

But what about the children?

A note on tutelage

Shawn P. Wilbur

September 5, 2016

It's a question again of "legitimate authority" and "justified hierarchy," and specifically of the favorite example used by those who want to leave a space within anarchist theory for those things: the care of very young children. The argument I have encountered repeatedly is that parenting is, at least in the case of those very young children, a necessarily authoritarian relation: children must be ordered about in order to protect them from hazards; parents have a duty and presumably also a right to dictate to their children; and children have an obligation to obey.

It's one of those debates that all too often comes down to: "WHY WON'T SOMEONE PLEASE THINK OF THE CHILDREN!!!" And we know all too well all the dodgy uses to which that appeal has been put. But it should also be clear that the underlying questions, regarding our relations with those individuals with substantially different capacities for self-determination, are important on their own and probably have some connection to how we organize our relations with non-human nature. So we have to try to get to the bottom of what's really at stake, despite the difficulties. Unfortunately, the terms that seem most useful to make the kinds of distinctions we would need are the very terms that seem to have been extended to encompass all sorts of potentially conflicting ideas, so we have to be try to find other vocabularies.

The general distinction that critics of all authority arguably need to make is between *the capacity to act* and *various sorts of social permission or sanction for action that include some right to command others*. It's a distinction that we make regularly: the capacity to kill another individual does not generally carry with it any right to do so, nor does the capacity to understand complex social relations itself grant any right to arrange them for others. The expert has to possess something more than mere expertise in order for there to be authority (in the strong sense) vested in them. That *something more* is social in character, and indeed structures the sort of society that can exist between individuals.

The question becomes where, in relations presumably guided by anarchist principles, that extra, social something could come from. The case of the parental relation is at least useful as a place to examine the possibilities. In order to be particularly careful, it may be useful to first address it in terms of the question of "legitimate authority" and then again in terms of "justifiable hierarchy."

There are some possible source of authority, such as *ownership* of the child by the parents, that we can probably set aside without much comment. Similarly, there seems to be little sympathy

for the notion that the parental relation might be one in which might makes right. In general, even those who consider the parental relation necessarily authoritarian seem inclined to also treat it as a relation of care. Indeed, they often characterize parental guardianship as a duty, although it is often unclear to whom the duty is, or could be, owed. We'll return to the dynamic of duty and obligation. First, we should see if perhaps parental authority could just be a matter of superior capacity and expertise, and perhaps one that could make us think differently about "the authority of the bootmaker."

Certainly, one of the elements of the parent-child relation is that adults have a significantly greater experience of the world and the business of making our way through it relatively unscathed. They have capacities that are more developed in a variety of ways. If we were to assent to the notion that the difference between knowing how to make boots and not having those skills could be a source of authority, then certainly the difference between the skills and capacities of parent and child could be a similar source. The question becomes how a difference in capacities is transformed into a right to command on the part of the more capable and a duty to obey on the part of the less capable.

Let's imagine a society of talented generalists, where skills and capacities are widely distributed and each individual is relatively self-sufficient. It is hard to imagine the rationale by which we would say that interference by certain individuals in the lives of others could be considered justified or legitimate. Perhaps the case of plucking someone out of harm's way would be the sort of exception we might note, but, in the case of individuals of equal capacities, it seems hard to characterize the act as one of authority. Under these circumstances, the intervention has to be considered one that we make on our own responsibility and if we find it was unwelcome, it isn't clear that we could justify our interference in any way that the recipient/victim should feel obliged to accept. Certainly, in a society of competent bootmakers, no particular bootmaker could be said to have much in the way of authority.

Let's consider then what happens if, in this society of competent bootmakers, one individual becomes expert. It still isn't clear that the additional capacity translates into any sort of authority. There are certainly likely to be economic effects as we begin to see specialization in a society, but there's no obvious way in which any power or right to command emerges from the scenario.

But let's consider the other end of a certain spectrum, in a society where we have a great deal of specialization—so much, in fact, that individuals are constantly confronted with the need to consult others to complete the most basic of tasks. The dynamics of the society will obviously be more complex, but it isn't clear that this extreme divvying-up of expertise provides much greater footholds for the establishment of authority, at least in the realm of principle. Here, every individual is, in theory, a potential authority when it comes to their particular specialization and a dependent in most other contexts, but in fact the complex interdependence means that all of that authority remains largely potential, since the social leverage available to each narrow specialization is minuscule in comparison to the combined importance of all the other forms of specialized expertise.

Now, in a more complex society there are more opportunities for equal interdependence to break down. That means that some of our specialists might find themselves gaining relative advantages as circumstances gave their skills particular importance. The various weapon-producers or food-producers might collude, under favorable circumstances, to transform their expertise into the power to command, but we would be hard put, I think, to find an anarchist principle to justify their actions. And I think we would have to say that the source of that possibility was more in the

general incapacity of the population with regard to specific skills and the specific environmental circumstances than it was in the expertise of the individuals able to capitalize on the situation.

Obviously, we live in societies where the distribution of expertise lies between these extremes and where the existing conditions already structure which sorts of expertise have access to the power to command, whether it is a matter of commanding wealth in the market or obedience in a wide range of authoritarian institutions. But it isn't clear how our own societies differ from these extreme examples, where the question of "legitimate authority" arising from expertise is concerned. The power to command seems to emerge from just about every element in society *except* individual expertise: already existing political authority, economic monopoly, the comparative incapacity of others, accidents and "acts of God," etc. We can't seem to make the leap from "I can..." to "I may and others must..." but that is precisely the leap we have to make in order to establish some principle by which expertise itself really establishes some authority vested in the expert.

Add to these considerations Bakunin's comments on the corrosive effects of authority on expertise, and perhaps we can acknowledge we have to look elsewhere. The ultimate sanction of expertise is presumably truth, but practical truth in a developing context is not the sort of thing that stands still, so that sanction has to be renewed and tested by new study and experiment. So even if we could establish the present legitimacy of an authority based on the most rigorous sort of scientific truth, in some way that the non-expert could verify (and this is not at all clear), we have no guarantee that the legitimacy would remain as circumstances changed, while the exercise of the authority as such is itself at least potentially a break from the exercise of the practices of the field of expertise on which it is presumably based. Once crowned an expert, it is easy to stop renewing one's expertise.

When we apply these considerations to the parental relation, it doesn't seem any easier to explain why the greater capacities of the parent would alone establish a power to command or an obligation to obey in this instance than it is in the relations between adults. At the same time, there seem to be other explanations for why we might act in their defense that don't depend on either authority or even on the relative differences in capacity between adults and children. We might, after all, act to save another adult, without any attempt to establish authority or permission. We might do so out of specific relations of care or simply on the basis of our experience of what constitutes intentional and accidental behavior in our own societies. The major difference with children is that we can be fairly certain that nobody, except the child, is likely to make much fuss if our exercise of real or imagined authority seems to be "for the good of the child." And the reasons for that may have more to do with our tendency to think of children and their actions as existing within a "justifiable hierarchy" beneath adults and the ordinary workings of adult society.

The parent-child hierarchy is often cited as one of a class of educational or tutelary hierarchies. Tutelage is guardianship and in tutelary relations the assumption is that the subordinate (child, pupil, apprentice, etc.) is at least temporarily incapable of protecting themselves and their interests, so the right to exercise the power of command is based on the assumption that it is exercised for the subordinate—or at least "for their own good." Bakunin left open the possibility of exercising authority over very young children, because he understood human development as in part characterized by a progressive increase in humanity, at the very beginning of which children are effectively not yet human and need to be given the tools to take on their own development before they can start that progressive development on their own terms.

Even this may not be entirely defensible as a matter of principle. The familiar example of pulling a child back from traffic already assumes a particular sort of “adult world” in which the spaces for free exploration are dramatically limited by the business as usual of the institutions we have created. It isn’t clear what could justify the busy street, in principled terms, so it is at least a little bit hard to know how that busy street contributes to the principled legitimization of the parental act.

But if we assume that, specifics aside, there will always be some set of coping skills that need to be acquired before children can assume responsibility for their own safety and development, we still have to work out just what form the tutelary hierarchy really takes—and then whether it amounts to evidence in favor of retaining some space for “legitimate authority” and “justified hierarchy” within anarchist thought.

Early in our examination, it was suggested that parental care might be a *duty*. Now, if this was the case, the parent would presumably be superior to the child because they were inferior to some other power that imposed the duty. We might certainly think of familiar circumstances, under which the care of children is indeed dictated by law and by specific social norms, but I suspect we can also think of reasons why most of those factors which presume to dictate to the individual might not be consistent with anarchist principles or present in an anarchist society. We could also think of the duty as a duty to the child, but that puts us in the strange position of imagining a hierarchy in which the superior interest is that of a being elevated to that status by their incapacity. If there is a hierarchy here, it is an odd one, disconnected from our usual understanding of authority, since the child who cannot manage their own interests is hardly in a position to exercise a right to command.

Instead of a hierarchy, we seem to be left with one of those complicated relationships, like the guest-host relation of hospitality, where the roles are fluid and the usual rules are suspended. In this case, we have some of the forms of command and rule, but without any of the usual authoritarian or hierarchical rationales. Rather than being an exception to anarchist principles, perhaps we should understand the parental relation as a most accessible example of how anarchists principles ought to be applied in our struggle towards a more genuinely free society, characterized by more thoroughly anti-authoritarian and non-hierarchical relations.

After all, the parental relation, with all of its negotiations between the rights and needs of children and those of parents, is not the sort of thing that we intend to maintain forever, assuming that we value our children as developing human beings. Confronted with the limited capacities of the child, our action is directed toward increasing those capacities. We teach and, in those instances where our teaching has not caught up with the needs of the day, we intervene more directly. But the hope, assuming that desire to see children grow up to be independent, is that the tutelage is a very temporary thing. And child-rearing is, like every other kind of expertise, itself a matter of practice and developing expertise. The specific difficulties of negotiating rights and interests mean that it is necessarily a work of trial-and-error. There’s nothing easy or comfortable about the relation, particularly for those who concern themselves with the principled critique of authority, so there’s even some strong incentives to move things along and reduce the quasi-hierarchical elements of the relation.

That doesn’t sound like a set of reasons to make space in anarchist theory for any more extensive acceptance of hierarchy—and perhaps quite the contrary. It would seem to me that each time we are confronted with an imbalance of expertise and the opening to authoritarian relations, the logical anarchist response would be to work, on our own responsibility, to cultivate greater,

more widespread knowledge and skill, rather than accommodating ourselves to the imbalance. There will, of course, be times when we have to move forward with the limitations imposed on us by hard necessity. That was, after all, the one law that anarchists like Proudhon and Bakunin would acknowledge. But the point of necessity-as-law was not to grant authority to any particular response to the inevitable, but to emphasize that we must respond. How we respond will seldom be entirely dictated by our circumstances, which is precisely the reason that our principles need to be clear, so that we can advance most effectively, given our real limitations, toward the beautiful ideal of anarchy.

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)
Anti-Copyright



Shawn P. Wilbur
But what about the children?
A note on tutelage
September 5, 2016

Retrieved on 31st August 2020 from <https://www.libertarian-labyrinth.org/contrun/but-what-about-the-children-a-note-on-tutelage/>

usa.anarchistlibraries.net