

Obedience¹

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“Semantical” categories may be unessential in the development of what could be widely accepted as a “logic” of directives. The later could possibly be achieved simply through the formulation of a testing or decision procedure which would allow us to place any directive argument in the class of valid arguments or in the class of invalid arguments, these two classes being mutually exclusive and jointly exhaustive. However, a discussion of semantical categories for directives — or, perhaps more properly, of their analogues for directives — is of much logical and philosophical interest. Accordingly, allow me to broach this topic.

To many writers the view has seemed plausible that “obedience” is to commands what “truth” is to assertions. P. F. Strawson, though he does not commit himself to this view, writes as follows.

Suppose we had in our language the word “execution,” meaning “action which is the carrying out of a command.” And suppose someone asked the philosophical question: What is obedience? What is it for a command to be obeyed? A philosopher might produce the answer: “Obedience is a conventional relation between a command and an execution. A command is obeyed when it corresponds to an execution.”

This is the Correspondence Theory of Obedience.²

1 * Parte A, “Obedience”, do Capítulo III, “The Semantics of Directives”, pp. 41-54 da tese de doutorado *Directives: A logico-philosophical inquiry*, submetida por Ernest Sosa à University of Pittsburgh, em 1964, 111 páginas. Reproduzimos o texto exatamente, inclusive sem modificar as convenções então adotadas para as referências bibliográficas. Indicamos com [JCS] as notas a esta edição, realizada por João Carlos Salles.

2 P. F. Strawson, “Truth,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*. Supp. Vol. XXIV (1950). Reprinted in *Truth*, ed. by George Pitcher, (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall Inc. 1964), p. 42.

And, according to Mark Fisher,

... in terms of obedience values, which we can think of as analogous to truth-values, a command is valid if and only if it takes the obedience-value "obeyed" (referred to as O) for all assignments of the obedience values O and D (disobeyed) to its variables.

... the command Np is obeyed if and only if the command p is disobeyed (or, as I prefer to say, not obeyed, since disobeyed commands are not just commands which are not obeyed) ...³

In addition, P. T. Geach has written that,

... the contradictory of a command is itself a command, one that would be obeyed if and only if the original command were not obeyed.⁴

And, finally, according to Michael Dummett,

The sense of a statement is determined by knowing in what circumstances it is true and in what false. Likewise the sense of a command is determined by knowing what constitutes obedience to it and what disobedience.⁵

To use "obedience" in any easy and simple-minded way as the semantical analogue of "truth," for commands, is, however, a serious mistake, as I shall try to show below; though I wholeheartedly agree that it is a promising point of departure: indeed I myself use it as such in Chapter IV.⁶

Since the notion of obedience also has bearing on the philosophy of law and politics via a positivistic notion of laws as commands of the sovereign or of "society," after taking some pains

3 Mark Fisher, "A System of Deontic-Alethic Modal Logic," *Mind*, Vol. 71 (1962), p. 233.

4 P. T. Geach, "Imperative Inference," *Analysis*, Vol. 23 (Supplement) Jan. 1963, p. 38.

5 Michael Dummett, "Truth," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Vol. LIX (1958-1959). Reprinted in *Truth*, ed. by George Pitcher, (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall Inc., 1964), pp. 100-101.

6 Refere-se Sosa ao capítulo "The Logic of Directives", cujo conteúdo encontra-se publicado, no essencial, nos artigos "The Logic of Imperatives" (*Theoria* 32, 1966: 224-35) e "The Semantics of Imperatives" (*American Philosophical Quarterly* 4, 1967: 57-64), de acesso relativamente fácil [JCS].

to get clear on its precise analysis I shall then try barely to point to its connection with legal and political philosophy by way of Hobbes's remark that the authority of the sovereign depends on the obedience of his subjects;⁷ and, finally I shall also try to show, by making reference to my analysis, that the notion of obedience will not (in any straightforward fashion) do for imperative logic what the notion of truth does for indicative or assertoric logic.⁸ The related notions of "carrying through (a resolute)" and of "following (a rule)" will also be discussed.

1. Consider the following contexts:

- (i) You did not obey the Sarge's order! That means three days for sure.
- (ii) You did not obey the Sarge! etc...
- (iii) Good citizens obey the laws of their country. Good children obey the rules of their home, school, etc.
- (iv) Sally is a very obedient child.

Taking these in order we find that one can obey an order, a person, or a law or set of laws and that one can also be obedient. Hobbes, a legal positivist, thought that the obedience talk in the third context could be logically reduced to (analyzed into) that of the first context. For the moment I shall only record my belief that senses of obedience used in (ii) and (iv) can be reduced to those used in (i) and (iii). The further reduction of (iii) to (i) is an interesting and controversial question in the philosophy of law which will not be taken up here.

My announced belief really needs no defense; a full statement of it should carry its own justification.

The "obedience" of (ii) is reducible to that of (i): to obey a person on an occasion is to obey an order or command which he addressed to one.

7 See Hobbes, *Selections*, ed. by F. J. Woodbridge (N.Y.: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1930), e. g., pp. 340-341, 375.

8 Though, as I try to show later, a narrowed down, more precise concept (which might even be called a rational reconstruction of the concept of obedience) does prove helpful in the construction of a logic of directives.

The “obedience” of (iv) is reducible to those of (i) and/or (iii): to say that a person, i.e., a child, soldier, and so on, is obedient is to say that in an overwhelming preponderance of types of cases he obeys or would obey the orders of his superiors and the laws and rules binding on his station.

2. Since what I have to say can easily be extended to more complicated, hypothetical, disjunctive, negative, etc., commands my analysis begins with the simple, straightforward paradigm: “Close the door!” Let us name the addresser of the command “X” and the addressee “Y.” Now what is it that constitutes obedience to X’s command? Our first candidate is that it is Y’s closing the door. But Y’s closing the door, when? Would Y’s closing the door a day before count? Absurd! Only Y’s closing the door after the command has been given will count. But will Y’s closing the door two years later count? Absurd! Only Y’s closing the door within the time either explicitly or contextually indicated (in this case a few minutes) will count. Now will Y’s crossing the street and closing the neighbor’s door count? Probably not. In any event, I must close the door explicitly or contextually indicated. In general, the action done must be done within certain explicitly or contextually indicated spatial limits — this includes of course cases like the one now under consideration, where the space is indicated via a specified object, i.e., the door.

In view of the above remarks let us change our command to “Y, close the door at j!” making the spatio temporal requirements explicit through “j,” which stands for the “juncture.” Our second candidate for an explication of obedience now is: Y’s closing the door at j. This too is objectionable. Consider a fictional situation. The officer in charge of a training session addresses a student by the back door with the order: “Mr. So-and-so, will you close the door, please?” Mr. So-and-so, who has already felt the chill coming through the open door, was preparing himself to close it anyway; furthermore, because of an ear infection he was temporarily deaf and thus unable to hear the officer. (Afraid that his proneness to such infections would disqualify him from pilot training, he had kept his illness to himself and continued to attend classes as normally; he had trained himself to read lips and was proficient at it, but his head was turned when the instructor gave the order, and so forth.) Here Mr. So-and-so closes the door at j but he does not obey the order that he close the door at j.

The third proposal which immediately suggests itself for the logically necessary and sufficient conditions for Y’s obeying X’s order that he close the door at j is that Y close the door at j

and that he be aware that X had given an order. But this also must be rejected. Counterexample: A prisoner of war tries to escape in an enemy uniform. As he self-consciously and impatiently paces the platform while awaiting his train, an officer happens by and barks a loud order at him. Nervously, all he can come up with is a stiff salute. To his surprise, the red-faced colonel turns his back and precariously struts away with his tipsy female companion. Was the command “Salute, you pig! Don’t you see my rank?” obeyed? Of course not. The difficulty is that the escaped prisoner, while aware that the colonel had given an order, did not understand it.

A fourth analysis arises directly from the immediately foregoing remarks. Y obeys X’s order that he do A at j, if and only if he is aware of this order, understands it, and does do A at j. Consider a fourth story. Mother to Johnny: “Don’t you play with Bobby Jones again! He has a dirty mouth.” Johnny hears the command, understands it and never again plays with Bobby Jones. The reason why he never does, however, is not what his mother told him but only his big fight with Bobby just that morning. Furthermore, if they had not fought, then, other things being equal, he would have continued to play with Bobby regardless of what his mother said. Here I think that without violating ordinary language, we have a choice between saying that Johnny obeyed, but only because of his fight, and saying that Johnny did not really obey at all. Exhibiting a proper logico-philosophical abhorrence of ambiguity, I shall now discard the former alternative, thus beginning with the logical reconstruction of the concept of obedience.⁹ In view of this move our fourth analysis too must be abandoned.

The word “reason,” which occurred in the fourth analysis, provides the clue for our fifth one: Y obeys X’s order that he do A at j if and only if he is aware of this order, understands it and does A at j for the only reason that X gave the order. St. Bernard must have been working on a notion of obedience somewhat like this one when he wrote to Adam:

Was it willingly or unwillingly that you went forth? If it was willingly then it was not from obedience.¹⁰

9 The reconstruction that I do in my analysis does not really essentially affect the grounding for my animadversions on obedience as an analogue of truth for the logic of directives. If I am right I am right on any acceptable analysis of the ordinary concept of obedience.

10 From Anne Fremantle, The Age of Belief (N.Y.: The New American Library, 1955) p. 101.

If we take his “willingly (done)” to mean “done because one wants to do it (among perhaps other reasons),” then it is clear he must have had a notion of obedience like the one now under consideration. I next confront this notion with a counterexample: Johnny is watching television after dinner. Mother’s piercing shout from the kitchen explodes his make-believe world: “Johnny, go do your homework!” Now Johnny, who had completely forgotten about his homework, considers the prospect of facing Miss Jones without it the next day, recognizes its grimness and reluctantly marches off to his bedroom and his books. It is important to remark also that his mother’s order had its part in the motivation of Johnny or would have had if the thought of Miss Jones’s dissatisfaction had not been enough. Johnny is well aware that his mother’s giving an order is a good reason for doing that which she orders: not doing it has dire consequences. (Just as a few years later he will come to recognize that the streets’s being ice is a good reason for driving slowly: not doing so has dire consequences.) Surely in such a case Johnny does obey his mother: the coup-de-grâce to our fifth analysis.

From the ashes of the previous five proposals rises a sixth one: Y obey X’s order that he do A at j if and only if while aware of this order and understanding it, he does A at j, and the fact that X gave the order is itself for him a reason to do A at j even though it may not be his full or even partial reason on that particular occasion.

Objections crowd in:

(i) In order to mortify P_3 , P_1 decides to do everything P_2 tells him, but only for the above reason. Does he then obey P_2 ’s order that he do A at j if he is aware of it, understands it, does A at j, and the fact that P_2 gave the order is the reason why he does A at j but only for the deeper reason that he wants to chagrin P_3 ?

(ii) Johnny, now in his late teens, feels totally independent from his parents and is eager to show it. But his mother has had a severe heart attack and must not be upset. Here letting “Johnny” = “Y” and “Johnny’s mother” = “X,” by fitting this against our sixth analysis, we see that Johnny obeys his mother’s order that he do A at j even though his deeper reason for doing A at j is “not to upset her.” Are we willing to countenance this?

My answer to both questions is: Yes. And, as is more obvious in proposed counterexample (ii) than in (i), this answer is not a cognitive one but rather constitutes a proposal, a proposal on

our usage of “obey.” Through the fifth analysis my main aim was to capture general usage; but we have now reached the point where general usage can no longer keep abreast of philosophical distinctions, where full-scale rational reconstruction can properly begin. Notice that in both cases, (i) and (ii), we can preface talk about P_1 or about Johnny’s deeper reasons for acting as he did by saying: “He didn’t really obey ..., (P_2 or his mother, as the case may be)”; “He was only trying to ... (Upset P_3 or keep his mother calm, respectively).” But it seems to me that we can with equal linguistic propriety say: “His only reason for obeying was that it would ... (upset P_3 or keep his mother calm, as the case may be).” Since to keep both usages would be to condone ambiguity, I reject the first and adopt the second: a decision embedded in our sixth analysis.

Two points before I start on the concluding analysis of the notion of obedience:

(i) The point that obedience requires that the simple giving of the order be a reason for the person obeying is reflected in the fact that the rebellious teenager’s “Why should I?” is really a questioning of the status of an utterance as a command and thereby a challenge to the authority of the addresser, usually his parent. In early stages of the game “Because I say so” reasserts the authority of the parent and the status of his utterance as a command. Not long after the “Why should I?” begins to be asked, however, “Because I say so,” is no longer satisfactory; other reasons have to be given. At roughly that point such utterances lose the force of commands and become recommendations or pieces of advice. And in parallel fashion they are no longer obeyed, disobeyed, or not obeyed, but followed or disregarded, taken or rejected, and so on.

(ii) Throughout our discussion we have taken it as obvious that obedience can take place only through voluntary action; that if, e.g., one’s arm is forcibly raised by another without regard for one’s will this automatically disqualifies that physical event from constituting obedience.

The sixth proposal advanced, though obviously much more adequate than any of the others is, however, still not adequate enough, something the following two counterexamples may bring home to the reader.

Ring leader, X, to revolutionaries: “Tomorrow you shall arise at 2 a.m. After that you shall watch for my signal from the light house.” Member Y goes to his place and sets the alarm clock for 2 a.m., secure in the knowledge that with its ring he will automatically jump out of bed. And so it occurs. Did he obey X’s first command?

X, officer in charge of materiel to a subordinate, Y: "On June 1st, two months from now, order three hundred flares." Y immediately sets down a reminder in the order book from which he works day by day. On June 1st he goes to the book, notes the entry about the flares and proceeds accordingly, although he has totally forgotten the fact that X gave him an order to that effect. Does he obey X's order?

If we respond affirmatively to either of the foregoing questions, as surely we must, my sixth proposal collapses. For in neither of the examples just presented is it the case that Y acts while aware of the order. Indeed, in the first example he doesn't even act (voluntarily or intentionally). Reflex "action," as well as habitual "action," is a paradigm case of non-voluntary "action." Once again we find our exit from the maze blocked. But an interesting observation offers renewed hope: May it not be that reasons and action are not directly connected, but only by way of decision?

First let me try to clarify my question. Put another way it reads: In doing something for reasons, must one be aware of the reasons at the time one does what one does? May one not do something for reasons if one had reasons for deciding to do what one does even though at the moment of action one may be unconscious of them, and may even have temporarily forgotten them?

Suppose that after watching a traffic safety program I decide to carefully brush all the snow off the back window of my car when this is required. How a few weeks later as I absent-mindedly but hurriedly go through my morning routine, since I am late, my wife says to me: "Why are you so careful and thorough? We are already late you know." To her question I reply: "Because (or, "My reason is that) I don't want to have a bad accident." Notice again that what I did was habitual, absentminded; and yet I still had reasons for it, the reasons which prompted me to take the decision that established the habit.

Similarly, suppose a father says to his young teenager son: "All right, take the other car to school on winter mornings. But clean the back window!" (*Sotto voce* grumble: "... otherwise I'll have to retract my permission!") Now If Girlfriend asks the question which in the foregoing example Wife asked, the honest answer would be: "Because Father told me to." Again the window-cleaning had become habitual, absentminded; yet, it constituted obedience to an order.

Of course there is a point after which the habit is just habit and behavior fitting under it is not engaged in for any reason, but only out of habit. One might well want to reserve the word “habit” for one’s disposition after that point and not before: before, one’s actions of that type (cleaning the back window) were absentminded but not habitual; they couldn’t have been habitual if there were reasons for them. Be that as it may, the point I wish to establish cuts across it; the point is that one can do something for a reason while not at that moment aware of the reason. The important thing is that for one’s decision to do it there were reasons and that such decision had a direct bearing on one’s doing it. Now a decision can have direct bearing on behavior in one of two ways:

(i) Rational bearing: the decision leads to the setting up of other reasons which the agent knows will lead to his doing that which he has decided to do. Take, for example, the case of the materiel clerk ordering the flares.

(ii) Causal bearing: the decision leads to the setting up of causes which the agent knows will lead to his doing that which he has decided to do. Take, for example, the case of the revolutionary arising at 2 a.m.

As a result of these considerations I advance as my final proposal: Y obeys X’s order that he do A at j if and only if he was at some time or other aware of the order and understood it; he does A at j; and the fact that X gave the order is itself for him a reason to do A at j. (In reading this the broad conception of reason which emerges from the discussion just above should be borne in mind.)

Or, preferably, one might load the results of the first three analyses into the very concept of commanding, and thus bring the discussion here into line with what was said on p. []¹¹. And then my final proposal would be expressed as:

Y obeys X’s order that he do A at j if and only if he does A at j and the fact that X so commanded him is itself for him a reason to do A at j. (In reading this the broad conception of reason which emerges from the discussion just above should be borne in mind.)

11 Falta a indicação da página [JCS].

3.¹² Hobbes wrote that the authority of a ruler rests on the obedience of his subjects.¹³ Now it is notorious that Hobbes did closely associate (if he did not conflate) authority and power. And while his assertion is perhaps controversial as it stands, it may be possibly be less so once one substitutes “power” for “authority.” The concept of obedience must be understood, however, before this is fully grasped. Indeed, on most of the earlier analyses of that concept discussed above, Hobbes’s remark would be patently false. This is brought out by the example of the omniscient scientist who predicts in some detail the acts of the subjects of a certain kingdom. Having made allowance for this in arriving at his predictions he issues the orders which correspond to what people will do anyway. The subjects’s actions then conform nicely to the scientist’s orders, of which they are aware; and thus on some notions of obedience, they obey the scientist. Are we then to say that the latter has great power or authority?

On the other hand, other notions of obedience are too narrow, too restrictive. Take our analysis five as an example. If we accept it, very few rulers would on our view have any power at all. For it is well known that laws become, after a while, habitual, and are adhered to quite perfunctorily and absent-mindedly.

Now it seems to me that the final analysis of obedience discussed above does do justice to Hobbes’s insight. For, a ruler has authority or perhaps political power (or at least what we might call direct and real authority or political power) over his subjects if and only if his dictates constitute reasons for fashioning behavior this way rather than that even if said subjects do not have his dictates in mind at every moment of their active lives. His dictates’s having an influence on their conduct via decisions which initiate patterns of behavior either rationally or casually controlled, is surely enough.

4.¹⁴ As we noted above, Strawson, Geach, Fisher and Dummett all seem to consider obedience as the analogue of truth for the logic of imperatives. I shall now record some considerations which seem to me to constitute stumbling blocks in that approach.¹⁵ A proposition

12 Por equívoco de numeração, consta o número 2 no original [JCS].

13 See the references provided on p. 43, supra [Refere-se à nota 6 desta edição [JCS]].

14 Por equívoco de numeração, consta o número 3 no original [JCS].

15 Though as will become clear below I am in complete agreement with the spirit of their proposal, and

can follow from another even if no one ever asserts either of them. And we mean by “the one follows from the other” that if the second be true then necessarily the first is true. Now notice that it is essential to all this that a proposition can be true though no one ever asserts it. For suppose being asserted were required for a proposition’s being true; suppose further that P_1 is true; and, suppose finally that P_2 is not asserted. It is a consequence of this that P_2 is not true and so cannot follow from P_1 . But suppose that P_2 is the double negation of P_1 and that the double negation of P always follows from P . That P_2 cannot follow from P_1 contradicts our assumptions. I take this to be a reductio of the first of them. Notice, furthermore, that if one requires assertion for truth, then “validity” and “following” would indicate empirical relations and would differ for different assertors unless one also modifies the usual formulation of the criterion of validity. Now surely we want to say that an imperative (and, more generally, a directive) can follow from another even if neither one is ever used. However, one simply cannot obey a command unless it is performed and, in general, an imperative which one could obey from the lips of one person one could not obey were it to have a different origin; (because of the authority presuppositions of commands, orders, etc.). Finally, besides all this, one can obey only commands, orders, laws, and perhaps some other kinds of imperatives, but surely there are many kinds of imperatives which one cannot, logically, obey. For example: requests, pleas, petitions, supplications, invocations, etc. And yet surely, in the interests of system and generality, we want to emphasize what their logics do have in common and not what they don’t; just as we emphasize what the logics of assertions, statements, predictions, etc., do have in common and not what they do not.

indeed take it as a starting point in my search for an explication and criterion of validity for directive arguments.