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# Commentary on John Fields's "Objectivity, Autonomy, and the Use of Arguments from Authority"

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## 1. Interpretation

Professor Fields criticizes a view of arguments from authority which he summarizes as follows:

- (1) Arguments from authority are certainly excusable, given certain practical considerations, but
- (2) They are in some important sense sub-optimal *vis-à-vis* other argument schemes, because
- (3) They violate a fundamental preference in favor of objectivity in argumentation, and
- (4) They violate a fundamental preference in favor of autonomy on the part of those making an argument. (p. 2)

By objectivity, Fields (pp. 4-5) seems to mean that "the evidence (warrant or justification) for the conclusion lies in 'the world out there' and not just in another person." By autonomy, he seems to mean a mixture of individualism, responsibility, and self-reliance, such that "it is better to do an experiment yourself than rely on the say-so of someone else who has done it and claimed certain results" (pp. 1, 2, quoted from Walton 2012, p. 212). With regard to Fields's talk of "sub-optimality," his meaning is less clear, although what he seems to have in mind is also conveyed by other phrases such as the following: "necessarily weaker than both deductive and inductive forms of evidence" (p. 1); "a second-class form of argumentation" (p. 2); "a lesser form of argument" (p. 2); and "there is something problematic about employing" (p. 9) arguments from authority. It is also relatively unclear whether or not the view being criticized is itself an argument, and if so what type: in his discussion, Fields seems to regard it not as an argument, but as a set of four theses, perhaps overlapping; but in the formulation quoted above, proposition (2) is presented as supported by propositions (3) and (4), although proposition (1) is left unsupported.

Fields claims, with some plausibility, that such a view is very widespread. Among contemporary argumentation scholars, Douglas Walton is found to hold it, based on the account given in his book *Informal Logic*. However, Fields also attributes it to various classics of early modern philosophy, such as Descartes, and especially Locke; from the latter, Fields quotes several passages from his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*.

As mentioned, Fields criticizes such a view. His criticism has two main parts, addressing respectively the two main premises of the target or object argument, propositions (3) and (4).

One criticism amounts to a denial of proposition (3). That is, Fields argues that appeals to authority do *not* violate the principle of objectivity, giving two supporting reasons: "(1) that there is a way of thinking about knowledge (warrant or justification) that will allow one to have knowledge or to be justified in one's beliefs without oneself having had direct access to the original source of that knowledge or justification; and (2) that there is a process by which such

knowledge (warrant or justification) can be transmitted and thus indirectly accessed” (p. 5).

With regard to proposition (4), Fields seems to *agree* that arguments from authority *do* violate the principle of autonomy. However, he argues that this principle is untenable because, in short, it would make knowledge impossible; or in his own words,

unless one has a very good reason for maintaining that there can be no such thing as human knowledge or justified belief—unless, that is, one has a compelling reason in favor of the thesis of universal skepticism—one cannot maintain a general skepticism about the value of expert authority. And thus one cannot maintain that there is something problematic about employing it, if it is indeed a means by which one is able to discharge effectively one’s primary epistemic responsibilities. (p. 9)

Instead, autonomy should be superseded by what Fields calls the principle of epistemic modesty, that is, the willingness to “allow for a ready—perhaps even an enthusiastic—incorporation into an individual’s set of beliefs those beliefs that are based upon the experiences and expertise of others” (p. 9).

The first criticism amounts to a claim that the subargument from proposition (3) to proposition (2) has a false premise. The second criticism is equivalent to saying that the subargument from proposition (4) to proposition (2) is inferentially incorrect, although its stated premise is true. Combining both criticisms, the key claim here is that the sub-optimality of arguments from authority (namely proposition 2) has not been justified by Locke, Walton, and their followers, since their supporting argument is flawed in at least two ways.

## 2. Evaluation

However, I am not sure Fields wants to limit himself to such critical and meta-argumentational considerations. He seems to want to advance a constructive view or argument about appeals to authority. Indeed the positive counterpart of his criticism may be stated as follows: arguments from authority are optimal (i.e., *not sub-optimal*) because they are (or can be) objective and they conform to the principle of epistemic modesty. That is, arguments from authority reflect the modesty of the human condition in which arguers and investigators depend on other human beings to learn about the world, and such dependence is an objective fact about human knowledge that cannot be denied or avoided. It follows that arguments from authority are not sub-optimal.

This argument has some plausibility, but the main issue is what the conclusion really means; what the talk of sub-optimality amounts to. Let us use some elementary logical notions. Certainly this conclusion cannot mean that arguments from authority are deductively valid. In fact, I would hold that none are. But they do not *aim* to be deductively valid. That is, they are inductive arguments, which claim that the premises, if true or acceptable, do not render the conclusion certain, but rather merely probable, to varying degrees, which define the strength of the argument (cf. W. Salmon 1984, pp. 97-101; M. Salmon 2002, pp. 119-21). Next, however, this is not to say that all arguments from authority are inductively correct or strong; rather, some are and some are not. Their strength or weakness depends on a number of conditions and principles of evaluation that assess whether and to what extent the source appealed to is a reliable authority about the topic in question and is consistent with the claims of other reliable

authorities. One version of such conditions and principles is the so called critical questions formulated by Walton and quoted by Fields (p. 9).

In short, the conclusion of Fields's constructive argument is acceptable if his denial of so-called "sub-optimality" means a denial that all arguments from authority are inductively worthless. In other words, not all arguments from authority are weak, some are strong. However, besides being acceptable when so interpreted, Fields's conclusion could perhaps be challenged from the point of view of whether it is part of a straw-man argument. For example, I don't think Walton would disagree with Fields's conclusion so interpreted. But what about Locke? And here we come to another strand of his paper, dealing with more historical considerations.

Fields quotes some passages from Locke indicating that Locke does hold that no arguments from authority have any strength. In Locke's own colorful language:

The floating of other men's opinions in our brains, makes us not one jot the more knowing, though they happen to be true. What in them was science, is in us but opiniatrey ... In the sciences, every one has so much as he really knows and comprehends. What he believes only, and takes upon trust, are but shreds; which, however well in the whole piece, make no considerable addition to his stock who gathers them. Such borrowed wealth, like fairy money, though it were gold in the land from which he received it, will be but leaves and dust when it comes to use. (Locke 1959, vol. 1, pp. 115-16; quoted by Fields, p. 4, from McMyler 2011, p. 25)

In the historical section of this paper, Fields labels such a view a "prejudice" (p. 3). However, I would object that here we are not really faced with a prejudice, which suggests not only that Locke's claim is wrong, but also that it was not based on any evidence, or that it was accepted before the mostly conflicting evidence was examined. I think that the proper manner of formulating the criticism is to characterize Locke's claim as an injudicious exaggeration. That is, he was reacting to a number of genuine problems and progressive developments in the recent cultural history of his time, but he went too far.

I believe that this more charitable (but still critical) evaluation of Locke's view should be acceptable to Fields himself, since the seeds for it may be found in his own paper.

In fact, Fields admits that Locke's claim is part of a tradition

going back to the beginning of early modern science. It is the tradition that began when early researchers, smarting under what may be described as their culture's excessive or indiscriminate use of arguments from authority, were moved to push back strongly against the notion of epistemic authority as such and to adopt as a model of research and argumentation what has been characterized by one philosopher as the ideal of epistemic autonomy. (p. 2; cf. McMyler 2011, p. 30)

Similarly, Fields is aware that "despite efforts of certain early modern theorists like Locke, early modern scientists, just like the scientists of today, were never so confused about how to discharge their epistemic duties as to actually apply to the practical work in which they were engaged this sort of model of epistemic autonomy" (p. 10).

### 3. Elaboration

An example of such nuanced scientific practice that belies Locke's theory, is provided by the work of Galileo Galilei. Galileo's attitude was nuanced in the sense that he did not practice Locke's wholesale rejection of arguments from authority, and yet Galileo was critical of them in various ways. Moreover, besides practicing a judicious criticism of appeals to authority, he was reflectively aware of what he was doing and found the occasion to formulate various methodological reflections along the same lines. Summarizing a very long and complex story, I would highlight it as follows.

In his pursuit of a Copernican, heliocentric, and geokinetic world view, in opposition to the Aristotelian, Ptolemaic, geocentric, and geostatic view, Galileo had to face many types of counter-arguments: some based on the laws of physics, some based on astronomical observation, and some based on epistemological principles. Another group of such counter-arguments was based on what is stated (explicitly or implicitly) in various passages of the Bible. By and large, these were arguments from authority of the following form:

The Bible states that P (that the Earth stands still at the center of the universe).  
(This may be seen from such passages as Joshua 10:12-13, Ecclesiastes 1:5, Psalm 104:5, etc.)  
Therefore, P.

Galileo rejected such arguments by arguing that the Bible is not a legitimate authority in astronomy, natural science, and natural philosophy (cf. Galilei 2014; Finocchiaro 2010, pp. 65-96, 243-48). And of course, his rejection of the scientific authority of Scripture was shared by others at the time, and gradually became generally endorsed, eventually even by the Catholic Church. However, Galileo's rejection of biblical authority did *not* extend to questions of faith and morals, in regard to which he accepted it.

Another group of counter-arguments which Galileo had to deal with was based on the authority of Aristotle. These arguments could be schematized as follows:

Aristotle said that Q (that the earth stands still).  
Therefore, Q is true (the earth stands still).

Here, Galileo's response was not, and could not have been, to reject Aristotle's authority in natural science and philosophy. Instead, Galileo claimed to have greater respect for Aristotle than Galileo's anti-Copernican opponents, so much so that he thought it important and instructive to expand such simple arguments from authority. That is, the arguer had the duty to examine *why* Aristotle said so, what *arguments(s)* he gave to support Q. Now, this examination of the authority's argumentation had two main parts: the first was interpretation, aimed at ensuring that we understood the argument(s); the second was evaluation, in order to determine the strength of the argument(s).

Moreover, with regard to the evaluation of Aristotle's arguments, Galileo thought that basically the arguer had the freedom, and indeed the duty, to arrive at his own evaluation; obviously he could not merely accept Aristotle's evaluation. However, in such an autonomous evaluation, Galileo again showed his respect for Aristotle's authority in various ways. One was that Galileo recognized and exploited the fact that Aristotle was the founder of the science of

logic, and so the arguer had the duty to learn it and try to apply its principles even to Aristotle's own arguments; and such an application might very well yield a negative evaluation (cf. Galilei 1890-1909, vol. 18, pp. 234, 248; 1997, pp. 87-88; Wallace 1984, pp. 337-38; Finocchiaro 2014, pp. 265-66).

Another way in which Galileo showed his respect for Aristotle's authority was to distinguish the substance and the manner of the reasoning in an Aristotelian argument. Sometimes it turned out that by using an Aristotelian manner of reasoning in the problem situation of the seventeenth century (two thousand years after Aristotle) one would arrive at an un-Aristotelian conclusion. A good example of this regards the question of whether the heavenly region and the heavenly bodies undergo physical changes. Aristotle had argued that the heavenly region is unchangeable because no heavenly changes had ever been observed. Galileo pointed out that in his own time many kinds of physical changes had been observed, and so "it is more in accordance with Aristotle to philosophize by saying 'the heavens are changeable because so the senses show me' than if you say 'the heavens are unchangeable because theorizing so persuaded Aristotle' " (Galilei 1997, p. 104).

Similarly, not all premises of an argument are equally important or equally correct. Thus, sometimes an Aristotelian argument is such that by accepting one of its more important and acceptable premises, and rejecting one that is less important and correct, the arguer can arrive at a conclusion different from the one which Aristotle arrived at. For example, as I have had occasion to elaborate elsewhere, one of Aristotle's arguments was

that the earth is at the center of the universe because it is at the center of planetary revolutions. Such an argument presupposes the idea that the center of the universe is the center of planetary revolutions; this may be regarded as the Aristotelian definition of the center of the universe. Now, Galileo thought that in his own time the new telescopic evidence was such that the minor premise of this argument could be conclusively refuted, and one could prove instead that the sun is at the center of planetary revolutions. It followed that if one applied the Aristotelian definition to the new situation, one would have to conclude that the sun is at the center of the universe. (Finocchiaro 2014, p. 267)

Finally, as mentioned earlier, besides practicing such a judicious criticism of arguments from authority, Galileo occasionally formulated the corresponding methodological reflections. They are comparable in linguistic eloquence and rhetorical effectiveness to Locke's more extreme pronouncements which Fields stresses. In the *Dialogue on the Two Chief World Systems, Ptolemaic and Copernican*, Galileo imagines the following exchange between the Aristotelian spokesman named Simplicio and the Copernican spokesman named Salviati:

SIMPLICIO. But, if one abandons Aristotle, who will be the guide in philosophy? Name some author.

SALVIATI. One needs a guide in an unknown and uncivilized country, but in a flat and open region only the blind need a guide; whoever is blind would do well to stay home, whereas anyone who has eyes in his head and in his mind should use them as a guide. Not that I am thereby saying that one should not listen to Aristotle; on the contrary, I applaud his being examined and diligently studied and only blame submitting to him in such a way that one blindly subscribes to all his

assertions and accepts them as unquestionable dictates, without searching for other reasons for them. This abuse carries with it another extreme impropriety, namely that no one makes an effort any longer to try to understand the strength of his demonstrations. Is there anything more shameful in a public discussion dealing with demonstrable conclusions than to see someone slyly appear with a textual passage (often written for some different purpose) and use it to shut the mouth of an opponent? If you want to persist in this manner of studying, lay down the name of philosophers and call yourselves either historians or memory experts, for it is not right that those who never philosophize should usurp the honorable title of philosopher. (Galilei 1997, pp. 126-27)

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