, not a claim that these stages will always be feasible or that every emergency has a neatly bounded end. Its point is that finality for action can coexist with continued responsibility for the action taken.

There are limits. Some decisions create irreversible consequences that later review cannot repair. In such cases, the quality of prior authorization and the availability of immediate challenge become especially important. A promise of eventual explanation cannot substitute for the protection that must exist before harm occurs. The structure of authority must therefore be assessed across time, including who bears the risk while a decision remains practically final.

Urgency can itself be disputed. A person asserting that there is no time to question may be accurately describing the situation, misunderstanding it, or protecting an interest. No conceptual account can determine which explanation applies without evidence. The appropriate inference is limited: urgency can alter procedures under a justified arrangement, but its invocation does not create unlimited jurisdiction. That distinction prevents the exception from swallowing the very responsibilities used to defend it.

8. Objections: disguised autonomy and permanent amateurism

One objection holds that retained judgment defeats authority. If individuals decide when a directive falls outside its domain, they remain the final judges and therefore never truly obey. The objection identifies an unavoidable feature of agency: a person cannot avoid making some judgment by invoking an instruction. Even recognizing the speaker, interpreting the words, and locating the situation involve judgment. The relevant contrast is therefore not judgment versus its total absence but responsible versus irresponsible ways of allocating judgment.

An authority can have real practical weight without being infallible or unlimited. A person may have a reason to comply with a decision they regard as imperfect because the decision falls within an authorized coordinating arrangement. That reason can be defeated without having been fictitious. Ordinary normative relations frequently have this structure. A promise can bind without licensing every act required for its fulfillment; a professional role can impose duties without exhausting moral responsibility. Conditionality does not by itself eliminate authority.

A second objection warns that constant scrutiny encourages amateur rejection of expertise. People may mistake misunderstanding for refutation or interpret inconvenience as evidence of illegitimacy. The warning is substantial. Retained judgment includes the responsibility to recognize the limits of one's competence. It can require further deference, patient inquiry, or acceptance of a conclusion one cannot independently reproduce. The proposed account does not reward reflexive distrust. It asks whether the response is fitted to the grounds actually available.

A third objection concerns burdens on subordinated participants. It may be unfair to demand conscientious refusal from someone exposed to severe personal consequences. The account distinguishes whether a directive is justified from how blame should be assigned to a person who complies under constraint. Lack of authority does not automatically imply that every subject can safely resist. Coercion, uncertainty, dependence, and feasible alternatives remain relevant to responsibility. Identifying an institutional defect should not be-

come a device for placing its entire cost on the person least able to correct it.

9. Responsibility after obedience

When a decision produces harm, the fact of obedience is relevant but incomplete. It can explain the route through which action occurred, identify who selected the objective, and clarify what the subordinate reasonably understood. It cannot answer every question of culpability or repair. An agent may have complied reasonably while an institution bears responsibility for the arrangement. Another may have exploited an instruction as convenient cover for conduct they independently recognized as wrongful.

The distinction also protects against hindsight. A directive's failure does not prove that its defects were evident when action was required. Retrospective judgment must reconstruct the information and alternatives then available rather than allowing the outcome to rewrite the past. At the same time, repeated failures can change future responsibilities. A previously reasonable pattern of reliance may become unreasonable once its defects are sufficiently established.

Repair can therefore concern both acts and the distribution of judgment. A correction may require clearer mandates, different information channels, altered review, or a reassignment of decision-making responsibility. It may also require acknowledgment by those who acted. These responses cannot be selected solely from the fact that an order was issued. The relevant question is how authority, knowledge, discretion, and foreseeable consequence were related in the particular case.

10. Conclusion: deference as a governed practice

Responsible agency does not require personally reconstructing every reason before acting. Coordination, expertise, and delegation can make deference an exercise of judgment. But the reason to defer is not an unrestricted permission to stop being answerable. It operates within a relation whose domain, purpose, and defeaters remain philosophically significant.

The resulting account is layered rather than absolute. Immediate decisions can receive practical finality while the arrangement remains subject to evaluation. Expertise can warrant belief without granting comprehensive command. Roles can create obligations without erasing independent constraints. Subordinates retain responsibilities proportionate to their knowledge and capacities, while institutions bear responsibilities for making relevant judgment possible.

Authority and autonomy therefore need not be treated as simple opposites in every setting. Their compatibility depends on how judgment is distributed and what remains available when a directive exceeds its reasons. Obedience is responsible neither because it is obedient nor because it is reluctant. It is responsible to the extent that the agent's reliance forms part of an intelligible and appropriately limited practice of judgment.

References

- Goldman, Alvin I. 2001. "Experts: Which Ones Should You Trust?" *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 63 (1): 85–110. DOI: [10.1111/j.1933-1592.2001.tb00093.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1933-1592.2001.tb00093.x)
- Raz, Joseph. 2006. "The Problem of Authority: Revisiting the Service Conception." *Minnesota Law Review* 90: 1003–1044. [Source](#)
- Silentii, Vocabor. 2026a. *The Architecture of Human Order. Part One: Foundations of Thought, Meaning, and Human Agency*. Revised and expanded edition. Author-supplied manuscript.
- Silentii, Vocabor. 2026b. *The Architecture of Human Order. Part Two: Law, Justice, and the Architecture of Order*. Revised critical edition. Author-supplied manuscript.
- Wolff, Robert Paul. 1970. *In Defense of Anarchism*. New York: Harper & Row. Electronic transcription, Digital Text International. [Source](#)