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Authority in contemporary society

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Abstract: *This paper examines the complex dynamics of authority and power in social context, presenting the distinction between legitimate authority and mere power. Drawing on Bocheński's framework, we analyze how authority operates through epistemic and deontic domains, emphasizing that recognition of authority depends on knowledge, competence, trustworthiness, and integrity. We further explore how misunderstandings of authority whether in adult and adult, adult-child, employee and employer, or citizen-institution relationships have led to a societal tendency to perceive directives and information as coercive, often provoking immediate contestation. Despite this, the proper acknowledgement of expertise and moral responsibility remains essential for the functioning of social, educational, and institutional systems. The study underscores the enduring significance of structured authority in shaping normative behavior, fostering trust, and guiding ethical engagement within society.*

Keywords: *authority; power; education;*

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Introduction

In everyday context, people constantly rely on others when forming beliefs, making decisions, or determining how to act. Whether in academic settings, professional contexts, or social relationships. Certain individuals are granted a position that allows their judgments or directives to carry particular weight. Not all forms of influence are the same, and not every respected figure exercises authority in the same way. The fundamental question concerns the characteristics that underpin the recognition of an individual's authority by an adult. Does such recognition stem from institutional status and assigned responsibilities, or from demonstrated knowledge, competence, and trustworthiness? In contemporary society, *authority* is frequently conflated with power, although the two concepts differ fundamentally in their structure and justification. Authority relationships are dynamic in nature, as they arise, develop, and may eventually disappear over time. The temporal dimension of authority, however, falls outside the scope of the present discussion (Kubalica, 2022). While, *power* refers to the capacity of T to make S do something they would not otherwise do, its forms and manifestations vary significantly. Michel Foucault distinguishes between *sovereign power* and *disciplinary power*. Sovereign power is visible, recognizable, and exercised in specific, punctual moments. Society clearly knows on whom it has acted, through which methods, and by whose mediation. In contrast, disciplinary power is diffuse, acting continuously and almost invisibly on everyone (Foucault, 2005). Disciplinary power, as Foucault shows, operates through subtle mechanisms like surveillance, examination, and normalization, shaping individual's behavior without the need for overt force. The panapticon exemplifies this form of power: a central observer can monitor many subjects simultaneously (Brignall, 2002), creating a sense of constant visibility that encourages self-regulation. Panapticon is more a metaphor of social organization, representing the power of the institution over citizen (Brunon-Ernst, 2026, 8).

In this way, power becomes internalized, efficient, and depersonalized, extending its reach far beyond what coercion alone could achieve. Authority, by contrast, functions through trust and recognition, guiding action not through fear but through accepted expertise and

legitimacy. In this sense, while power can compel, authority guides, educates, and influences voluntarily, making it a distinct mechanism in social, educational, and institutional context.
The phenomenon of authority in education is often interpreted in two contrasting ways. On the one hand, it is associated with antisocial behavior, requiring the teacher to manage classroom disruptions and crises. Authority is frequently confused with the authoritarian style adopted by some teachers in the classroom, although the two concepts are fundamentally different. Genuine authority does not suppress the expression of those who acknowledge it; rather, accepting authority can represent an act of maturity that does not undermine personal autonomy or self-esteem (Stan, 2018).

According to Bocheński, the concept of authority is defined as a relation between 3 terms: authority holder, subject, and domain. Bocheński distinguishes between what he refers to as epistemic authority and deontic authority. Epistemic authority arises when a person is recognized as an authority in matters of truth or knowledge, accepting declarative sentences as true or probable, while deontic authority concerns the recognition of someone's authority to issue imperatives or commands that are considered binding (Bocheński, 1965; Brożek, 2013). P is an epistemic authority for S in the domain D if and only if S, in principle, accepts every proposition belonging to the domain D that D communicates to them assertively (Bocheński, 1979; Brożek, 2013). According to his perspective, authority is a relationship between two persons in which A holds authority over B within a specific domain D. This implies that B recognizes A's authority only when A possesses greater knowledge, superior competence in the field, higher trustworthiness, and greater integrity. For example, when a student asks a teacher for clarification on a topic, it demonstrates that the student acknowledges the teacher's greater competence and knowledge in that specific subject. Such recognition allows the teacher's guidance to be accepted, facilitating learning, the transmission of expertise, and the maintenance of structured interactions within the classroom. Similarly, a citizen who wishes to pay a bill or make changes to a contract relies on the employee's instructions, acknowledging that the employee has superior knowledge and competence in navigating the procedures correctly.

Nevertheless, despite this tendency to challenge authority, the recognition of expertise, competence, and moral integrity remains essential for the proper functioning of social, educational, and institutional systems, highlighting the enduring relevance of Bocheński's framework for understanding how authority should be acknowledged and exercised.
This recognition is necessary because authority provides structure, guidance, and predictability in social interactions. Without acknowledgment of legitimate authority, cooperation breaks down, norms lose their force, and the transmission of knowledge and expertise becomes inefficient. In educational and institutional contexts, recognizing authority ensures that instructions, rules, and ethical standards are respected, enabling the collective achievement of goals and the maintenance of social order.
It is neither shameful nor a sign of weakness to affirm that one does not know something and to defer to someone who possesses greater expertise. On the contrary, recognizing and respecting the knowledge of others is a fundamental aspect of learning. effective decision-making, and the proper functioning of social and institutional interactions. Such humility allows individuals to benefit from guidance, avoid errors, and cultivate trust in relationships where expertise is necessary. For example, in teaching, there are occasions when students possess more information about a particular topic than the teacher.

Acknowledging this does not diminish the teacher's recognition, rather, it highlights the dynamic and reciprocal nature of epistemic authority. Effective educators recognize that learning is a two-way process, where both teachers and students contribute to the construction of knowledge. This approach strengthens trust, enhances motivation, and reinforces the legitimacy of authority based on competence rather than mere position.

Building bases of the relationship with authority

The process of building a healthy relationship with authority starts during young childhood. Socialization is a continuous process that prepares human beings for social life, for social integration; it is a process of transmission and internalization of social normativity, roles, behaviours, values in the continuous act of interaction with family, and then with school, employers and colleagues, and general social environment.

The *family* has a huge role in the process of education considering the recognition and respect for authority. Through the family socialization the child learns to respect the adult authority. From tradition and respect for rules, to understanding and respecting them and the social authorities that are designed to verify compliance with the rules, a person goes to different stages that transform her / him into a socially integrated and autonomous person. Although understanding rules and negotiating them could be considered a democratic process in contemporary family education, there are healthy limits that children have to learn in dealing with adults and these limits could help them for a successful integration with other environments like school, groups, work etc.

Becoming autonomous as a human being is influenced by external factors (see May, 1998) like religious conviction, moral obligations and desires for objects or states of affairs that are beyond the control of the agent, requirements of authority or law.

Education with all its classical aspects (intellectual, moral, civic, esthetic, religious etc.) and new tendencies (like education for peace and democracy, ecological, intercultural, for media, nutritional and for leisure etc.) propose to help all generations in a continuous process for social integration. This process also includes education for civic and moral values, for responsibility and respect for societal authority. Religious education, for instance, always proposed to promote universal values like tolerance, human rights and civic responsibility and in many Romanian communities religious values are closely linked to national identity and social norms (Savelovici, 2024). Still, nowadays context, with its openness, tolerance and proportion of individualism / respect for unicity (sometimes excessively, without discernment) creates the opportunity for conflicts with traditions and respect for societal norms. Also, intercultural education promotes social responsibility and civic values in accordance with the Orthodox vision on humanity (Savelovici, 2025).

Respect for rules even if in the absence of the physical presence of the authorities is a sign of social maturity, is the emblem of the moral being, as E. Durkheim named it. Morality, considering E. Durkheim, is not innate but socially constructed and becoming social (seen as moral) beings, individuals learn (self-)discipline, social solidarity and autonomy (seen as accepting rules and applying them in practice not by coercion but by own will) (Saha, 2001).

And still…

Today relationships in the educational field have dramatically changed. We have a problem with the respect for authorities (first with parents, and then teachers, policemen etc.). And consequences could be easily seen. Statistics indicate Romania as a leading country in the EU for deadly car accidents, and also with a high rate of juvenile delinquency and school dropout. As specialists draw attention, (considering United States' situation, but applicable also to our society) competency issues should be analysed: "Although the competence has not ended, it is going through a difficult period. Something is not right at all. The United States is now a country obsessed with worshipping its own ignorance. (...) Rejecting expert advice is equivalent to asserting autonomy." (Nichols, 2019, Preface) Everybody, due to the access to the internet and AI, seems to be expert and competent in many fields, so everybody expresses their opinion and does not consider that their opinions could be wrong.

Parents are reading parenting books and becoming experts in education and more, in education for a group (a class group) and imposing on their children teachers class management measures. Without being aware of the boomerang effect, parents are not any

more allies of teachers and show disrespect for teachers' authority in the presence of their children. Mass media and social networks present cases of teachers / parents / society representatives etc. whose authority is violated in schools / families / society and this information often is not properly interpreted by children / pupils / citizens and become a possible model of behaviour in relationship with authorities. Children are learning that they have rights and no restrictions and use this information without discernment both in their families and in school and society. Lack of limits in education is not only counterproductive but also dangerous considering long term effects on social behaviours.

The function of authority and the moral duty of the citizen

A retrospective analysis of human organizational structures reveals that, despite their apparent rudimentary nature in comparison to contemporary forms of government, a common element can be identified. This may be indicative of a societal need for normalization, both in the past and the present. In the absence of clear and consistent rules, the effective functioning of any system is rendered unattainable. Historically, the focus was on establishing regulations for the distribution of surplus agricultural production. However, as time progressed, these needs underwent significant development and sophistication. The concepts that were initially implemented have subsequently become the very standards by which contemporary society is measured. The fundamental purpose of the state is to ensure and guarantee the general good, the general needs of society, and the safety of its citizens. This is achieved by the establishment of a set of regulations that are to be adhered to by all parties. The onus to respect the laws does not rest solely with the citizenry, rather, it originates with the authority that has instituted them.

On the other hand, citizens have a moral duty to actively participate in the public life of the city. They cannot simply pass the responsibility on to the state and just have expectations. Aristotle compared citizens to sailors who contribute to the success of the association. "Citizens are exactly like sailors, despite the difference in their jobs, maintaining the association is their common duty. However, the association is the state, and therefore the virtue of the citizen is always measured according to the constitution of the state. But since there are different forms of state, it is clear that the virtue of the citizen cannot be one and only perfect, but on the contrary, the virtue of the good man is one and absolute" (Aristotle, sine anno)

As has already been emphasized, there is a need for both the authorities who create the space for society to function and those who directly benefit from the smooth functioning of society to respect the rules. In order for members of society to comply with the rules, it is important that the state, with all its mechanisms, has authority over them. Specifically, this refers to political authority, which is "that species of the genus of political power capable of obtaining obedience from the members of the synthesis by virtue not so much of fear of coercive sanctions but rather due to the consensus that derives from its consideration, either in relation to its rights or in relation to the actions it undertakes in accordance with the community's value system. This leads us to the concept of legitimacy, which can be defined as the property of political power to be regarded and accepted as the most appropriate, consonant, and convenient for the political synthesis, whose members (or, in any case, whose significant sectors) consistently give it their support [...] legitimacy refers to the justified qualification to hold power, while legality refers to the exercise of power in accordance with established laws" (Fisichella, 2007).

Can power be legitimate if it does not have the support of the majority of the population? Can we still talk about exercising power in accordance with the law if those laws are unjust and outdated? These are some of the questions we will attempt to answer.

1. According to the principle of legal theory, the legitimacy of a government is contingent upon two factors: firstly, the support of the majority of the populace, and secondly, the government's actions being in accordance with the prevailing legal framework. These two elements, seemingly disparate in nature, are, in fact, inextricably linked, resulting in a societal structure predicated on the rule of law and the government's capacity to exercise its authority within that society. In a democratic system of government, the acquisition of power is facilitated by the organization of free and fair elections, ultimately leading to the election of the party or candidate that garners the most popular votes. The overarching ambition of each political party is to gain power by proposing a political programme that reflects the political doctrine of said party. From a theoretical standpoint, this is the case. In practice, the majority of citizens with the right to vote either demonstrate a degree of resonance with a particular message or they do not. In recent years, there has been a significant decline in voter turnout, not only in Romania but also throughout Europe. This prompts the following question: does the party that has won the elections and will be in power until the next elections exercise power legitimately? It is true that he won the elections, but against a backdrop of absenteeism, and therefore the condition of having the support of the majority of the population can no longer be met. Legally, the conditions are met, but morally there is a flaw.

A power that has obtained power in this way creates rules but does not always have the authority to enforce them and ensure that citizens comply with them. "As is unanimously recognized, rules are one thing, and their proper and widespread application is another matter. Their enforcement can only be guaranteed by the way in which the constituent political power distributes powers among the authorities of the three public powers that guarantee their enforcement as much as possible. The law, whether in the process of being created or enforced, is closely linked to political power…" (Alexandru, 2012).

In today's society, there is a moral crisis, values seem to have been turned upside down, and the efforts made by humanity over the last century to protect all individuals, to ensure fairness and freedom, seem distant. In most cases, the measures taken and public policies are outdated or non-existent. The individual no longer seems to be the focus of these measures and public policies. A society can no longer evolve if the individual, the citizen, is no longer the central element of society, and their well-being is no longer the main objective of legislative measures.

In that crisis of values, it is very difficult for the state to maintain its authority when its structures do not act in accordance with the law, witnessing real deviations from the rule of law. In other words, it no longer has authority. Citizens tend to circumvent legal provisions or, worse, violate them. A real solution is education, both citizens and of the state. While the former seems easier, the latter seems implausible, abstract.

As Aristotle noted, when citizens become active members of the city, *or sailors*, they can eventually compel the state to act in accordance with the law. Furthermore, the law itself should be the result of free debate, reflecting the welfare of citizens. The individual must be educated to become a true citizen and to participate in all the activities of the city. Citizenship should not be considered as a matter of sporadic action, such as that which occurs once every four or five years. This entails the necessity for perpetual vigilance and insistence on the adherence to stipulated regulations by state entities, thereby ensuring the transformation of these regulations into legal frameworks that are honored by the state and its citizens. Adherence to the legal regulations is imperative and cannot be subject to individual discretion.

If the law proves to be unfair, favoring small groups and leading to social inequality, it becomes a civic and moral duty for citizens to oppose it, as legal philosophers argue. Civil society can also play a role here, as it has an essential role in supervising and monitoring the actions of the state to ensure that they do not become abusive. Educating citizens to be

responsible individuals in society should not be the sole responsibility of schools. There are multiple factors that influence the growth of the individual.

Education is essential in society, and the crisis of authority at the societal level (of parents, educators, the state) is also the result of the indifference of citizens who believe they only have rights, forgetting the correlation between these rights and the obligations they have towards both the state and society.

Conclusions

Authority, unlike raw power, is sustained not through coercion but through the recognition of competence, legitimacy, and moral integrity. Its effectiveness relies on the ethical and moral engagement of citizens, shaping not only compliance but the cultivation of responsible, conscientious individuals (Waghid, 2015; Taylor & Zhang, 2025). A strong society depends on authority that educates, guides, and inspires by fostering students and citizens who are not merely obedient (when rules / social norms are not internalised, but guided by fear of punishment), but morally aware, ethically grounded, and capable of critical thought. In this sense, authority and moral values are deeply intertwined: authority flourishes when it cultivates virtue, and virtue, in turn, reinforces the legitimacy of authority.

Bases of the respect for authority lie in the family, in relations developed between adults, adults and children and models provided by parents in relation to state authorities (including teachers, policemen etc.). So, parents have to be educated (by schools and also by state institutions) to understand their roles as models for their children as authorities and also in relation with the authorities designated by the state with the power of providing and respecting social rules / norms. Showing respect, they also could be respected in a functional society. We understand the liberty of expression for a democratic society, but we have to be aware that as long as we are not ready to critical thinking and properly educated for media consumption, we could be easily manipulated and criticized without discernment.

Nowadays, schools face a growing tension between authority and power. Tian's study (2021) reflects how power in schools is layered and often contested. Different tensions were observed: education bureaus, inspection offices, and schools themselves exercise distinct types of influence. Students often perceive themselves as more knowledgeable or capable than their teachers, challenging traditional hierarchies of respect and guidance. At the same time, teachers find their capacity to assert influence increasingly limited, constrained by institutional regulations, societal expectations, and the shifting dynamics of student autonomy.

This phenomenon reflects a broader generational divide, where the values, experiences, and attitudes of students clash with established norms and pedagogical methods. In this context, the school occupies a critical but contested space: it must navigate between maintaining legitimate authority grounded in expertise, ethics, and moral guidance and avoiding the exercise of coercive power that may alienate or demoralize students. Society has to support education for a healthier socialization process, for respect for rights and assuming responsibilities, respect for rules and authorities. This also includes showing respect for teacher status, for investment in teachers initial and continuous training (there are essential changes that have to be made considering reforming teachers' training), for solid criteria of selection and acceptance in the educational system and permanent motivation for this profession so that best students consider choosing teaching as a honorable profession.

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