

**Sovereign Authority or Leviathan Bully:  
Alexandre Kojève on distinguishing the use and abuse of power**

Murray S. Y. Bessette  
Morehead State University  
m.bessette@moreheadstate.edu  
*Comments Welcome*  
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Abstract

Thomas Hobbes claims humans love freedom and dominion over others, which is to say they love influencing the behavior of others while themselves being free from others' influence. Since every individual by nature would be the bully, peace requires the Sovereign to be the greatest bully of all – the Leviathan. Jean-Jacques Rousseau observes that the determinative influence of government and religion, of laws and morality, is everywhere and always a fact; individuals are not free to behave simply as they see fit, rather, human behavior is subject to constraint whether political, moral, or psychological. The important political question is whether or not constraint can be made legitimate, whether authority and force are different, albeit related, things. The phenomenon of bullying, or the abuse of power, then, immediately raises the question of the use of power, or rather, the proper use of power and is, therefore, another means of exploring the problems of just and unjust rule, of legitimate and illegitimate authority, that have long been a theme of political philosophy. Few theorists have examined the question "What is authority?," either taking it for granted or dismissing it out of hand. Alexandre Kojève, in *La notion de l'autorité*, identifies the four theories of authority (the theological, the Platonic, the Aristotelian, and the Hegelian) that have been elaborated throughout history and argues both that each is irreducible to the others and that all together are exclusive of any other. Moreover, he sketches the necessary consequences for the political, moral, and psychological spheres of authority properly understood. In the final analysis, it is only when we come to understand what authority is and how authoritative power is used that we then can distinguish between the use and abuse of power.

According to the ancients, human beings come together in political communities because ‘each of us isn’t self-sufficient but is in need of much.’<sup>1</sup> In fact, Aristotle goes so far as to assert, ‘One who is incapable of participating or who is in need of nothing through being self-sufficient is no part of a city and so is either a beast or a god.’<sup>2</sup> Setting aside savages and deities, the mutual needfulness of human beings together with their rational capacity and essential diversity naturally gives rise to social organization in general, and division and specialization of labor in particular.<sup>3</sup> This economic division and specialization in turn requires an economic collection and equation, meaning a common assessment of value and means of exchange. The necessity of equation points to the question of equity or justice and, thus, to the need for political organization, for a recognized common or sovereign authority, to settle disputes about the relative value of work and products. While it is not clear how many loaves of bread are equal to a pair of shoes, it is clear that it is in the interest of the baker and is not in the interest of the shoemaker for the number to be less rather than more. The extreme case of this problem occurs when one seeks to obtain something from the other while exchanging nothing in return. Obviously, the identification of this “exchange” as a problem precludes the possibility that what is referred to here is a gift; rather, it is grift and graft, theft and thievery. In other words, the extreme case is that of obtaining through the use of force (either intellectual or physical) that to which one has no right. The one who undertakes such an enterprise is a bully.

The existence of the bully, according to the moderns, is the perennial problem of political life. Thomas Hobbes, the founder of the modern liberal regime, contends that human beings ‘naturally love Liberty, and Dominion over others.’<sup>4</sup> This double love

leads each to seek to control all that touches upon or may touch upon any aspect of his or her life with the inevitable result that each quickly finds his- or her-self in a war of all against all – the State of Nature. Ultimately, Hobbes observes, this desire for complete control is rooted in our common fear of ‘violent death.’<sup>5</sup> While Hobbes takes great pains to argue that this common fear ultimately serves to level all other inequalities and to provide the foundation for the political equality of individuals under the rule of the sovereign authority, in the final analysis his argument is unpersuasive.<sup>6</sup> To be persuaded of Hobbes’s argument one must elide the existence of individuals who can transcend the fear of violent death, that is, those individuals who are willing to risk their lives to obtain a desired end. In fact, it often goes unremarked that it is precisely these ‘children of pride’<sup>7</sup> whom provide the solution to the perennial problem of political life – it is they who in their roles as policemen and soldiers confront the everyday bullies on behalf of the common or sovereign authority.

The question posed by both the ancients and the moderns has been: what is the source of the common authority manifest in the political community? For the ancients, on the one hand, this authority is rooted in the common customs and conventions, gods and ancestors, habits and laws of the polis, which are comprised by the notion of *nomos*. Like *phusis* (i.e., nature), *nomos* is the given, its genesis a natural outgrowth of human interaction, which persists as the accumulated underbrush of heredity. Philosophy, which is said to arise from the recognition of the distinction between *phusis* and *nomos*, becomes political philosophy when it turns its critical gaze to this overgrown briar patch and problematizes the common, unifying standards of the political community from whose perspective it is a radical and dangerous activity. For the moderns, on the other

hand, this common authority is rooted in the social contract that brings an end to the State of Nature, as such it is an artifact of human interaction. The State of Nature, however, is hypothetical (excepting that which exists during civil war); it is for this reason that Hobbes acknowledges a second source of the genesis of authority – ‘naturall force.’<sup>8</sup> In a sense, then, the moderns too see common authority as a given, which is perhaps why Jean-Jacques Rousseau observes in *The Social Contract*,

Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains. One believes himself the master of others, who nevertheless is more a slave than they. How did this change come about? I do not know. What can make it legitimate? I believe I can solve this question.<sup>9</sup>

On the surface, it would seem that the question of the *legitimacy* of political authority must be distinguished from that of its source and genesis; however, if Alexandre Kojève is correct in his analysis of the notion of authority, ‘When an action is authoritarian [meaning possessing the character of authority], it is legal or legitimate by definition. ... It makes no sense to speak of illegitimate or illegal Authority: it is a contradiction *in adjecto*.’<sup>10</sup> To speak of legitimate authority, then, is redundant. Ultimately, what Rousseau is asking after is whether or not mere force can be made authoritative – if the origin of a political community is not consensual, that is, if it rests not on the social contract, then this question seems to be of the gravest import. The distinction that must be drawn is between authority and force – why is submission to the former acceptable, even laudable, but submission to the latter only necessary, perhaps even repugnant? To rephrase this in other terms: what distinguishes a king from a tyrant, or a policeman from a bully?

Here it behooves us to take up Alexandre Kojève’s analysis of the notion of authority as he presents it in the book of the same name. Kojève begins by saying,

Curious thing, the problem and the notion of Authority has been very little studied. Above all we are occupied by questions relative to the transfer and genesis of Authority, but the essence of this phenomenon has rarely drawn attention. And moreover, it is from all evidence impossible to treat of political power and the structure of the State without knowing what is Authority *qua* Authority.<sup>11</sup>

It is likely that many find the latter part of this observation puzzling, for if political philosophy has treated any subjects at all it certainly has treated those of political power and the structure of the State. However, to buttress Kojève's contention, I merely will observe that the social contract theory elaborated by Thomas Hobbes in *Leviathan* seeks to explain the origin of political authority, while that of Jean-Jacques Rousseau seeks to justify it, that is, neither seeks to answer the question 'What is authority?'

According to Kojève,

the authoritarian act differs from all others by the fact that it does not encounter *opposition* on the part of the person or persons upon whom it is directed. This presupposes, on the one hand, the *possibility* of opposition and, on the other hand, the *conscious* and *voluntary* renunciation of the possibility of realizing it.<sup>12</sup>

Moreover, 'Authority is necessarily a *relation* (between agent and patient): it is therefore an essentially *social* (and not individual) phenomenon.'<sup>13</sup> The use of the term "patient," as opposed to "subject," calls to mind the physician and, thereby, connects authority to the good of the one who submits to it – it provides a possible explanation as to why one consciously and voluntarily submits to the direction and serves as a possible ground for the distinction between authority and force. Authority is the capacity to direct the action of the external human environment, either social or political, without making compromises broadly understood (*i.e.*, encountering opposition, including even discussion).<sup>14</sup> Kojève argues that this understanding of authority clearly connects it to the phenomenon of Right, which is understood to be the ability to do something without

encountering opposition.<sup>15</sup> The essential difference between authority and right is the following:

In the case of Authority, the “reaction” (opposition) never leaves the domain of pure *possibility* (it is never *actualized*): its *realization* destroys Authority. In the case of Right, on the contrary, the “reaction” can be actualized without destroying the Right: it suffices that this reaction is suffered by someone other than the one who holds the Right.<sup>16</sup>

In short, ‘Authority excludes force, in principle; Right implies and presupposes it, while remaining something other than it.’<sup>17</sup> Authority, therefore, involves making someone do through direction *without force* that which absent the direction they otherwise would not do spontaneously.<sup>18</sup>

The necessity of recognition for the existence of authority, that is, the necessity of the conscious and voluntary renunciation of the possibility of opposition to the directive, raises the question of why one recognizes and submits to it.<sup>19</sup> The answer varies according to the type of authority in question. Kojève identifies four irreducible theories of authority: the theological, the Platonic, the Aristotelian, and the Hegelian, which typically are embodied by the father, the judge, the chief, and the master, respectively. The grounds of authority in each case, moreover, are heredity, justice, prudence, and risk.<sup>20</sup> Each theory is exclusive, meaning it recognizes only one type of authority; to demonstrate how each is insufficient is one of the purposes of Kojève’s analysis.<sup>21</sup>

The Hegelian theory treats the relations of master and slave, as such it does not speak to the authoritarian relations existent between equals. As Kojève explains,

Mastery is born of mortal Combat for recognition. The two adversaries posit an essentially human, non-animal, non-biological end: that of being “recognized” in their human reality or dignity. While the future Master meets the test of Combat and Risk, the future Slave fails to master his animal dread of death. He therefore concedes, recognizes the superiority of the victor and submits to him as a Slave to his Master.<sup>22</sup>

In the final analysis, it is the overcoming of the natural aspect of human nature by the human (*i.e.*, the sublimation of brute force) that serves as the ground of the master's authority over the slave.<sup>23</sup>

Aristotle's theory of authority also treats the relations of those who are unequal; it treats the authority of the leader over the lead, of the chief over the band. The ground of the chiefs authority lies not in vanquishing those he leads in the thumotic contest for recognition, but rather the chief has the 'right to exercise an authority over [those he leads] because he can foresee, whereas [those he leads] register nothing but *immediate* needs and are guided exclusively by them.'<sup>24</sup> The authority of the Chief, of the one who proposes the project ultimately rests not upon the project per se, but upon the good to be attained thereby. Those who submit to the leadership and direction of the Chief do not do so simply because he proposes just any project, but because he proposes a project which will further the common good as they understand it. As such, the authoritarian criterion for Aristotle is not so much foresight as the good, or at least that which is perceived as good – a fact that Kojève never addresses. The perceived good, of course, raises the problem of knowing what is actually and not just apparently good. One can reasonably doubt that Aristotle would deem the one who has the foresight required to persuade those around him that a the appearance of a project that is apparently good, but is not actually good, is the reality as possessing the right to exercise authority. Rightful authority is itself a questionable phenomenon given Kojève's analysis – can one have a right, which implies and presupposes force, to that which by its very nature excludes force? In other words, can one enforce the right to exercise authority, or does the very need for enforcement destroy the authority in question? This question points to an anti-utopian

view of politics – if, like illegitimate authority, rightful authority too is a contradiction *in adjecto*, then a purely authoritarian politics would appear to be impossible, meaning government without force (*i.e.*, violence) cannot exist.

It must be observed, however, that right itself can be said to possess an authority, that is, the authority of justice or equity. At bottom one can conceive of the securing of the rights of individuals as ‘giv[ing] to each what is owed.’<sup>25</sup>

For Plato, all Authority is – or at least, ought to be – founded on Justice or Equity. All other forms of Authority are illegitimate. This means, practically, not stable, not durable, transient, ephemeral, accidental. In reality, all power that does not rest on Justice rests not on an Authority in the proper sense of the term. It is maintained only through force (through “terror”).<sup>26</sup>

Kojève highlights the fact that justice cannot explain the authority of masters, chiefs, and fathers, by pointing to the conflicting obligations of filial obedience and the sentiment of justice.<sup>27</sup> That Plato was aware of this conflict is obvious from any reading of the *Euthyphro*.<sup>28</sup>

The theological theory of authority, which Kojève identifies with the scholastics, is akin to that of cause over effect, that is, to the hereditary determination of the cause in the effect. This hereditary character draws together fatherly and divine authority, as does the fact that, for good or for ill, we can have no control over that which we inherit, meaning just as we cannot react against the divine, so too we cannot react against and change the given into which we are born – which is not to say that it cannot be changed going forward.<sup>29</sup>

Here we come full circle. The authority of *nomos*, of that which we inherit and are born into, is that of fathers and gods. Through critical analysis, ancient political philosophy revealed this authority to be internally inconsistent, that is, it laid bare the fact

that the demands of fathers and gods could come into conflict. In place of paternal, hereditary authority, the ancient philosophers sought to establish another standard. This attempt to replace the power of the father with that of the judge or that of the chief was co-opted by the mediaeval scholastic tradition against which the moderns fought so as to bring about a rebirth of political philosophy. The modern liberal project that begins with Hobbes and culminates in Hegel gives preference to the authority of the master, while seeking to incorporate institutionally the authority of the Judge and Chief.<sup>30</sup> The sovereign for Hobbes is the one whom all others recognize as the final arbiter of conflicting claims, either because he has shown them a way out of the state of nature, or because they all fear him, but not because of his superior justness – since justice and injustice are ‘Qualities, that relate to men in Society, not in Solitude,’<sup>31</sup> they arise only after the sovereign has been recognized as such and, thus, the former cannot serve as the basis of selection. In a sense, the moderns seek to lower justice lest it again provide grounds for the reestablishment of the rule of god the father. Furthermore, the justice preached by classical liberalism, that of the equality of rights arising out of the State of Nature and the social contract, is preached precisely because human nature will recognize no other arrangement as true – each holds his or her self to be roughly equal if not slightly superior in dignity to his or her fellows and demands to be recognized accordingly.<sup>32</sup> Whether or not this is actually the case is besides the point, the issue here is one of consent – if individuals will not consent to enter into the social contract save upon terms of equality, then one with foresight cannot do otherwise than recognize it, as it is required for peace and peace is good for all.

## <sup>1</sup>Notes

Plato, *Republic*, trans Allan Bloom, Basic Books, New York, 1968, p. 369c.

<sup>2</sup> Aristotle, *The Politics*, trans Carnes Lord, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1984, p. 1253a26-28.

<sup>3</sup> Plato, *Republic*, p. 369e-370c.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1991, p. 117. This double love is manifest in our relations with our exterior environment: we see it in modern science whereby we seek both mastery of and freedom from Nature; we see it in politics whereby we seek both to prescribe and proscribe individual and social behavior according to our presumably idiosyncratic preferences; finally, we see it in our social relations whereby we seek to influence others while being free from others' influence.

<sup>5</sup> Hobbes, p. 89. For another view of the naturalness of the desire to control, see B. F. Skinner, *About Behaviorism*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1974, p.189-190.

<sup>6</sup> Hobbes, p. 86-89.

<sup>7</sup> Hobbes, p. 221. See also *Job* 41:34.

<sup>8</sup> Hobbes, p. 121.

<sup>9</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Oeuvres Complètes: tome 3*, Éditions Gallimard, Paris, 1964, p. 351. All translations are my own.

<sup>10</sup> Alexandre Kojève, *La notion de l'autorité*, Éditions Gallimard, Paris, 2004, 62. All translations are my own.

<sup>11</sup> Kojève, p. 49.

<sup>12</sup> Kojève, p. 57.

<sup>13</sup> Kojève, p. 58.

<sup>14</sup> Kojève, p. 58-59.

<sup>15</sup> Kojève, p. 59.

<sup>16</sup> Kojève, p. 60. In light of this passage, it might prove profitable to compare Kojève's notion of authority to Gramsci's theory of hegemony, which refers 'to a relationship between two political units where one dominates the other with the consent of that other,' see Maurice A. Finocchiaro, 'Gramsci, Antonio' in *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy, Second Edition*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1999, p. 353-354.

<sup>17</sup> Kojève, p. 60.

<sup>18</sup> Kojève, p. 58, 61, and 66.

<sup>19</sup> Kojève, p. 66.

<sup>20</sup> Kojève, p. 50.

<sup>21</sup> Kojève, p. 51.

<sup>22</sup> Kojève, p. 70-71.

<sup>23</sup> Kojève, p. 83.

<sup>24</sup> Kojève, p. 73.

<sup>25</sup> Plato, *Republic*, p. 331e.

<sup>26</sup> Kojève, p. 77.

<sup>27</sup> Kojève, p. 77.

<sup>28</sup> Plato, 'Euthyphro' in T. G. West and G. S. West (trans), *Four Texts on Socrates*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1984.

<sup>29</sup> Kojève, p. 81.

<sup>30</sup> While Kojève maintains that paternal authority is amputated in the separation of powers, it is not entirely clear that it does not come to rest with the Constitution itself, which is held to be venerable, see Kojève, p. 142-143.

<sup>31</sup> Hobbes, p. 90.

<sup>32</sup> Hobbes, p. 88.

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