

Political Authority and Scientific Authority: What Does Deference Mean?

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In this paper we will argue for an ‘acceptance’ model of deference to scientific authority. In the literature of political theory and philosophy, it is fairly standard to compare and contrast “political authority” and “expert (including scientific) authority” in the following way. Both involve deference, but deference of very different sorts. Political authority involves issuing commands that are to be obeyed. Scientific authority involves issuing statements that are to be believed. Political authority concerns action; scientific authority concerns belief. And this seems right in important respects. The state can (perhaps) tell us what to do, but (definitely) not what to believe. And scientists can (perhaps) tell us what to believe, but (definitely) not what to do. This seems to keep politics and science within their proper provinces. But there is also something unsettling here with regard to science. On this view, personal judgment and political authority are separable: one can disapprove of a command and yet still obey it and thereby uphold the authority of the state. Whereas personal judgment and scientific authority cannot be dissociated: for how can one possibly uphold the authority of scientists while disbelieving their substantive claims? This is the root of a common assumption among political theorists/philosophers that scientific authority requires a near complete surrender of judgment – a much greater surrender than political authority involves.

In addressing this issue we appeal to a distinction made by Jonathan Cohen between “acceptance” and belief. We suggest re-construing scientific authority in terms of the former rather than the latter: one cannot be expected to believe a scientific authority, but one might well be expected to accept a scientist’s claims. Acceptance of a proposition involves acting on it (in ways that we will explain). In this respect, scientific authority resembles political authority more closely than has often been assumed, in that it involves doing what scientists want us to do. Which may sound worryingly technocratic. But this closer resemblance can actually make scientific authority less imposing – because it does not require belief. Personal judgment and scientific authority can then be dissociated, allowing one to question a scientist’s substantive claims, inferences, methodology, etc. without rejecting his or her authority. One does not simply believe and disbelieve on cue, nor believe in some contexts and not in others. Acceptance on the other hand can be more or less temporary, and more or less context-

limited. In short, it permits a more mindful form of deference – moreover, a more mindful form of deference that is in turn necessary for legitimating scientific authority.

We will then suggest several ways in which the ‘acceptance’ model of deference to scientific authority helps us better understand a number of different aspects of the relation between science, policy and the public. First, it allows that we can do what experts want without necessarily believing their claims (and also that non-experts may refuse to accept expert claims - a phenomenon we will call ‘epistemic disobedience’). This is important because expert claims, in the most interesting cases, bear not simply on belief but on action. Nobody is particularly worried about the epistemic authority of the physicist who tells us about the Higgs Boson. But those who worry that scientific authority is in ‘crisis’ often refer to cases where expert claims bear on action. Thus, when health officials assure us that a vaccine is safe they are not simply aiming to influence our beliefs. Rather, they want to ensure that we immunize our children. Second, the acceptance model raises the possibility of holding people responsible for what they accept or refuse to accept in a way we would not in the case of belief. We do not set out to elaborate a normative theory of deference to expert authority, but we do claim that the acceptance model of deference is capable of capturing the moral potentials of acceptance and refusal more effectively than the belief model. Third, the acceptance model has implications for the way in which expert claims are taken up by audiences of policy and decision-makers. Finally, this model has implications for how scientific claims are constructed and presented to various lay audiences.